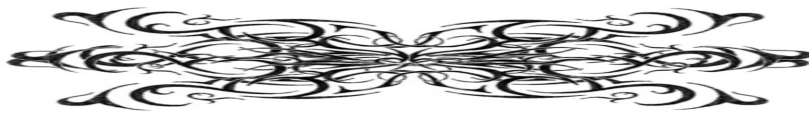


The Two Witches



Liz



Dee

By Dr. Douglas Courtney

The house stood stark upon the promontory. The few trees that clung to the outcropping grew bent under the constant force of wind. As it was long past time for leaves to turn color what remained was the black framework of limbs and trunks. Each in turn appeared gnarled and beaten as if anger itself took vengeance at their insolence.

The house was in stark contrast to the darkness of the trees. With an original coat of white burnished by years of sea and salt winds it played a canvass to the drawings of the trees. Yet even with its pale appearance the age of the mansion could not be denied. Falling shingles, broken shutters, and shattered window panes gave testament to its decline in years and care. The only redeeming characteristic was the well-tended garden set close by the main house. While the garden itself was in a fallow state, this was the only indication that anyone was about or anyone cared.

Two Aunts lived within and on the estate. Liz and Dee moved about freely with little care for the vicissitudes of life or the necessities of home maintenance. They were witches and that simple fact was enough to keep their full attentions. Neither was happy about their circumstances, nor were they dismayed. They were what they were and there was no denying it. To rail against their fate, cry into their soul, or cheer for their good fortune did no one any good or move matters in any way. Being a witch was not a part of their being, it was their being. They could no longer not be a witch than a raven could cease being a bird. Both had been born this way and had no say in the matter.

As witches their styles and tastes turned to dark dresses, outlandishly pointed hats, and cats. Stereotypical, but nonetheless what they preferred. Each in their own right could have been the crazy cat lady every one spoke about, but instead they were witches.

Their skin had a white pallor from too much time out of the sun and too much time in moonlight. It wasn't that they disdained the sun or even feared it. It was just that witchcraft was best done at night. The lack of sun and more than a few splatters of whatever concoction was in their kettle had turned their faces into a disquieting mask when looked upon. But each mumbled merrily each day, happy with who they were and what they did. Neither was seeking passionate true love, nor were they the worse for the lack of it. If any description was wholly written about the two Aunts it was that they were very content in being the witches they were.

Which was why the apparition sitting on the top steps of their dilapidated front porch a few days before All Hallows Eve was so disquieting. It was a small girl. Her eyes were hollow and streaks of tears lined her sunken cheeks. Her hair fell about her shoulders in a matted mess. She couldn't have been more than 9 years old and there was no doubt she was in deep distress.

Being witches Dee and Liz had seen their share of apparitions, so the appearance of one was not much of a distraction. But one of this age was unusual. It was also extremely unusual for such an apparition to stay present for so long. Dee had noticed the child first and Liz confirmed it still sat there two hours later. The apparition moved very little and stared at the entrance to their home as if willing them to come out. Its vacant stare and immovability confounded and confused Dee and Liz. They didn't want anything to do with this child, but they couldn't shake the desperation of its features. After all, they themselves were mothers of young children long ago. It tore at their heart to see such despair. Finally Liz ripped open the front door and with obvious irritation, confronted the ghost.

"Alright, child. You have our attention. What do you want?" Liz screeched in a bit too high a voice.

Dee followed her out and began shushing Liz immediately.

“Hush, Liz. You know how hard it is to git rid of ghost, even for witches. You scare her enough and she just might attach herself to our home and what would that do to our lives.” Dee said.

Dee turned to the child and looked down with concern.

“What do you want little one?” Dee said.

Dee spoke with the care of a concerned mother and the apparition reacted immediately to the soft comfort. The child moved from her place atop the step and flowed over to Dee. She wrapped what could be called an arm around Dee and bound herself to Dee’s leg.

“Didn’t know ghosts could do that.” Liz said in confusion.

“It’s because they can’t. This isn’t a ghost. It’s a projection. The child is still alive somewhere.” Dee replied.

“Alive. Only witches can project like this. She isn’t old enough to be a witch.” Liz said.

“Exactly. Unless her protection has been breached. She may have become unbound.” Dee replied.

“A young witch on All Hallows Eve with no binding. That could be real bad.” Liz replied in horror.

“Hush. You’re scaring her.” Dee said.

Indeed Liz remarks had moved the apparition. The child had turned her face into Dee’s leg and the movements of her body suggested crying.

“Sorry. I forgot she could hear us. I just wish we could hear her.” Liz replied and went over to comfort the child.

“Well we have to help her. Find out who she is and bind her again.” Dee stated.

“I don’t see how it’s our problem. Why do we need to re-bind her?” Liz asked.

“Well, first because it is a lonely scared child. Second, because you know what happens to unbound child witches at the stroke of midnight on Halloween.” Dee responded.

“I know she could lose her powers completely.” Liz said.

“Or become dark. You wouldn’t want a witch that went dark to decide to move in with us would you?” Dee asked.

“Forgot about that part. Wait. Why would she move in with us if she goes dark?” Liz asked.

“She doesn’t have to, but dark usually resides where it feels most comfortable. Seems she has made herself quite comfortable here.” Dee replied looking at the apparition.

“Fiddlesticks. We always have to do all the work. Well we better get started.” Liz groaned.

“Exactly. And we only have 48 hours to get it done.” Liz replied.

Liz and Dee moved back inside. Their house was what you would have expected their home to look like. It had lace across the chairs and tables that hadn’t seen a wash in years. Dust had accumulated in all available places that the Aunts forsook for other venues. Cats prowled around the carpet and on top of furniture. Lighting was primarily candles with a few modern fixtures thrown in. The Aunts were witches but they were not unreasonable. They liked modern conveniences when it suited them.

Mostly the home was warm. It smelled old, but also of cookies, cakes, and brownies, favorite foods of witches. The warmth was generated by a large fireplace at the center of the back wall. The fire burned a steady hot as if driven by a spell. Which it was.

When they moved inside Dee without thinking had put her hand out. The child did her best to take it and followed the witches into the comfort of their home. Liz already had the kettle brewing and was adding a few more chemicals into the mix. Dee had moved to open the grimoire and was looking for

the most useful incantation. The child sat ghost like next to the table that the grimoire perched upon. Dee occasionally looked down to see if there were any markings on the child or the child's clothes that could give a clue as to her location. Suddenly the child's head turned as if she saw something.

"She sees something Dee." Liz said urgently.

Dee looked down just in time to see the child vanish.

"This could be bad, Dee." Liz said.

Both Aunts took but a moment and then went frantically to work. Pages turned, words were shouted, and the cauldron bubbled with a hiss under the heat of the flames. But no amount of work or spells could locate the child. Liz and Dee were soon screaming at each other in pure frustration. Then as witches like humans, are won't to do, both fell into each other's arms crying.

The wood in the fire under the kettle popped one more time and interrupted Liz's thoughts. Suddenly she sat up with a look of determination.

"We're going to town." Liz stated.

"What? Why? You know how they treat us, especially on Halloween." Dee asked.

"Well we are witches. What do you expect? Besides we might find someone to use one of those internet things to search for missing children." Liz replied.

"You know we really need to learn about those things." Dee replied.

"Not now, Dee. Let's go." Liz said.

A bit of magic had them quickly standing next to an old wrought iron fence surrounding a small two story building deep in the heart of town. Dee quickly recognized it for what it was.

"The elementary school? Really? You took us to the elementary school. Why not just shoot me now? Witches and children on Halloween. Next you will be adding candy and I'll have to hear that whole Hansel and Gretel thing again." Dee spat out.

The school was a common building seen in most small northern towns. It was red brick with concrete stairs leading up to a main doorway. School windows on the first floor had child's pictures of leaves and pumpkins plastered on them for all to see. At least five decades of children had walked through its doors. The maple and oak trees spread a canopy across the front lawn that sheltered the children in the summer and supplied plenty of leaves for fun in the fall. The air around the school smelled damp and the leaves left a small odor of decay. But intermixed with all this was the movement, smell, and sound of children.

"Keep calm, Dee. The kids understand these things a whole lot better than their dads and moms. We will get farther with them and with a lot less hassle. If we start asking for a missing child with adults they would probably try to lock us up." Liz replied.

"Well maybe. But one crack about flying brooms or eating children I am going to turn them into frogs." Dee huffed.

Liz shook her head. She knew Dee wouldn't harm a child, but it didn't mean her feelings didn't get hurt when she was confronted by all the myths. Liz stood on the cracked concrete sidewalk lined by large trees and looked down both directions of the fence hoping to see a child. It didn't take too long before a blond haired girl with a pink coat planted herself on an old wooden bus bench near the gates of the school. She pulled out one of those tablet thingies and began to tap on it.

Liz made her way to the child with Dee in tow.

"Excuse me, dear." Liz spoke.

"Not supposed to speak with strangers." The girl replied not looking up from tapping away on one of those infernal things.

Liz had to admit it was quite irritating to be addressed this way and not even have eye contact. But she needed information and persisted. She just hoped she didn't turn the little twerp into a frog.

"Yes, of course dear. But we need to find someone and thought you could help us."

The girl looked up with a bit of an attitude and then her eyes grew as big as saucers.

"Whoa! Neat costumes. You look just like witches." She said.

"Why thank you." Dee replied with a smile.

"I don't think she was complimenting you like you believe she was, Dee." Liz said quietly to Dee.

It took Dee a beat more before understanding dawned on her.

"Oh. I see what you mean." Dee replied, her sour disposition returning.

The child looked back and forth at the Aunts before speaking again.

"So what did you need me to help you with?" She asked.

"Well we don't know how to use one of those things and we need to find a missing girl?" Liz replied.

"Oh. Ok. I'll help. Do you know her name?" The girl asked.

The girl tapped on the device in front of her and then waited for a reply to her question.

"Well, no. We don't. We only know what she looks like." Dee replied.

The girl scratched her head.

"That's going to be a bit harder. Hey, maybe we can look under missing persons. Then you can look through the pictures." She said and began tapping furiously on her device.

"How long has she been missing?" The girl asked.

Dee and Liz looked at each other as if adding up the possibilities.

"Well probably in the last 36 hours." Liz replied.

The child sat back in her seat and exhaled slightly.

"Oh. That isn't long enough. They have to be missing at least 3 days before they put them in missing persons. I know because they won't start hunting for Rebecca yet." The girl said.

Liz and Dee looked at each other. They knew magic well and what may look like a coincidence to some is magic's way of working its spell. Liz and Dee probably didn't meet this child by chance, but by magic.

"Who's Rebecca?" The Aunt's asked in unison.

"She's my best friend. She just moved here in August right next door to me. I see her every day. But two days ago she didn't come out when we had to go to school. I knocked on the door and nobody answered. Not her mom or her. I tried to get my mom to do something, but all she would do is call the police and they said they couldn't do anything for 3 days." The girl said.

The child was so exasperated at unknowing adults. She even emphasized "anything" as if the whole world never believed her.

It only took a few moments for the Aunts to find out where Rebecca lived. Dee cast a quick confounding charm to make the girl more relaxed and happy. Then they sent her on her way. With a bit more magic they were soon standing in front of Rebecca's home.

Dee and Liz were dumbfounded when they saw the house. It was old, a Victorian mansion. It appeared well maintained. Nice front yard, white picket fence circling the whole area, and even a child's swing dangling from one of the large branches of the many trees that filled the lot. But the look of the yard or house isn't what drew the Aunts' attentions. The house was the one built by Angus Spector, a warlock gone insane with the death of his wife and child. He had cast ancient spells on the house and

bound it in old strong magic. Witch or warlock would not go near the place for fear of those spells. It was said even old Scratch himself avoided this place.

“Well we know why she is unbound.” Liz remarked.

Dee just nodded silently as they stood before the structure. To both Dee and Liz it seemed as if the house was looking back. Liz could swear it was seething. Dee knew she felt the coldest chill she had ever felt.

“What do we do now, Liz?” Dee asked.

Liz and Dee returned to their home. The apparition of Rebecca had reappeared and was waiting for them on the front porch. Liz reached out. Rebecca stood up and as before tried to take Liz’s hand. The three of them walked back into the front room of the mansion.

It had been hours since they saw the house and Liz and Dee had hardly spoken. Each was in their own thoughts. Finally Liz spoke up.

“You know if she does go dark I think I could make room for her in here. I mean it’s 50/50 she just loses her powers, isn’t it?” Liz asked.

Dee smiled. She knew Liz wouldn’t back down. But she had to say the words. Saying them out loud seemed to focus her thoughts.

“I want to know what witch moved her in there. I mean any witch would have to feel the spells cast upon that place. At the very least all of the sisterhood knows the history of that place. Why go in there?” Dee responded.

“We need information. We have a name and a location. Think we can do something with that?” Liz cackled.

“Indeed I can.” Dee responded.

Dee headed to the grimoire and Liz fired up the kettle. It was going to be a long night, but they would find their answers. Rebecca’s apparition just sat under the table and began to sleep.

The grim hours of the night had passed and All Hollows Eve daylight was fast approaching when Liz read the final runes.

“Her fear was great. She couldn’t hold him back. He was too powerful. But she couldn’t let him have Rebecca. Only the house would keep him at bay.” Liz said.

“That explains why she went there. Doesn’t give us her name though.” Dee replied.

“Yes. But it does mean she went in there by choice. She wasn’t taken by spell.” Liz said.

“It means she isn’t bound, she is lost.” The Aunts said together.

“If we can find her and lead her out, she and Rebecca can leave.” Dee finished the thoughts.

“That’s a big if. No witch or warlock has ever entered the house and left. We don’t even know what it does to them or if they are alive. The spells and enchantments are ancient and unknown. Even if there was a way to reverse some of the spells we wouldn’t know how.” Liz replied.

“Shall we sit then and keep the apparition company?” Dee asked.

“Foolish old woman. Do you want to live forever?” Liz quipped and moved toward the kettle once more.

“Well, I have thought about the possibility.” Dee laughed.

Liz and Dee began their preparations to enter the Spector house.

It was late evening when they made their way to the front of the Spector mansion. It had taken all day to make plans and devise spells. Liz had remarked more than once that she would have preferred a lifetime of preparation and study before they began this effort. But time was not on their side. Still they did have a plan, as feeble as it was.

“Remember, we have to get Rebecca out before the last stroke of midnight.” Liz mentioned once again.

“And us as well. This mansion is powerful in the calmest of times. There is no way to know what it will do at the witching hour.” Dee said and shivered.

Dee took one more look along the tree lined street. She saw that all the leaves had fallen and the limbs were framing the large golden moon hanging low in the sky. Kids were busy “trick or treating” in various costumes and clothes. Candles burning in pumpkins mingled with the smell of decaying grass and leaves. It was a bit damp and cool. A perfect All Hollow’s Eve night. She just hoped she could come back and enjoy some of it. After all it was the high holy night for witches.

“Ready?” Liz asked.

“Ready.” Dee replied.

With those words the two witches shoved their open palms towards the ground. Streaks of green light flowed from their hands to the ground and each was propelled skyward. They gained just enough height and headed towards the front porch of the hated house. Then suddenly, everything was pitch black.

Liz called out first.

“Dee are you there?”

A loud voice answered.

“Illuminate!”

Liz looked toward the light and saw Dee casting close beside her. Liz reached down to her side with both hands then shoved her arms into the air above her head.

“Revelatum.” Liz demanded.

The darkness faded and revealed the front sitting room of the old mansion. Dee and Liz were standing in the middle of the room. The small child’s apparition was standing quiet and still directly in front of them. The apparition had hideous sunken eyes and decaying garments draping her body.

“Don’t be deceived Liz. It is but a specter sent to torment us.” Dee said.

With a flick of her hand Dee sent the specter into a dissolving mist.

“Where do we begin looking, Dee?” Liz asked.

“The house is blocking our tracking and travel spells. We will have to personally look into each nook and cranny until we find her. If I know warlocks they will want to keep their innocents close to their darkest powers. That will have to be in the lowest levels of the house. So we start by finding a door to the basement.” Dee replied.

“That will also be the most dangerous for us as well, Dee. So be prepared.” Liz said.

Cautiously Dee and Liz made their way through the front room to the main hallway towards the kitchen. Liz knew old houses and believed the entrance to the basement would lay in the kitchen. Each step of the way was met with resistance. First a holding spell in the hallway grabbed their heels and tried to mold them into the walls. Ghosts and specters popped out of pictures, vases, and even the odd door. Each was violent in temper and possessed abilities to harm most women, men, warlocks, or witches. It took a full hour and a half just for Liz and Dee to make it to the kitchen. Their skills and magic had never

been so tested before. They were worn out, but had yet to find the basement door let alone the child. Finally Liz turned the corner into the kitchen and there before her stood the sought after door. Liz could swear she saw it breathing.

“We can’t waste any more time sparing with this house. It is tiring us out. We only have less than an hour until midnight and the house’s powers are growing.” Dee said.

“Nice thing about being witches. Our powers are growing as well.” Liz replied with a smile.

Liz reached out her hands towards Dee. Dee turned and began to feel the rush of power the nearness of the “witching hour” was having upon them. Dee grabbed Liz’s hands and closed her eyes. Both began speaking the incantation. The room they were in began to fight back. Knives flew from drawers. The oven shot flames towards them that licked at their forms. Furniture began to spin and try to beat at the Aunts. But their power held. Nothing could touch them. Soon the door to the basement heaved and stretched against its hinges. A loud agonizing roar bellowed from the basement and the door exploded into the kitchen. A bright light of terrifying orange and red engulfed all then disappeared just as quickly as it started.

Liz and Dee found themselves in the basement. They were in the center of a room decorated in old runes, an ancient altar, and decades of filth and decay. On the top of the altar below a blood dripping pendulum was a body. Liz and Dee rushed over to get the girl and get out. But when they turned her over it was not the child they sought.

“Ramona!” Dee screamed out.

It was Dee’s only child who had disappeared twenty years ago. At the sound of her mother’s voice Ramona opened her eyes.

“Mom.” Ramona replied and fell into her mother’s arms.

Liz quickly cast a protection spell as Ramona clung tightly to her mother.

“I didn’t want to go, mom. He made me. I tried to come back. I tried.” Ramona was crying hysterically into her mother’s arms.

Dee just shushed her daughter.

“It’ll be alright, dear. We will have plenty of time to talk. We just need to get you out of here.” Dee said and began to move Ramona to safety.

“No! I can’t go. He’s out there and I have to find Emily. We came in here to escape him and the house took Emily. I have been looking for days. I won’t leave my daughter.” Ramona cried.

Liz and Dee stared at each other over the revelation. They were too stunned to even speak let alone move.

“Ramona, we have to work fast. Emily is unbound and it’s All Hallows Eve.” Dee told Ramona. Ramona’s eye grew wide and fear gripped her once more.

“By the Goddess. She could go dark.” Ramona wailed.

“Time is running out dears. We can’t split up to look the house would own us. But we can have Emily look for us.” Liz smiled.

“We would need to go where Ramona last saw Emily.” Dee said.

“It was in the front room. But I’ve looked there. I have looked everywhere.” Ramona said in exhaustion.

“But we haven’t looked there, Ramona.” Dee smiled and grabbed Ramona by the hand.

Realization hit Ramona and she reached out to Liz. Liz grabbed Ramona’s hand and then grabbed Dee’s. The witching hour was drawing closer and more power was coursing through their veins.

Dee started the incantation, followed by Ramona and then Liz. Their ring of power grew and grew as the strength of three witches in the shadow of the witching hour began casting.

The room surrounding them began to wobble, then fade in and out. The room moaned and fought and growled and howled, but ancient spells and warlock rants were not a match for three powerful witches. After all, it was a witch that wrote the first spells. And with the howl of a forgotten wind the witches found themselves in the front room of the mansion.

Ramona smiled as she looked at her mother and Liz.

"I forgot how good it is to really cast. Shall we do it once more, ladies?" Ramona asked her strength retuning with each tick toward the witching hour.

"Remember dear. We have to get Emily out and rebind her before the twelfth stroke of midnight. We only have a less than a half hour." Dee said.

"I remember, mom. Let's do this Aunt Liz." Ramona said.

Liz began another incantation. Ramona followed. Dee picked up the chanting and the house rebelled once again. The walls buckled, the furniture disappeared, and the depths of oblivion opened below their feet. But neither witch wavered, neither witch faltered. Their voices were loud and strong. With an angry howl from the depths of hell the room fell silent. Ramona looked about and Emily emerged from a tall floor mirror positioned just inside the front door.

"Mom?" Emily asked in a bewildered state.

"Quickly Emily, take my hand." Ramona said.

Emily moved to her mother and took her hand. Dee reached out to take Emily's other hand.

"It's OK Emily. You can take her hand." Ramona said as she smiled at Emily.

Emily took Dee's hand and then Dee began to chant another incantation. Liz picked up the chant and so did Ramona. Then out of the drum of regular incantation Dee, Liz, and Ramona heard the small child's voice chant with them. The three had become four.

With a fury unheard, unseen, or even felt ever before by any of them the four witches were propelled out of the house in a massive black cloud. They found themselves all tumbled together on the ground just on the right side of the picket fence.

"I don't think we are welcome in that house." Liz remarked with a chuckle.

"It appears it did have an attitude." Dee replied.

Each of them, including Emily, began to chuckle.

"Looks like I have a few minutes. Come here Emily." Ramona said.

Emily came over and Ramona began a chant to re-bind her daughter when a dark form blocked the moonlight.

"Never!" A man's voice commanded.

A green bolt of light cracked upon the ground in front of Ramona. Emily was thrown back and Ramona was convulsing on the ground, her face distorted and fear engulfing her. Just then the clock began to strike the midnight chimes.

"A warlock? A warlock has caused this pain?" Liz asked.

"Apparently so, sister. Shall we?" Dee asked.

Dee flung her arms out and broke the spell on Ramona. This in turn angered the warlock and he turned his attentions to Dee. Liz blocked his attack on Dee while Dee picked up Ramona.

"Re-bind her dear. We only have seconds." Dee pleaded with her daughter.

Ramona reached out placed Emily in front of her. Ramona began the enchantments once again. The clock only had 6 more tolls to go. The warlock tried to stop Ramona once more, but Dee and Liz blocked his spell and then began to cast their own and it wasn't going to be pretty.

Two spells cast out as the tower clock struck another cord. Two more followed as a second cord echoed across the town. For each strike of the clock toward midnight Liz and Dee cast as anger, frustration, and hatred filled their spells. Ramona worked feverishly in the background chanting a binding spell on Emily. A final chime sounded as Ramona, Dee, and Liz spoke their final words. The sound of thunder broke the clear night sky and a bolt of lightning crashed. The "witching hour" was now upon them.

The warlock was gone. Liz and Dee quickly turned to Emily. The child was curling up to softly fall asleep in her mother's arms. The re-binding had worked. Emily was safe until she came of age.

Liz looked down at Ramona and then turned to Dee.

"Seems we met the witching hour. Shall we go home and partake of some fudge and honor the Goddess?" Liz asked.

"Suits me." Dee replied.

Dee and Liz held out their hands. Ramona cuddled Emily in one arm and held her mother's hand with the other.

"Fudge on Halloween. How wonderful!" Ramona smiled.

Dee raised her arm and snapped her fingers. With a crack of lightning, only a wisp of smoke remained behind. The two witches had taken the two new witches back to the safety of their home.