E Witches o Rummly Bog

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Ah dinnae spik aboot iss affen – maistly cos fowk stairt tellin me Ah'm spikkin mince – but fan Ah wis a loon, Ah hid a brush wi a hoose fu o witches in e wids aside e Rummly Bog at's jist ahint Steenhive. It wid hae bin aboot e time o e aul Queen's jubilee – e siller een – an Ah wid hae bin aboot eichteen en.

Tae explain fit wey Ah hid daeins wi e witches, Ah'll need tae tell ye a bitty aboot ma early academic career. Ah left e skweel as suin as Ah cud. Ah'd nivir bin richt convincit at buik learnin an lessons wir fir me, an tae be honest ma teechurs aa agreed wi me. E dey Ah left wisnae sae much a fond fareweel as an ejection; Ah hid e leaver's form rudely grabbit oot ma haun by ma guidance teechur, an wi ink still weet on e page, Ah wis spun oot e front door like a peerie afore Ah cud change ma mind. Some o e swotty kids at wir steyin on telt me later at e dominies aa wint doon tae e Marine Hotel at same nicht at lousin time, an hid a richt gweed bucket tae celebrate (which cud hae hurtit a lesser loon's feelins).

Onyweys, Ah wint straicht fae e skweel tae warkin on fairms aroon Steenhive, which Ah thocht wis affa gweed at e time. Ah wis fifteen an makin a bitty siller, an Ah cud laird it ower e kids at wir still at e skweel. But efter a couple o years, maist o e loons an quines Ah'd hid as classmates wint aff tae colleges an universities, an e eens at wint intae wark wir earnin better nor me. Ah stairtit tae get a bitty dissatisfied wi ma lot in life en. Ah wis up at five in e morn, knockin ma pan in – up tae e knees in sharn usually, an bein gied jobs like nippin e baas aff e wee grumphies. Ah wis aye exowstit, an e accusatory luiks e wee piggies usit tae gie me fan Ah wint near thir sty wis gettin tae me. E pey fir a fairmhaun wis nex tae nihin en, an Ah suin realised at Ah cud nivir afford tae get ma ain place an Ah wid be steyin wi ma fowks firivir.

Een dey it aa cam tae a heid. Ah wis soakin in a richt nippy bath fu o Dettol an ma ma wis oot in e back gairden burnin ma dongarees an beets cos Ah'd hid a wee bit mishanter wi e muckspreader at wark. Ah wis fair foonert cos ey widnae let me on e bus an Ah'd hid tae wauk hame. Fower bliddy miles Ah'd hid tae tramp wi a thick clood o flees an clegs aa buzzin roon me an drivin me daft! Eneuch wis eneuch, Ah thocht tae masel. Ah wis gaun tae get masel a less manky job far Ah cud wear a suit an tie an command a bit o respek – an nivir hae tae nip e baas aff o onyhin again.

Ah'd seen iss adverteesement at e bak bitty o e *P&J* which hid gied me fuid fir thocht. It wis iss company luikin fir intelligent salesmen fa hid an ootgaun an attractive wey aboot em, an it wis promisin at ye cud be earnin aboot sax thoosan a year – which wis a fortune en! Aa ye hid tae dae wis flog eicht sets o eese encyclopaedias a month an ye wir minted. Aa training wid be gied fan ye signed up.

Ah wint fir e training at een o e big hotels in Aiberdeen wi aboot a hunner ither loons an quines. Iss slippery-luikin mannie took us throu aa e techniques we wid need tae ken aboot. It seemit easy an Ah thocht Ah wid be sellin mair nor eicht sets a month. Grantit, ye hid tae pey fir a few sets o buiks up front, an ye hid tae get yirsel a wee car tae get aroon as weel. Luckily, Ah hid put by some siller in ma bank accoont tae get tae e warl cup in Argentina e nex year. (As it turnit oot, Ah didnae miss onyhin thare!) Ah bocht masel an aul Ford Anglia, an Ah set aff tae mak ma fortune.

First place Ah tried wis ma aul skweel. Ah thocht ey wid be pleased tae see me warkin wi ma brain an buy a set fir e skweel library. It wis Maister Strawberry – e heidie himsel – fa saw me. Ah'd bin in his office mony a time fan Ah'd bin a scholar an, it haes tae be sed, it wis nivir reely a pleasant experience fir aither o us. Iss time he gied me a coffee an a wee biscuit an Ah wis sittin in e muckle laider chair at e ithir side o e desk fae him. It wis e first time Ah'd bin in at room an nae bin scuddit.

Ah wis convinced Ah wis gaun tae ring up ma first sale fan, oot o e blue, he askit,

"Did ye ever find yir wey tae e library fan ye wir a pupil here?"

"Sadly, naw, Maister Strawberry. But Ah'm sur e place will luik aa e better fir a set o eese bonny buikies." Ah repleed.

He telt me en at e skweel hid twa sets o better encyclopaedias aa reedy an at ey didnae need anither. Ah wis a bitty taen abak, an fan Ah askit him fit wey did he agree tae an appointment if he didnae wint e damp buiks, he luikit at me an stairtit tae mak iss chucklin soond.

"Cos e irony o ye – Dod Baxter – as a purveyor o knowledge, wis jist ower gweed tae let pass." An en e aul swine stairtit aboot pishin himself lauchin.

Ah waulkit oot at skweel wi ma neb in e air, tryin ma best tae act wi dignity (which wis mair nor e heidie did, as he wis gien me e twa fingert salute fae his windae).

Fan a got bak tae ma car, Ah luikit up *IRONY* in een o ma buiks, an it sed summit aboot a difference atween expectation an reality causin humour. Ah didnae get it ava, an jist put it doon tae e aul sod gettin senile.

Ah winna lee, pretty suin Ah realised e cash Ah thocht Ah wid be rollin in wisnae appearin. Ah'd cairtit em buiks aa roon Steenhive an surroondins an hid nae luck ava. Ah wis runnin oot o possible customers, an en Ah minded on e creepy aul but-an-ben in e wids up by Rummly Bog. Fan we wir kids at e skweel aabidy sed it wis three witches at bade thare, an nane o us ivir hid e courage tae gang near it. Weel surely, Ah thocht, witches wid be intrested in encyclopaedias tae help em wi spells an e like. As Ah sed, thare jist wirnae ony ithir places tae try.

Ah drove up e dubby, pot-holed track at led tae e witches hoose an near rattelt ma peer Anglia tae bits afore Ah stappit ootside e eldritch tummel doon but-an-ben. It stood aa on its lane in iss weird luikin wee clearin deep in e wids. Fan Ah got oot o e car an waukit up tae e door aa Ah cud smell wis foost an decay. Aa roon e cot hoose wis dairk green moss

an e trees closest by e hoosie luikit sickly an scroggit. It wis twa in e efternuin but it seemit like nicht it wis at gloomy aboot thon hoose.

Ah gied e door a nervish chap an waitit. Ah heard fitsteps an as e door creakit open Ah hid a bitty gulp wonderin fit Ah wis gaun tae see. Tae ma surpreese thare, stannin afore me wis a quine fa luikit aboot ma age. She wis richt gweed luikin an aa, an it threw me aff a bitty fir Ah'd expectit summit like e witch in Hansel an Gretel. Ah minded ma training thou, an askit if Ah cud come in cos thir address hid bin selectit fir a speicial discount on e buiks. She soucht an telt me tae come ben e hoose. She wis wearin iss lang goonie made o silk which wint aa e wey doon tae e grun, an fan she waulkit afore me it luikit like she wis floatin. E lobby we wint throu hid widen waas an ceilin an iss sort o tiled flair wi pictures in it – mosaic Ah hink it's caad. E lobby wis a lot langer an Ah thocht it wid be, an ilka couple o yairds alang its length thare wis a caunle burnin in a sconce screwed intae e waa at cast aa shapes o shadows aboot, an fair pit e wind up me.

E quine pusht open a big widen door at e end o e lobby an Ah followit hir intae a brichtly lit sittin room wi a log fire blazin in e grate an twa wifies sittin an luikin up at me. Een wis ancient an toothless, mair like yir money's wirth if ye wir luikin fir a witch, but e ithir seemit aboot e same age as ma ma. Ah reckoned ey must hae bin grunnie, mithir an dochter so it gied me a wee shock fan e ying lassie introducit em as hir sisters.

Ah askit if ey wid mind me explainin foo lucky ey wir tae hae bin selectit fir iss special offir at wid change thir lives. Ah launchit intae ma brawest description o fit e buiks cud gie em, an files Ah wis daen it e ying quine sat doon on a seat near hir ithir sisters an stairtit tae spin yarn wi a spinnle. Hir sister aside hir en puud oot an measured a bitty threid, an e aulest sister en snippit it wi scissors. Ey hid obviously bin daein iss fir years fir ey kep listenin tae fit Ah wis seyin an luikit at me fan Ah hid een o e buiks open tae demonstrate aa e bonny photies in it.

Ah feenisht aff wi fit Ah thocht wis ma maist persuasive wee speech ivir.

"Ye see ladies, iss isnae jist a set o buikies Ah'm passin on tae ye. Iss collection contains e maist valuable treisur of aa. Imagine if ye can, iss represents e collectit knowledge gaithert by humanity tae date. Fit wey cud onybody nae be excitit by at?" Ah felt like giein a wee bow at e end, Ah'd pit sae muckle emotion intae it, but aa Ah got bak wis a blank kinda luik fae em, an e aulest een gied a shrug.

"Ye dinna ken fa we are, dae ye Dod?" she sed. Ah aboot jumpit oot o ma skin fan she sed ma name, an Ah wis convinced en at ey wir witches richt eneuch. "At's ma sister, Clotho fa is spinnin, ma ithir sister, Lachesis, is measuring thare, an Ah'm Atropos – Ah haunle e snippers. We dinna care fir yir human knowledge fir we ken aahin. We decide fate, Dod, an at's aa at maiters ma loon. Ye spik o human knowledge as a treisur, but Ah can tell ye noo, fir aa e gweed yir knowledge dis, it's din at least as much bad fir e warl."

Jist at at moment we aa heard a lood scraitchin at e front door, an Clotho pit doon hir spinnle an wint tae open it. Iss muckle dug cam boundin throu tae e room an sat aside aul Atropos fa stairtit clappin it an seyin,

“Gweed boy, Laelaps. Far hae ye bin iss time ma loon?” E dug fair enjoyit getting its lugs scratchit an pantit happily fan she spake tae it. Ah tried tae get us bak tae e buiks, cos witches or nae, Ah wis desperate noo tae mak a sale.

“But knowledge can change yir life. It can open yir een tae aa new weys o hinkin. Luik here.” Ah let e buik in ma haun faa open at a random page, an Ah read e first entry Ah saw. “Noo ladies, Ah bet ye hiv nivir heard o e Gowden Toad fae Costa Rica. It can live fir ten year, an e females are mair muckle an e males…” Atropos stappit me by puttin hir haun up like a polisman stappin traffic.

“Noo at’s an excellent example, Dod.” She sed, which Ah thocht wis encouraging til she continued, “It shows ye jist fit aa yir knowledge leads up tae. Nae lang fae noo at wee cratur winna exist. Aa thir lengths o yarn hae bin measurit an Ah’v snippit em. Aa will be deid afore lang, kilt aff by e warmin atmosphere an pollution yir treisur o knowledge his brocht tae iss warl.”

“Fit wey cud ye ken at?” Ah scowft. E lassie, Clotho, gaspit, an Atropos luikit affa, affa angry.

“Shaw a bit respek, mortal, fan ye spik tae a goddess!” she hissed, wi a richt edge in hir voice. “We ken aahin. We are e Moirai.” Ah wis a bitty intrigued wi iss, an Ah hid tae ask.

“Div ye mean ye can see intae e future en?”

“We ken aa futures an past,” sed Lachesis.

“We are inescapable,” sed Clotho.

Ey nodded thir heids an wir silent fir a moment. En Atropos sed,

“Noo listen, Dod, an listen weel, fir Ah’m gaun tae tell ye e ainly important fact ye ivir need tae ken. Iss human knowledge ye keep tryin tae peddle tae us isnae human ava. Aa knowledge wis thare lang, lang afore ye humans wir ivir thocht up. E gods gied ye e pouer tae unnerstan an eese it. An fit did ye dae wi at giftie? Ye destroy aahin ye touch – maistly yirsels. Ah’m aaready cutting yir threids shorter an it’ll nae be lang afore yir jinin at bonny wee puddock ye wir shawin us in yir buik.

But it isnae ower late yet, Dod. Aabidy usit tae caa me “e inflexible”, but it’s nae quite e case wi ye humans. Ye can shape yir fate a bitty. Aye, yir planet an aa o ye will dee eventually – at is yir fate. But it disnae hae tae be suin. Ye mortals cud change at.

But yir aye chasin efter knowledge, an ye nivir get e pint o it. Yir like Laelaps lyin here.” She pintit doon at e dug fa wis noo sleepin soondly at hir feet. “Iss hound wis speicial made by e gods tae aye catch his prey, an he his nivir failed. But en e gods set him efter iss verra crafty tod caad e Teumessian Tod, fa can nivir be catchit. Noo Laelaps micht be immortal, but he’s still a dumb beast an ye humans shid be better an at. Dod, ye dinna wint tae be like him, chasin fit ye canna ivir reach.

Fit ye mortals need tae achieve abuin aa is wisdom. Mind on iss, Dod: it's ainly by applyin wisdom tae knowledge at ye humans can change yir present fate. Ainly wisdom can mak a treisur o knowledge."

Ah dinna ken if it wis cos his name hid bin mentioned, but jist as e aul witch feenishit hir haverin e dug, fa hidnae muivit a muscle til en, let aff iss lang an lood ripper o a fart – een o thon eens far e note rises up tae a squeak at e end. In a moment, e hale room wis reekin – Ah canna imagine fit ey hid bin feedin him. Ah cud see e sisters' een wir waaterin fae e guff. Ey luikit fair affrontit, an aa three o em hid taen beamers. Atropos luikit e maist embarassit an she turnit tae me an sed,

"Oh, Ah'm affa sairy fir at, Dod."

Ah decidit a wee bitty levity micht lichten e muid, an Ah'd mindit iss story aboot e Queen Mithir so Ah repleed,

"At's aa richt, Atropos. Ah actually thocht it wis e dug … but better oot an in, eh?"

Oh min Ah got at een completely wrang! Atropos wis purple wi rage (mind ye, e ithir twa wir tryin nae tae lauch). Thare wis a blindin flash o lichtnin ootside which lit up e hale room, followit by a rummle o thunder at shook e hoose. Atropos' een wir lit up like ey hid fire in em, an she grabbit a length o threid fae e pile by hir seat.

"Ye wir aaready warnt tae spik tae us wi a bitty respek, mortal. Noo ye'll suffer. Afore ye get hame e nicht, yir faither will be deid!" She took hir shears an snippit e end o e threid she hid pickt oot e bundle.

Thare wis summat aboot e wey she sed iss at made ma hert sink, an Ah wis terrifeed. Ah picked up ma demonstration buikies, mummilt "Cheerio", an stairtit fir e front door. Fan Ah opent it, thare afore me wis iss muckle tod sittin in e gairden starin at me, like it wis waitin fir somehin. It wis huge an hid a bonny glossy orange coat an a lush orange brush wi a fite tip, an aa fower o its legs hid black socks. It wis a beautifu tod but it hid a richt impudent luik in its bricht amber een, like it wis sneerin at me. Quick as a flash, Laelaps wis up an near cowpit me ower rushin past tae chase efter it. E twa suin disappearit intae e gloom o e wids wi e tod aye jist oot o reach o e dug.

Ah jumpit intae ma Anglia an sped aff towards ma da's wark. He wis a mechanic at e garage in Steenhive, an Ah prayed aa e wey thare at he wis aaricht. Ah parkit an ran intae e garage. Ah cudnae see him at his bench, or in e gless waad office, or on e workshop flair an Ah turnt tae e apprentice loon, Deek, fa hid bin twa year ablo me at e skweel, an Ah askit,

"Fit's happint tae ma da? Far is he?" Ah wis neer greetin by noo, an Ah wis feelin at wey fan ye hink yir innards hae turnt tae waater.

"He's awa fir a shite," Deek repleed. He wis aye a richt coorse kinda loon, wis Deek. Jist at at moment – an muckle tae ma relief – ma da appeared, strollin across e garage flair wi a rolled-up copy o e *Daily Mail* unner his airm an a serene smile on his baa face. He luikit

absolutely fine. Sae much fir at aul biddy's threits, Ah thocht. She wis nae mair a witch an Ah wis.

But an affa eldritch hing did happin at dey, which made me hink at possibly thare wis summat witchy aboot thon wifies at Rummly Bog.

Fan Ah got bak hame, e breid mannie wis lyin deid in oor front gairden, wi ma ma haein hysterics aside him. He hid bin daein his roons as usual, an hid collapsed fan he got tae oor hoose. He wis streechit oot on oor lawn wi his face aa contorted up in a horrible wey, like summat inside him hid backfired.

It must hae happent roon aboot e time Ah'd bin up wi e witches. Ah cudnae help but keep mindin Atropos wi hir shears, snippin at at wee bit threid an Ah stairtit chitterin a bit. E peer mannie hid bin deliverin oor pan loaves fir years – Ah'm sure Ah heard een o e neebours fa wir crowdin roon seyin he'd bin giein een tae Ma twice a wik syne afore Ah'd bin born.

It wis an affa tragedy, but Ah nivir cud unnerstan fit wey Ma kep greetin aboot it fir sae lang efterwards.

An tae cap it aa, thare wis anithir muckle surpreese at cam efter it.

E breid mannie hidnae ony faimly, an fir some reason best kent tae himsel, he left me his hoose, his breid van, an a puckle siller in his will. Mebbe it wis summat tae dae wi us bein e ainly twa in e toon fa hid e same reid hair wi a grey streak in it.

Ah'll probably nivir ken.

Ah wisnae carin thou, fir Ah wis able tae gie up ma career in e warl o knowledge an stairt as e toon's new breid mannie. Ah pit thon buiks intae e loft, an Ah swore Ah'd nivir luik at em again.

Onyweys, at wis ma ainly meetin wi e witches o Rummly Bog. Nae lang efter Ah saw em, ey left at hoosie in e wids. Some sed ey aa flittit tae Greece far some o thir faimily hid a fancy muckle hoose.

Ey didnae tak e dug wi em thou, fir Ah usit tae see him, still chasin thon tod, fir years efter.