THE WITCH, THE MONK, AND THE IT GUY

A Tale From Wytch End



By

David Thomas Stone

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For Nicola

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Only one person from this tale isn't a figment of my imagination. Margaret Read, also known as 'Shady Meg', lived in King's Lynn, and was hanged for witchcraft on 20th July 1590. Local folklore still insists she was burnt at the stake but it's unlikely. Unfortunately official records from that time no longer survive to confirm or otherwise. Many thanks to the Norfolk Records Office for letting me delve.

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CHAPTER ONE

Sizzling Bacon

Flames danced angrily all around me, but my strength had gone. I lay in such agony. Blood pooled in my mouth and frothed on my lips with each panicking gasp of breath. All around, the decrepit wooden house succumbed to the fire's rage. Its heat seared the bare flesh of my face and hands. I was done for and offered up one last prayer while I still had a breath.

Somewhere distant, a saxophone was playing.

There was movement next to me and I dared to hope that my desperate plea to the Almighty had been answered. Forcing my eyes open, I saw a small child kneeling next to me. A girl, the flames reflected in her big tear-filled eyes of melting ice. Not the answer my prayer deserved.

The saxophone was louder. I recognised the tune.

A woman's voice screamed: 'You promised me!' Did she mean me? I wasn't sure, but I was too busy dying to worry about it.

'I'm sorry,' said the child as she raised a dagger much too large for her small hands. She plunged the blade down towards my heart.

I woke up.

Like last night, the same dream, and every other night this week. The heat, the fear, and the pain. All too real. I'm awake, coated in sweat with the smell of smoke and singed nose hair. The saxophone accompaniment was new though.

In fact, it was still playing the Benny Hill theme. I scrabbled for my phone and pressed answer.

'Hello,' I croaked.

'Good morning, Neil.' It was my neighbour, Dotty Henderson. Or

'Mrs H' as I call her. 'Did I wake you?'

An alarm on Sunday mornings feels counterproductive, I don't do them. The clock on my phone said it was 08:45, and I believed it. Yawning, I clambered out of bed to open the curtains on a grey, miserable morning. Rain pattered on the window. It was early March, but winter was reluctant to release its grasp.

'I was awake. You okay Mrs H?'

'Very well, thank you,' she replied in her warm Jamaican accent. It became more pronounced when she remembered. 'I'm cooking a nice breakfast if you want some.'

'Let me check my diary.' I flumped back down on the bed. 'You mean bacon, not that cooked banana stuff?'

Dotty chuckled. 'A full English, and no plantain.' The grey morning brightened, but she must be after something. 'Now get your lazy bones out of bed!'

'I'm up, I'm up!'

'Fine. Now, that box you're looking after for me, bring it, please?' I glanced towards my chest of drawers where a lacquered wooden box lurked broodily. Large enough to hold a sandwich, the time battered box was secured with a shiny new padlock. I thought it curious last weekend when Dotty thrust both a rum cake and the box at me, with instructions to hold on to it. Hopefully she meant the box.

'Gladly Mrs H, it's given me nothing but nightmares all week.'

'Truthfully?'

'Well, that or the rum cake. Right, a shower and I'll be right there.'

*

Mrs H lives in the flat opposite mine. She's a lovely caring soul who often feels the need to feed me. Wonderful jerk chicken, for example, or a mean goat curry (it's meant as a compliment by the way, not that she cooks bolshie goats). Delicious cooking smells fill the hallway between us, often with a Bob Marley or Desmond Dekker soundtrack. This morning, a waft of sizzling bacon lured me to her door like a siren.

She opened the door still wearing her oven gloves then dashed back to the kitchen to carry on with her customary umpteen things at once routine. One of which involved handing me a mug of freshly brewed coffee accompanied by her big beaming smile.

'Smells good Mrs H. Where do you want this?' I offered her the weird box. I'm sure the bloody thing vibrated every time I held it. Whatever was inside would soon need new batteries.

'Bring it with you,' she said wiping her hands on a tea towel and heading towards the lounge. 'There's someone I'd like you to meet.'

My heart sank. Mrs H has a habit of doing this. It's the price I pay for stroppy goat curries; to be shepherded in to meet a woman she thinks would benefit from my company, or vice versa. Invariably, neither of us mutually horrified victims can see the benefits. I entered the lounge with an audible sigh, but this time I must admit to being stunned when I saw Dotty's latest matchmaking victim because, well, she was absolutely stunning.

The visitor stood up as we entered. Casually dressed in blue denims and a blouse, with raven black shoulder-length hair and sparkling ice-blue eyes, she smiled warmly and held out her hand to shake. 'Hello,' said the suspiciously keen victim. 'I'm Martha, Martha Benandanti, pleased to meet you.'

I shook her soft and scented hand. Martha was probably in her late twenties, genuinely gorgeous and smelt of roses. 'Likewise, I'm Neil Fellows. Benandanti sounds Italian.'

'Yes, I was born in England but have no memory of it. I was adopted when very young and grew up in Italy.'

I nodded. She didn't sound Italian, and I was about to ask but was interrupted.

'There now, good,' said Dotty. 'Martha's been wanting to meet you, and now the time is right.'

'Right for what, Mrs H?' I turned to her and realised I was still holding the box. 'Here you are.'

'I'll take that, please,' Martha said, holding out her hand again.

Dotty saw my confusion but nodded enthusiastically. Her guest took the box with both hands, held it up for inspection, then smiled at me again. 'Dorothy says the box gave you dreams.'

I snorted a laugh. 'Nightmares more like. Flames and… Well, stuff. But I can't blame Mrs H's, erm, toy box.'

'You cheeky…' Dotty gave me a friendly swipe with the tea towel. 'Now sit while I get the breakfast ready.' She swept out of the lounge, leaving me and Martha perched awkwardly on the edges of the sofa and armchair.

'So,' I said, to break the silence, 'how long have you known Mrs H?'

'A good while,' Martha nodded. 'We're old friends. You work with computers, yes?'

'I do IT stuff for an agency. For now, anyway.'

Dotty popped her head around the door. I doubt she'd got as far as the kitchen. 'His pal, Gibbo, let him down badly. Neil left the Army for him too. Such a shame, but I'm glad he's out.'

'Yes, thank you Mrs H.'

It was true. I'd left the Army after letting Owen Gibson, an ex-Royal Signals mate, convince me there was a lucrative future in running our own IT network support business. Shortly after, during an intended 'business planning' meeting at the pub, he dropped the bombshell of his updated plans: Gibbo was leaving to run a bar in Albufeira with the love of his life, Mavis, a fifty-something travel rep whose dream, unsurprisingly, had always been to run a bar serving the egg and chip-hunting Brits in the Algarve. I laughed at first, before realising he was serious. I gave him the angriest bollocking he'd experienced since basic training, which promptly resulted in our being invited to leave the pub. The last thing Gibbo said to me before walking away was, 'It's love mate, sorry.'

Mavis qualified as the love of Gibbo's life by readily agreeing to multiple dates without the need for any form of bribery, coercion or dodgy substances. Given his previous experience with women had largely involved watching porn, this occurring naturally had similar

odds to the *Titanic* being sunk by an iceberg lettuce. I wasn't bitter, but Gibbo was the ideas man, not me. A good mate and a nice guy, but he'd been suckered by a gold-digging cougar with trowelled on make-up.

Fine, I was bitter, and currently considering re-enlisting since suitably palatable work was proving scarcer than a Gibbo second date.

'You must miss the Army life?' Martha still had the box on her lap and occasionally stroked it like a slightly odd, but attractive, Bond villain.

'Yeah, well it was all I'd known. The stuff I'm doing now is pretty much at the "try turning it off and back on again" level. It's soul destroying.'

'Do you believe you have a soul?' Martha looked at me intently.

'Um,' I said thoughtfully, unsure whether she was an old-school church goer or a new age religious nut. It could go either way. 'It's only a saying.'

'You have an old soul, it's in your eyes.'

'That'll be the nightmares from Mrs H's box thingy.' I pointed at it helpfully.

'No. You were a soldier, and served in Afghanistan,' she said, with another stroke of the box. 'What did you think about before a battle?'

Despite being buried deep within, some memories only need a prod, intentional or accidental, and years later you're whisked back. A full and vivid multi-sensory reminiscence. A flashback of standing inside the gates of the patrol base compound, pre-dawn, in full kit waiting for the patrol's 'Go' command. The Afghan air baked dusty dry, the sweltering heat yet to come. My main worries being 'have I got everything?' or 'do I want the toilet again?' and the all-important, 'please let my tin of chicken curry still be there when I get back'.

Probably not the answers Martha expected.

Thoughts of a soul honestly never cropped up, even in the scariest of moments. Just as sex wasn't the root cause of exclaiming 'fuck!'

whenever a rocket-propelled grenade fizzed overhead. She received my usual answer, designed to divert the conversation.

'I was Royal Signals based at Bastion. I did communications stuff. Didn't get out much, it never cropped up.' Martha looked genuinely surprised, her eyebrows disappearing upwards behind her fringe.

'I'm sorry,' she said, blushing a little as she smiled and placed the box on the coffee table. 'I didn't mean to pry, simply trying to get to know you.'

'No, I'm sorry. Didn't mean to be rude.'

Dotty arrived in the nick of time to refill our coffee cups. Martha stood up. 'I've been offending your neighbour. I hope you don't mind.'

'He's got a thick skin,' Dotty laughed. 'You're not easily offended, eh Neil?'

'No Mrs H, course not.' I relaxed back into the armchair as Dotty, unusually for when she had guests, turned on both her telly and Freesat box, then sat alongside Martha on the sofa.

'There's something we'd like you to watch,' she said flicking her way through the on-screen programme planner to her recordings. She found the one she wanted and pressed play. It was a BBC news broadcast; East of England, I think. She whizzed through bits about protests over a power station being built, a report on some TV celebrity being unable to cope with real life, and a fire extinguisher factory burning down. I sipped my coffee and wondered what had happened to breakfast.

The next item was a video clip of an attractive blonde lady in a sombre business suit. Mid-forties maybe, looking tired and troubled as she left a tribunal of some sort. The woman was trailed by umpteen photographers and a team of lawyers, all curiously being kept at bay by a gaggle of old ladies. One of whom offered the pursuers sweeties from a crumpled bag. All around, cameras flashed and the waiting press shouted their questions.

The text caption read: The hearing on the fifth day of the legal dispute between Ms Beverly Hadley and HM Prison Service took a

twist when family members of former inmates, said to have suffered extraordinary side effects following their behavioural therapy treatments, accused Ms Hadley of witchcraft. They…

Dotty paused it, then sat forward in her seat, elbows on her knees and hands wrapped around her cup. The face of the blonde lady was paused on the screen. 'Neil, what do you think?'

'About what?'

'The news item.'

'Witchcraft? That's a bit bonkers.'

'You don't recognise her?' asked Martha.

'Nope. I don't watch much news on the telly.'

The ladies exchanged looks before Dotty spoke. She pointed at the image paused on screen. 'The lady called Beverly… She's an old friend, and she's got troubles. Martha here has come to ask you for your help.'

'My help? I know nothing about industrial disputes or the, um, witchcraft thing.'

'It's not about the industrial tribunal,' Martha said. 'These ladies live in a Norfolk village that's the actual definition of the back of beyond. It has no communications. No WiFi, no mobile signal. The whole village only has one antiquated pay phone in the pub, which hasn't worked since decimalisation. We need to change things, update them to something modern. We'd like you to come along to help us out. Give us your opinion on what is needed.'

'Me? Why?'

'You're the IT guy.'

'*An* IT guy. Can't they magic something up?' I sniggered.

'Don't be rude, Neil,' said Dotty sternly.

'Sorry, but my advice is find a service provider that covers Norfolk to sort it.'

Martha nodded patiently. 'The ladies are largely a bit elderly, as you saw. They need some reassuring advice from a friendly face, to let them know something can be done.'

'I don't have to go to Norfolk.' I drained the last of my coffee and put the cup on the table. 'It only needs some research.'

'These ladies are old school,' Martha said. 'They're asking for some help. Look, we'll pay you for your trouble.'

'I couldn't take your money as I'd be wasting your time.'

'It's our time and money to waste. Please, come with us for a friendly chat and to advise them on what they can do.'

'Course he will,' said Dotty, smiling. 'Won't you Neil?'

'Jeez Mrs H, no pressure then.' I leant back in the chair and looked at the ceiling for a moment. 'I'm working through 'til Thursday this week, so it would have to be Friday, and even then, I'd have to get back for Marie's evening party bash, some TV people are attending.'

Dotty tutted, her eyes rolling up towards the ceiling.

'Marie's your girlfriend?' asked Martha. A rotten question for a bloke to be asked by a gorgeous lady when the answer is reluctantly in the affirmative.

'The controlling little floozy.' Dotty's comment was under her breath and camouflaged with a smile, but we heard it.

'Bring her with you,' was Martha's cheerful solution. 'Have a weekend in Norfolk and, better still, a free one. Accommodation and expenses all thrown in.'

I stood up in the hope it may spur on the dishing up of food. 'A generous offer, Martha, but Marie wouldn't miss partying with a couple of celebs, not for all the prosecco in Lidl.'

Marie and I first met when the agency sent me to her office for a few days about three months ago. She latched onto me as some sort of a pet project with the emphasis, I suspect, on the word 'pet'. It was fun for a while. She was twenty-four, ten years younger than me, with surprisingly immature friends who made me feel ancient. However, it was during our alone time that it became glaringly obvious we had no common ground. Our days were numbered, and it was simply a case of who bailed first. I'd long since given up asking

'who?' whenever Marie talked of her reality TV heroes as though they were actual friends. The chance of her passing up partying with a couple of them was about as likely as my discovering which git had nicked my tin of chicken curry.

'Chicken curry?' asked a bemused Martha.

'Did I say that out loud?'

'We're asking a big favour, Neil.' Dotty's usually sunny face had clouded over. 'But it's important, and I am cooking your favourite.'

'No such thing as a free breakfast, eh?' I shrugged. 'Let me see what I can do.'

Martha smiled and grasped Dotty's hand.

Dotty chuckled and rose from the sofa to go to the kitchen. 'Tell Marie you're taking her away for the weekend and she'll be happy!'

I had my doubts.