

Witchlet

(A Summer's End Story)

By G.B. Marian

“Don’t you just love Ceri’s costume?” Ceri’s father asked, looking down at his little girl with glee.

“What’s she supposed to be?” Ceri’s mother asked in reply, looking very confused.

“Yeah,” agreed Pawl-Pawl, Ceri’s grandfather. “What’s she supposed to be?”

Ceri was dressed in a black outfit and had whiskers painted on her face. There was also a pair of feline ears poking up from her scalp. A cardboard box with holes had been pulled over her head so that it covered her entire torso; it looked as if the girl were exploding out of the box from both ends. A piece of green construction paper with a big black question mark was stapled to the front side of the box, and a long black tail was stapled to the back.

“She’s Schroedinger’s Cat!” Dad announced, sounding quite proud of himself.

Ceri giggled.

“See? She likes it,” Dad said.

“She doesn’t even know what Schroedinger’s Cat is, Bronnie,” Mom criticized. “Hell, *I* don’t even know what it is.”

“Beats the hell out of me,” Pawl-Pawl shrugged.

“Well that doesn’t matter,” Dad insisted. “She doesn’t know what ghosts or witches are yet, either, so what’s the difference?”

“The *hell* she doesn’t know about ghosts, boy,” Pawl-Pawl said fiercely, but neither Dad nor Mom noticed. Ceri clapped her hands at the old man and smiled. Pawl-Pawl’s face relaxed into a tired smile; he winked at her and she giggled again.

“Well it’s supposed to get pretty chilly tonight,” said Mom. “And it’ll be dark in about a half hour. Ready for Trick-or-Treat?”

“You bet I am,” Dad said, following Mom out of the room.

“Dummies,” Pawl-Pawl muttered after them.

Ceri reached up for him, smiling.

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“Oh, but not *you!*” Pawl-Pawl beamed, reaching for the little girl. He picked her up and she tugged gently at his puffy white beard. “You’re a keen one, so you are!” the old man rejoiced. “You’re just about the brightest little bulb this town’s ever seen, Ceri—and probably the cutest, too!”

Ceri caught a flash of something in the corner of her eye, and she looked over to the window. There was nothing there now, but whatever she had seen had frightened her a little. Pawl-Pawl looked in the same direction, but he didn’t see anything either. “Catching glimpses again, eh?” he asked. “Well, don’t you fret none; it’s normal for a little witchlet like you. I expect you’ll be seeing all kinds of things tonight. It’s *Calan Gaeaf*, by Gods, and strange things always walk in Wyrddham this night.”

Pawl-Pawl put Ceri gently back on the floor just as Dad walked back into the room. The younger man stopped, rubbed his eyes and stared at his daughter for a second; then his wife passed behind him in the hallway. Mom looked at him and asked, “What’s the matter with you?”

“I—hmmm.”

“What is it?”

“I must be working too hard, is all. I thought I saw Ceri flying down from the ceiling for a minute there.”

Mom laughed, but Pawl-Pawl sure didn’t.

* * *

Mom’s arms lifted Ceri into the night, and Dad and Pawl-Pawl followed. Dad accidentally shut the front door on the old man’s face. Ceri heard Pawl-Pawl yell; then she saw him walk through the door, looking disgruntled.

“Dammit, boy!” the old man muttered, rubbing his nose. “Almost got killed in Korea so you could waste your milk money on the Beatles, and this is the thanks I get. I taught you to have more respect for your elders than this! By the Lady Cerridwen, I did!”

Ceri almost never saw the world outside their house at night, and she was suddenly very glad for this. The neighborhood echoed with strange laughter and the sound of knuckles knocking on wood. Voices chanted, “Trick or Treat!” (with the occasional refrain of “Smell My Feet!”), and everywhere she looked, Ceri saw monsters. There was one over in the next yard that had a pale white face, a big red

nose and a mouth smeared with something red. It towered over the bushes in a shiny silver suit with balls of orange fuzz running down its chest. It was laughing about something with another creature wearing a striped sweater and knives for fingers. A third monster—a big, slimy brown goblin with a glowing red chest—walked over to them from the sidewalk and started laughing too.

Ceri didn't like any of these creatures at all—not even the black-eyed sheets that walked around by themselves. She worried they might sneak into the house while she and her family were gone. They could hide under her crib and wait to eat her while Mom and Dad were asleep; or they could hide in the bathroom ceiling (with the beast that hummed whenever the light was turned on) and eat Mom or Dad while they went potty.

“Don't be scared, Witchlet,” Pawl-Pawl whispered to her. “They're children, just like you. Well, maybe a little older...but children, just the same.”

That made Ceri feel a little better, but she wasn't entirely convinced. She wouldn't take her eyes off that gorilla down the street until it went away.

Mom put her on the ground and said, “Okay, baby, you want to try walking by yourself? Here, hold Mommy's hand.” Then Dad led the way across the street. A shrill wind gusted through the trees, causing red and gold leaves to brush against Ceri's shoes. The fragrance in the air reminded her of the fires Pawl-Pawl would make inside his fireplace whenever there was snow outside.

“Let's try the Powells' first,” Dad said, heading for the house directly across the street. There were orange lights in every window, and one of them had a picture of a woman with green skin, wearing a pointy black hat and stirring a big black pot. Another window had a smiling, legless white thing flying out from a big orange ball.

There were two chairs on either side of the front door, and a person was seated in each one. To Ceri's horror, they weren't actually *people* at all; they were faceless giants wearing tattered clothes, with thin yellow things poking out from their sleeves and the legs of their pants. Each of them wore a funny hat, and they all sat motionless, staring blankly into the dark without any eyes. Dad slowly ascended the stairs to the porch, and as he approached these lifeless giants, Ceri's grip tightened on her mother's hand.

“Ceri—Ow!”

“What's the matter, Cynthia?” Dad asked from the porch.

“I think she's scared,” Mom replied, freeing herself from the little girl's hand. “Don't worry honey, they aren't real.”

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Dad inspected each of the silent giants one by one. Ceri watched in great suspense, believing that one—or perhaps all—of these monsters would suddenly leap up and grab her father at any minute. But after studying them for a brief moment, Dad turned to her mother and said, “I think the coast is clear. No monsters here; everything’s just hunky dory—”

Then he grabbed the thing that was closest to the left side of the door and screamed into its ear. Wide-eyed, Ceri jumped twice; once in response to her father’s surprise attack on the thing, and once again in response to the fact that *the thing had jumped too*.

“AHHH!” the thing screamed.

“OH!” Mom shrieked.

“SHIT!” Pawl-Pawl hollered, clutching his chest.

“Aha!” Dad chuckled, quite proud of himself. “That’s for trying to scare my little girl, you knucklehead!” He turned to Ceri. “Don’t worry, honey,” he repeated, “It’s just Mr. Powell.”

The creature removed its faceless head, only to reveal the friendly and familiar semblance of their next door neighbor.

“Hey there, Ceri!” Mr. Powell said, raising his right hand in greeting. Then he turned to Mom and said, “Howdy, Cynthia.”

“Hello, Tristan,” Ceri’s mother replied. She didn’t seem to think anything that had just transpired was very funny, and Ceri had to agree.

Mr. Powell shook his head and laughed. “Holy smokes, Bronnie Baines! You really got me good, this time!”

“He got us *all* good,” Pawl-Pawl grumbled.

“Serves you right, you old goat,” Dad laughed again as Mom led Ceri up the porch. “Didn’t you pull that trick on enough trick-or-treaters last year?”

“Hell no.”

“Uh-huh. Well, how are things?”

“Oh, pretty much the same,” Mr. Powell replied tiredly while tossing his mask to the floor. “Deidre’s still having kittens about what happened at Hobb’s Tree. You’d think we’d have more important things to worry about than somebody carving some damn fool words on a tree; but whatever.”

“Hey!” Pawl-Pawl exclaimed. “That tree’s mighty important! That’s where our whole community got started, you damn fool!”

“Anyway,” Mr. Powell sighed. “Who wants some candy?”

“Ahh!” Ceri cheered.

“Oh!” said Mr. Powell, pretending to sound stern. “Formalities, young lady! You have to say the magic words, you know.”

Ceri worked hard to get the words out, but all she could say was, “Twi...twi...”

Mr. Powell laughed. “I’ll accept that as a valid ‘Trick or Treat.’” He placed a handful of Kit-Kats, M&M’s and Snickers bars into Ceri’s treat bag. “That ought to be enough sugar to keep you up all night, don’t you think?”

As the adults conversed, Ceri saw something move on the other side of Mr. Powell’s porch. It looked like an animal at first, but it was only a shadow. Yet its shape was far too...*squiggly* for comfort. It reminded her of that many-legged wormy thing she had seen crawling up the basement stairs one day, except it was much larger and more unsettling.

Then—as if the thing had noticed her watching it—the shadow beast slithered off the porch and into the Powells’ front yard. Ceri did her best to follow it with her eyes, but it soon melted away into darkness.

Lightning flashed across the sky, and that was when Ceri saw the stranger standing on the sidewalk.

He reminded her of those movies Pawl-Pawl always watched on TV, with the men riding into small towns on horses and firing their guns at the bad guys. He wore a long black coat and a big black hat, and he held something in his left hand. She didn’t know the word for it, but it was the same tool her father used to chop wood. The man in black was clearly alive, but he didn’t seem to be breathing; he just stood there motionless, like a statue. The other monsters—the ones that were knocking on people’s doors and demanding treats—didn’t seem to notice he was there. And though his face was entirely concealed by shadow, the stranger had eyes that glowed red in the dark—

—and which were looking right at *Ceri*.

“What is it, baby?” Mom asked, hearing the girl whimper.

Ceri pointed in the stranger’s direction, just as a dull crack of thunder sounded from above; but he was long gone.

“Did you see something that scared you?” Mom continued. “Don’t worry; it was just someone in a mask.”

But Pawl-Pawl was looking right at Ceri’s face, and he could see that she was truly frightened. He shook his head at his daughter-in-law; then he gently placed his

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hand on his granddaughter's shoulder. "I don't know what you saw, kiddo," he said, "but whatever it was, I believe it was there."

They stood there together for a while, grandfather and granddaughter, looking out into the darkness while Mom and Dad swapped dinner recipes with Mr. Powell.

* * *

Ceri had no sense of time, but it seemed to her that trick-or-treating lasted forever that night. She saw more curious creatures along the way, including white bony things that hung from the trees and rattled in the wind, and creatures that were wrapped from head to toe in toilet paper. There was a woman dressed like that lady who showed monster movies on TV (and Pawl-Pawl stopped grumbling for just a moment when he saw her); and with each house they visited, Ceri received another generous helping of candy.

They had reached what her father called "the corner of 4th and Wesley" when they bumped into another family. They seemed familiar, but Ceri couldn't recognize them; they looked like a random family of pirates that had just washed ashore from some great nautical adventure. But as Mom and Dad started talking with them, the girl felt a chill race down her spine. She looked to the black emptiness behind her parents, worried that the shadow beast from Mr. Powell's porch had followed them and was lurking there; but she saw nothing. Lightning flashed, and she turned back to face the pirate family.

There was the man in black again, looming over the lead pirate's right shoulder.

Ceri froze, but she relaxed a little when she realized that the stranger wasn't looking directly at her this time. He was studying the same pocket of darkness that she had just checked a moment before. Neither Mom nor Dad noticed he was there; even Pawl-Pawl was looking away at present. Ceri gazed into the stranger's shining crimson eyes for just a second, thinking she could see thunderclouds and lightning bolts brewing within. Actual thunder cracked in the sky, sounding like a hungry animal ready to pounce.

And that was when Ceri heard something *hiss* right into her left ear.

She screamed in terror, and she didn't stop. It was the same scream she would unleash whenever she tripped and bruised herself, or when she was bitten or stung

by some vicious arthropod. Whatever it was that had scared her had moved away now, but she sensed it was still somewhere close by.

Mom, Dad, and the parents of the pirate family all leapt to check and see if Ceri was hurt, while Pawl-Pawl noticed the stranger, who had turned to look at her. Pawl-Pawl lifted his cane into a battle stance, ready to beat the man in black senseless if he took one more step toward the little girl. Then lightning flashed—
—and the stranger was gone again.

“Are you all right?” Mom and Dad both asked Ceri. “What’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

“She’s okay,” the mother of the pirate family confirmed.

“The HELL she is!” Pawl-Pawl replied.

“I don’t understand what’s got her so frightened,” Dad remarked.

“Maybe she saw someone in a scary costume across the street?” Mom suggested.

With Ceri still crying, Pawl-Pawl rolled his eyes and threw his hands into the air. “All right!” he seethed. “I didn’t want to do this, boy, but now I *have* to.” He reached inside his son’s head and snapped his fingers. When he pulled his hand back, Dad said, “I think it’s time we went home.”

* * *

After parting ways with the pirate family, Mom removed the box around Ceri, handed it to Dad, and carried the girl in her arms. They were walking back toward their house, which by Ceri’s reckoning must have been hours away.

Pawl-Pawl went ahead of them, still brandishing his cane and looking all around them with the eyes of a hawk. It seemed very late, for even most of the monsters Ceri had seen knocking on people’s doors were gone. A few were still walking around at the end of the block, but they soon turned down another street, leaving Ceri’s family alone in the darkness. The only sound they could hear was that of a dog somewhere on another block, begging to be let inside.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have gone so far,” Mom said, her voice faltering just a little.

“Not to worry, honey,” said Dad. “We’ll be back home in just a few minutes.”

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They continued walking in silence for a while, but Ceri soon felt chills down her spine again. She looked around just as Pawl-Pawl was doing, but neither of them saw anything out of the ordinary. Everything looked perfectly fine—

—Except for the red-eyed stranger standing in the yard just to their left.

Lightning flashed again, and Ceri grabbed her mother's hair, causing Mom to yell.

“What is it?” Dad hollered, turning to face them.

“I don't know,” Mom answered over a heavy thunderclap, pulling her hair out of Ceri's grasp. “She's really riled up about something.”

As before, neither of them noticed the stranger standing right there beside them; but Pawl-Pawl sure did. He shoved his hand inside Mom's head this time and shouted, “RUN!”

“RUN!” Mom screamed. She ran, clinging Ceri close to her chest.

“Wait!” Dad shouted, confused. When he realized Mom wasn't going to stop, he tossed the Schrodinger's Cat box to the ground and followed suit.

Over her mother's shoulder, Ceri saw Pawl-Pawl approaching the stranger. “Stay away from my kids!” the old man shouted, swinging his cane back and forth. The stranger didn't listen; he just kept walking calmly after Ceri and her parents, as if he couldn't hear. He was limping, dragging his right leg behind him. The man in black leaned on his wood-chopping tool as he moved, using it like Pawl-Pawl used his cane.

Angered by the stranger's refusal to listen, Pawl-Pawl brought his cane down against the stranger's back—

—and accomplished nothing. The man in black just kept limping forward, as if nothing had touched him at all.

“PAWL-PAWL!” Ceri screamed, scaring her mother even more.

The wind picked up, and the lightning was nearly constant now. Ceri's father was still trying to catch up, but he tripped on a large tree branch that had fallen into the street. He fell to the ground, hollering in pain.

Ceri screamed and pulled her mother's hair again. Mom screamed too, both in fear and in pain, as she turned left to the next street.

That was when the shadow beast attacked.

It lunged out from the bushes behind them, just like that awful box that surprised Ceri with a scary face whenever she turned the handle. She cried out again,

and Mom, exhausted, slowed down. “Baby,” she gasped, “I don’t see anything, and I don’t know what we’re running away from.”

Ceri could hear the shadow beast coming up behind them. She could hear its slimy skin puckering as it slid toward them on the pavement.

Then it pounced.

Something tore Ceri away from her mother’s arms. The appendage felt cold and sticky against her skin. It paralyzed her, prohibiting her from squirming away. The tentacle lifted her high in the air, holding her so she could only see its owner in her periphery. She could tell the monster was long like a snake, and that it had hairy, spidery legs extending from its sides.

The creature studied her with millions of black, doll-like eyes, and then it opened its mouth *the wrong way*. It roared, its breath carrying the scent of sour excrement—

—And then it shrieked as its tentacle relaxed and dropped Ceri. A mighty arm caught her before she hit the ground; then it placed her gently on the grass in a nearby yard.

Mom ran to Ceri and pulled her into a warm embrace. “Ceri?” her voice trembled. “Are you okay? Why—why aren’t you moving, baby?”

As her rescuer limped away, Ceri saw it was the man in black. He had chopped through the beast’s tentacle with his weapon, with which he now dispensed another blow. The beast shrieked again—was that *fear* in its voice?—and tried to slither away. Then the stranger thrust his weapon through the monster’s hide. It struggled once more to escape, but the stranger hacked away at its legs and tentacles. Black pus squirted into the sky and mixed with cold rain.

The monster’s roar died down into a pathetic, choking rattle...

...and then it stopped.

The man in black kicked at the monster’s remains, but it didn’t move. Then he looked over at Ceri. When she looked into his shining red eyes again, her paralysis immediately wore off. She moved her arms and legs joyously, and her trembling mother let out a heartfelt, “Thank heaven!”

“Please,” a tired voice called from somewhere behind them. “Don’t hurt the little girl.”

It was Pawl-Pawl. He stepped in front of Ceri and her mother, facing the stranger. He threw his cane to the pavement. “No more,” he said, his voice tired and

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hoarse. “If you want another victim, take me. But please...whoever you are...please leave my family in peace.”

Another bolt of lightning fell from heaven. Ceri could see that the stranger’s face was extremely pale. Long red hair flowed from beneath his hat like lava, and his chin and cheekbones were as sharp as broken glass.

“You make Me very proud, Merlyn Baines,” the stranger replied in a soothing voice, catching Pawl-Pawl off guard. He then limped toward the little girl and extended his left hand to her. She reached out to him with her left hand as well, and the man gently took it into his fingers.

“Monsters like that always come back,” he crooned to Ceri in that lovely voice of his. “But it fears Me—and since I have touched you, it will now fear you as well. You will remember this exchange when you are older, little Witchlet.”

Then the man in black faded away, and the lightning followed.

* * *

A little while later, Dad was being hauled into the back of an ambulance, and Mom was talking to a policewoman. She was still holding Ceri in her arms, and Pawl-Pawl stood beside them, unseen by most.

“I don’t *know*,” Mom said to the policewoman. “She just flew right out of my arms! It was like someone was *carrying* her. Then she stopped moving, and I thought she was *dead*...”

“Well thank the Gods someone had the good sense to call 911, Mrs. Baines,” the policewoman replied. “Let’s get you and your daughter home; in the meantime, I’ll make sure Mr. Baines gets everything he needs over at the clinic tonight.”

“And I don’t know why,” Mom continued, “but I almost felt like my father-in-law was with us. That’s crazy, isn’t it?”

The officer blinked. “Not here in Wyrddham, ma’am.”

Pawl-Pawl smiled at Ceri. “I’ll follow you and your mother home, Witchlet. Then I’ll be off to see Bronwyn at the hospital. He’s a real dummy, your Dad, but he’s also my boy.”

Ceri blinked at him sleepily; all she wanted was rest.

“Yeah,” the old man agreed as he followed Mom and Ceri to the policewoman’s car. “We’ve had quite a night, haven’t we? Hell of a way to spend Halloween. Well, thank the spirits we’re all okay!”

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Ceri fell asleep then, and she dreamed that all the monsters in Wyrldham were scared of her. She awoke for a little while back at the house, where she saw that Mom had lit all the candles surrounding Pawl-Pawl's picture in the front hallway.

Then Ceri returned to her dreams.