The Witch

by **Miriam Mandel Levi**

The only other person I knew who feared darkness as I did, was my grandfather. He grew up in a village in Lithuania where ghosts, draped in prayer shawls, prayed upside down in the synagogue and invited unsuspecting boys to join their *minyan*, while others in the study hall rattled the windows on winter nights.

For me, nights brought the witch. She would tap on my window pane with her long, curled nail, her tattered black cape flapping in the moonlight. Where her eyes should have been were black-holed sockets. Her teeth, she had three, were pointed and razor sharp. I trembled under my ruffled yellow bedspread. As her silhouette loomed larger and larger, I would leap from my bed and sprint headlong through the darkness to my parents' room. There I crawled between their sleeping forms on the wire-veined electric blanket, safe. Too soon though, my father would awake. "Don't be ridiculous," he would say, "There's no such thing as witches," and he would carry me back to my room.

My grandfather braved the darkness every night on his way home from *cheder.* "We started out in a pack, lit up with lanterns," he told me, in Yiddish-accented English. The autumn sun lit the sky amber, and my grandfather and I walked side by side, crunching leaves with our boots. "One by one, though, my friends dropped off to their houses, until I was left alone." Then he whispered, "I ran past the cemetery as fast as my legs would carry me, so the demons wouldn't get me." He pulled me to his thick wool coat, as if to reassure me, or perhaps himself.

"Were there witches?" I asked.

"No witches," he replied, "Poles."

After World War One, Ulkenik fell under Polish control. The Poles rode through the village on horses, shooting in the air and robbing its inhabitants. They caught young Jewish boys and put them to work, cutting and hauling wood in the bush, from which they never returned. “They killed Jews on the streets … for nothing,” my grandfather said, his lips curling in revulsion. I tugged his gloved hand with my mitt and he turned to me.

“But those bad people aren’t in Ottawa, right?”

“Right,” he said, and the warm breath of his words met the warm breath of mine in a white cloud.

I spent many weekends playing with cousins in my grandparents’ basement amidst several frightening relics. There were musty old books, a broken gramophone, and an out-of-tune upright piano with several broken keys. But the scariest item was a painting. In the painting was a large pile of rubble, as if moments earlier the buildings which stood in that place had collapsed. In the midst of the wreckage stood a woman in a tattered dress, holding a cinder block over her head. Years later, I discovered that the painting was a depiction of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. As a child, though, all I saw was a woman’s desperation, for she had lost all she had. She told me, in a parched, cracked voice, that any life could turn to rubble like hers, and I thought of how much I stood to lose. She was the only reminder in my everyday life of the six million about whom I learned at Hillel Academy.

Every spring on Holocaust Remembrance Day the pupils of Hillel Academy gathered in the basement of the school and sat cross-legged on the cold cement floor. A white canvas screen, perched on spindly tripod legs, stood in the far corner. Silent black and white movies, with jumpy, snowy footage, flashed across the screen, recalling a world of evil and devastation that somehow spared our families and us. Nazis in impeccable uniforms taunted Jews; Jewish families huddled together with battered suitcases; children with big yellow stars and frightened faces stared out at us. We sat, hands in our laps, in uncomprehending silence. Then we filed back to our classrooms for the spelling

bee and hot spaghetti lunch. None of my teachers explained what hardships the people in the movie had faced. No one reassured me that whatever happened to them would not happen to me one day.

I tried to make sense of it. They had old, gray clothes. I had a fluffy white muff to keep my hands warm in winter. They were hungry. I had pancakes with maple syrup. They had nothing. I had tickets to the Ice Capades. Nobody I knew got sick or died or was murdered. Nobody I knew was angry or sad. I only knew one mean person and that was my principal, Mr. Heilman, who even at his most vexed would not likely have killed me.

When I was nine, though, someone I knew was singled out by the witch's long, curled nail, for misfortune.

Uncle Hymie, my father's uncle, had his left forearm amputated. When he came for dinner one evening, on a rare visit from London, I saw how the shirt sleeve, where his arm should have been, was pressed flat, its cuff fastened with a safety pin.

"What happened to his arm?" I asked my mother in the kitchen.

"An accident," she answered, placing a row of salad plates along the counter.

"What kind of accident?" I asked in a loud whisper.

She didn't answer.

"What does his arm look like?"

"Like yours, but without the part from the elbow down." She placed a lettuce leaf and piece of fish on each plate.

"Where *is* his arm?"

"What arm?"

"The missing arm," I said too loudly.

"Sshh," she said swiveling to hand me two plates. "Can you put these on the table?"

As I sat across from Uncle Hymie at dinner, I imagined the empty space beneath his shirt, his knobby elbow, and the missing arm strewn somewhere in a

field where I might come across it one day while picking dandelions. At that prospect, I bolted upstairs to my room, sat on the floor next to the door, hugged my knees, and pressed my ear to the wood. “Miriam,” my mother called, “Will you be coming down to join us?”

Uncle Hymie, the black and white Holocaust Jews, the woman in the rubble, and the witch peopled my darkness. Each of them told me, in a different way, that I wasn’t safe. Not really.

If I were a child today, someone might have explained to me just how Uncle Hymie came to lose his arm, and reassure me that he managed just fine without it. I doubt I’d be exposed to Holocaust movies in primary school. But, if I had asked a question about the woman in the rubble, I would have learned that bad things happened during the war and that she was brave and resilient and that, remarkably, so was I. My parents would have been counseled to acknowledge my fear and talk about it because when fears are not addressed, they grow out of all proportion. My fear of the dark might have even merited a diagnosis, nyctophobia. I would have liked that word.

I don’t blame anyone. It was commonplace for parents in the Sixties to believe that they could shield their children from misfortune. The world was a safer place. Ottawa, in particular, was a provincial city with virtually no violent crime. Nobody had to “street proof” me to be wary of strangers. Strangers carried my bike home when I got a flat tire and returned my lost balls from their yards. If there was upheaval in the world at large—war, revolution—I didn’t know it. Terrorist attacks and natural disasters didn’t flash across my T.V. screen. My safety depended on Elmer the Elephant, who told me to look both ways before I crossed the street, “Use your eyes, use your ears, and then you use your feet.”

As an adolescent, I pretended to be brave. With my heart in my mouth, I went down to the basement alone to get the laundry, then took the steps three at a time on my way back up. I watched movie thrillers squinting between my index and middle finger. But my fears would not relent. In fact, the more time passed,

the more I felt time was running out, that at some point God would catch on that, in doling out misfortune, He had overlooked me. Then, realizing his omission, he'd send me packing to the darkest, dankest place He could find.

He hasn't yet. Over the past twenty-four years, I've mothered three children with all the hair-raising experiences involved in parenting. I have lived in Israel, with war and terrorism. I've lain in bed wondering where, on this dark night, my sons in the I.D.F. are patrolling. Surely, my red badge of courage is long overdue. And yet, after all these years, I'm still scared. I can't shake the thought that at any turn, I might come across Uncle Hymie's arm in a field.

There is, perhaps, one difference between the scared of then and the scared of now. Today, my fear makes me hold things dear: reading side by side in bed with my husband, our heads touching on the shared pillow; hearing my eighty-two year old father's enthusiastic voice on the phone when I call Canada, "Sheila, quick, pick up the phone, it's Mir;" dancing wildly in the living room with my daughter to "It's Raining Men" by *The Weather Girls*, spinning and gyrating and laughing; coming across an unforgettable sentence in a book: "the tender light of the moon, when it hung like an eyelash and the tree trunks shone like bones."; the chirping of the swallows in the trees at sunset; a bowl of French onion soup.

On a recent trip to Prague, I bought a hand-painted wood marionette. Of the hundreds of marionettes hanging from the ceiling and walls of the workshop—kings, queens, jesters, maidens, goblins, and wizards—I chose a witch. When I brought her home and hung her in the living room, my children protested, "She's ugly … she's creepy." With her sunken black eyes, jagged chin, and bony sharp-nailed fingers, she is indeed.

The witch watches from her post on the wall. Sometimes I meet her glare head on and a chill runs up my spine, but most of the time, I pay her little heed. I know she's wreaking havoc out there.

For many years I had hoped the witch tapping at the window would take flight. Instead, I've let her in. We've struck an uneasy alliance.

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