

## Witch's Brew

I knew she was a witch as soon as I saw her hair. It hung in thin braids, stoppered at the ends with multi-coloured beads. Her nose wasn't crooked or warty but her skin was brown like the creamy coffee Mum liked to drink from her new percolator. She didn't look like anyone else in our street and all I wanted to do was get a closer look at her but a small white dog ran out of the witch's gate and the ground rushed up to meet my face.

My eyes flickered open and there she was, black beaded hair swinging around, brown forehead lined with concern, plump lips shushing, "Honey, I'm sorry. Dandelion is still getting used to the neighbourhood and she rushed out as soon as she saw you. She loves children."

Her voice sung in a rhythm unlike anything I'd heard before. I tried to get up, but my head was still buzzing. She helped me to my feet and before I could protest she was carrying me into her house. I shut my eyes tight as we stepped over the threshold; her voice and her manner were comforting and kind, but she was a witch. What kind of spell would she cast over me?

"I have to go," I said, but my voice was weak.

"Shush, honey-child. Your head's sore. I'll get you something." She laid me on a long red leather lounge. When she came back she offered me a glass of pale lemon liquid, and two small tablets. "I made this myself. And put these under your tongue. They'll help with the pain and the bruising."

I took the glass, sniffed the sour drink, looked up at her smiling face, dropped it and ran.

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"Slow down, Jackie. What witch? Where have you been?" Mum scowled and rubbed Mercurichrome onto my grazed forehead.

"Ow! The new neighbour. She gave me some tablets for my head. But I didn't eat them. I was scared I'd wake up as frog or something."

"I told you she'd be trouble," Dad said.

"Don't rush to conclusions," Mum retorted in her school teacher's voice, as we followed Dad out the door.

"What did you give my daughter? What gives you the right to give our daughter your voodoo medicine." Dad's voice was squeezing out through his mouth and I could see his hands trembling. It scared me, the look on his face.

The witch folded her arms across her bosom. "I gave your daughter some arnica, for the fall she had. She didn't take them. It's a herbal remedy, nothing to do with voodoo or witch doctors." She held my Mum's gaze, then looked at my Dad. I saw her lips purse slightly. "I would never do anything to hurt a child, but I should have asked you first. I am very sorry if I've upset you." She held out her hand. I waited for Dad to do likewise, or at least for Mum to make him. But after what seemed like ages, the witch's arm fell back to her side unshaken.

Dad turned and walked back up the path. I could tell Mum was a bit embarrassed and felt obliged to say something nice, but final. She chose a simple 'goodbye' and turned after Dad. I hung behind a second, and smiled slightly. The witch winked back at me.

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I snuck back the next day. I really wanted to say sorry for getting her into trouble. I'd seen the hurt in her eyes, and decided that she must be a white witch, even though she wasn't actually white.

I sat on the red lounge again, staring around the room this time. There were photos up on the walls of seascapes and exotic flowers and waving people the same shade of brown as the witch.

"My island home," the witch smiled as she saw my gaze captured by the scene. "St Lucia, in the Caribbean. It's where I'm from. This is my family."

"Why are you here?"

"Honey, I love the sea. I'm drawn to it. But when I was young and foolish, I lost my heart to a man. I followed him to England, and when he came to Australia, I followed again. And now I'm setting up a shop here. It's not the same as home, but it's warmer than London."

"And where is your husband now?"

She threw her head back and laughed the deepest and most musical laugh I'd ever heard.

"Well, he followed someone else back to England."

"Oh. That's not very nice."

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She smiled a thoughtful smile. "No, it's not, is it? But, he did leave me here, in this fascinating country and I thought I'd like to stay awhile." She laughed again, lighter this time, with just a tinge of sadness.

"Do you miss your island? St Lucia?"

"Sometimes I miss the sounds and the smells; and the people's voices. But mostly I miss my family. And I will go home one day."

"I've never met anyone like you," I confessed. "You look different to everyone else I know."

She folded her arms over her bosom and grinned. "Well, perhaps that explains why most people seem to stare at me when I walk down the street. And there was I believing that I was the most beautiful creature they'd ever laid eyes on!"

This time, I had to join in with her laughter.

When we'd recovered, I asked about her shop. "What will you sell?"

She curled a finger at me and I followed her to a room at the back of the house. It had a table on which lay a mixing bowl, spoons, an assortment of packets – flour, bicarb, oatmeal; different sized jugs containing clear liquids. In the corner, there was a potter's wheel and the shelf behind was covered in unglazed pots and vases.

"You make cakes and pottery stuff," I said. "I've had a go on a wheel before. It was fun."

"I like it too, but as you can see, I'm not very good," she laughed.

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I took a good look at the wheel, running my hands over it until they were dusty. "Are your cakes better?"

"Well, I don't make cakes. My recipes are a little different."

I felt a bit hot and shaky. I knew I shouldn't be in this house and now the witch was actually confessing to me about her spells. "I have to go. I'm not supposed to speak to you."

"I got that impression, honey. And I won't tell a soul. But if you ever get knocked over by Dandelion again, and you want to come in and sit at the potter's wheel, you just ask." She reached over to one of the tables and picked a small jar with a circle of paper held over the top by a red bow. There was swirly writing on a label on the front *Made with love by Miss Frances*. "Take this for your mother. She might like it."

Mum took the jar into the bathroom, making me promise not to tell Dad. She opened the lid and the room filled with a light fragrance, like the gardenias in Nanna's garden.

"It's face cream," she said, dabbing a finger in and rubbing the lemon coloured cream over her cheek. "Smells better than my Nivea. But you shouldn't have gone back in. Dad will go mad if he finds out."

"Why? She's a nice witch."

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Mum gasped. "She's not a witch, Jackie. She's...different, and I'm not sure that Frankston is ready for different. The people here are very insular, not like in Melbourne or Sydney. It's like we're living in a time-warp, not the 1970s."

I visited the witch's house the next weekend and made a wonky pot on her wheel. She showed me how to melt and mix the ingredients for face cream – almond oil, beeswax, mashed avocado and rose water. I watched her measure ingredients, mix liquids, try different combinations and write down the winning recipe. She told me all about St Lucia with its twin volcanic peaks and her home town of Soufriere where the houses all had to be built lower than the church tower. She told me about guavas and jackfish and breadfruit.

"We didn't have money so we made all our own stuff, soaps, candles, creams, cleaning products. I've taken my mother's and my grandmother's recipes and turned them into commercial products. I started out doing mail order, but now I have the shop."

"What will you call it?"

"I haven't decided yet, maybe inspiration will strike me soon."

Dad came home in a fury one evening, jabbing a finger at his new leather jacket and pointing out a blue streak.

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"The boss' son came into the office and started doodling on the blotter pad. Then the boss put the little tacker on my chair to spin him around and he stuck his dirty hands all over my jacket. Look at that, Helen. Blue biro all over it."

"Did you ask the boss to pay for it to be cleaned?"

Dad gulped and shook his head. He threw the jacket over the coat rack at the front door and walked, defeated, into the kitchen to pull out a coldie. Mum rolled her eyes at me as he wandered out to the garden.

"No spine," she whispered. "Can't deal with confrontation."

I thought about that. "So how come he stormed over to Miss Frances' house?"

Mum put down the wooden spoon she was stirring the Bolognese with. "When it comes to looking out for you, he'd do anything. He thought she'd given you something."

"But he was rude to her. Is it because she's got black skin?"

Mum pursed her lips. "She could be purple with gold stars and some people would still be rude, love. He didn't mean it. And he was worried about you."

"He should apologise to her. If I spoke to someone like that, or ignored them, you would make me say sorry."

Mum took up the spoon again and spoke to the saucepan. "Good luck with that one."

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I told Miss Frances about dad's leather jacket and she asked me to fetch it.

"It looks like just plain biro," she said, inspecting the stains.

"They use the same pens in the office. I've seen them. Blue biros with the company name written on them."

"Then it's very simple. Get me the bottle of white spirits from the back room, honey. And the cotton buds."

I hung the jacket back on the coat rack and watched as Dad pulled it off the next morning. He opened it out, checking for the stains. His brows creased in confusion when he saw nothing but the tan leather, free of biro.

"Helen. Did you get this jacket cleaned?"

Mum shook her head and looked at the jacket herself. "That's amazing."

I crossed my arms over my chest, trying desperately to hold in the excitement of this win. "It was Miss Frances. She cleaned it for you." My voice bubbled with glee.

Dad's face darkened. "What were you doing giving that woman my coat?"

Mum tutted. "David," she said in the tone usually reserved for me. "I think you need to go and thank her for this. How did she do it, Jackie?"

"White spirits and a cotton bud."

Dad stiffened but Mum glared at him and he mumbled something about going next door.

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The school fair was in a few days. Mum and Dad were running a raffle stall and I was stuck putting the tickets on the items. It was a never-ending mountain of tinned soup and salmon, Vegemite and the occasional bottle of something more exotic. I took the basket to Miss Frances' house for some company while I worked.

“So you just match the tickets with a 5 or a 0, and you win a prize?” she asked.

“That's right, but who would get excited over a can of condensed soup?”

She laughed heartily. “I could donate you some goodies.”

I nodded, then a better thought dropped into my mind. “You could even have your own stall!”

“I suppose I could drop by the school and ask the principal. It would be good publicity before I open the shop. And I have an idea. I'll need you to collect some things for me.”

The principal was doubtful he could find a space, but his younger deputy, newly-arrived from inner west Melbourne, smiled at Miss Frances and sold her a stall for a pound plus a donation to the raffle.

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We had a prime spot, beside the barbie and the cake stall. The crowd milled past, stopping at the stands either side of us, and ignoring ours. Some of the mothers stared at Miss Frances like she was an alien.

“We'll have to put on some demonstrations. Me and these jars aren't going to attract anyone.”

“Demonstrations?” I asked.

“Where's our box of stuff?”

I pulled it out, placing the items on the table. An old leather jacket from the Op Shop, a biro, white spirits, a carpet square, a bottle of red wine, cotton buds and tea towels.

Mum saw me and came over, with the deputy head and his wife. “Miss Frances' face cream is lovely. Here, try it. Oh, what's this?”

“I'm going to show you how to remove biro from leather.”

Mum gathered a few of the more friendly mothers. Miss Frances nodded to me and I scribbled on the jacket. The women issued a collective tut.

“White spirits on a cotton bud.” Miss Frances dabbed my doodles and the ink disappeared. “For suede, just sprinkle after with talcum powder and then dust it off. It will be as good as new.”

She then showed them how to get a red wine stain out of carpet with water and bicarb of soda. She told them about oil of cloves for treating mould, tea tree oil for cleaning, how to make shampoos and moisturisers and carpet cleaners. Within

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twenty minutes, she had sold all the stock from her stall. I helped her compile a list of people who wanted more information about her wheat-bags, oatmeal cleaning balls, beeswax polishes and herbal remedies.

“How did you learn all this?” my Mum asked, hoping to keep the crowd piqued.

“I just wrote down what my Momma and her Momma taught me at home. They always said that you have to get past what's on the surface,” she paused to look at her audience. “to look at what you're actually dealing with. You need to know what your ingredients are; the stain and the cleaning product.”

We counted the profits at Miss Frances' house later that evening. Mum took a bottle of Asti and a plate of cheese and kabana, telling me that Dad needed a little more time to adjust to anything new.

“You made heaps of money. More than twenty dollars,” I exclaimed.

“I can buy some more ingredients.”

“When do you open?” Mum asked.

“Next week. The signwriter comes tomorrow.”

I clapped. “What are you going to call the shop?”

She smiled, nodding her head so that the beads in her hair clacked. “Well, I've been thinking long and hard, and I think I'll settle for 'Witch's Brew'.”