

A Hug from Rumpelbitchkin

by Martin Reed

“Dare you. Go on. Chicken or not?”

She shifts in her armchair, shadowed beneath the dark pitched roof, gently replaces her chipped white china teacup in its saucer. It's started again. It's how they go, their whisperings, egging younger children to climb the steps to her attic apartment, as they were egged themselves a few years earlier, she doesn't doubt. Their parents even. Perhaps.

“What if she - ?”

“She might.”

“But what if she - ?”

“Just go on. Old Bitchkin can't hear you. Not till you knock loud. Deaf as a nail.”

“Why nail?”

“Shut up and do it, chicken.”

“I'm not a - ”

“Yeah yeah, chicken, prove it.”

How many this time, she's wondering? Sometimes they send them up in twos, hand in hand. Never more than three. Mostly it's one alone. Terrified, quaking, not even a little friend to comfort them on

their climb.

A creak on the bottom step. It's begun. Only one, she thinks.

More whispers, giggling: "Careful. When she opens the door the first thing you'll see are the flies. She keeps a swarm of them up there. But don't be scared of them. They're nothing next to the other stuff."

"Wasps with mohicans," giggles another voice.

"Shut up," shouts the younger one, climbing, bolder now. The first step is always most difficult. After that they grow with each new. How many creaks has she heard now? Four, five. This one's quicker than most.

One child. One is all she'd have needed, given the chance. But time doesn't give chances. It slips them from grasp, replacing them with teasing. Old Mags. Witch Madge. Rumpelbitchkin. What they've called her over the years, these children and their parents. She's always been old. Since her twenties she's been old, and now she hasn't a clue what she'd do with just one of them, given half a chance.

"Sometimes she's naked when she opens the door," not whispering this time, they don't care who hears.

Now that's a new one, she thinks. Naked. That would surprise them. Surprise me, for that matter.

"She's got more than a thousand black lumps. All over her. The ones on her face. They go all over."

Oh well, she thinks, it comes to that, of course.

"That's where the flies live. A hundred in each lump. And maggots.

Trillions of them.”

The child on the stair is giggling now. She's imagining a small frail girl, four or five, wearing her older brother's scuffed hand-me-downs, long shorts, a faded brown shirt, and a tattered pink ribbon that she found herself, tied clumsy to a short tuft of cropped hair. She's imagining herself. The one she was, climbing to meet her future. But this one won't become her. This one will grow through this, becoming a little mirror on the older ones. Grow through this. Through her. Climbing to Rumpelbitchkin is a rite of passage.

She pulls herself up, wincing at the raw of the moles on her back, buttocks, in her armpits, between her legs. She steadies herself on chair back and cupboard top as she creaks slow to the kitchen. What this time? The draining board stacked high. A knife is too much. Fright not terror is the order of the day. Not much she can do with a plate. Pans, she thinks. She grabs the milk pan and frying pan, then on to the door where the creaking has stopped and the child must be waiting on the other side, summoning the courage to knock.

“Go on,” come the calls from below. “Do it.”

“Are you coming for your lunch?” the voice of an adult this time, from another apartment down the way.

“Yeah, Mom. In a minute. Go on. Knock.”

“You aren't bothering her again, are you,” their mother laughs.

“Leave the old dear in peace.”

“Yeah, Mom. Coming,” then hissing, “do it - knock.”

She doesn't wait for the knock. She places the pans on the bookshelf to the right of the door, then slips the chain aside, quiet as she can, grasps the handle firm, flexes it then pulls the door quick.

Open.

The smell of outside hits her first. The cleaning stuff they use on the floors now. Food being cooked. Baked beans. Toast. Fresh paint from somewhere too. She thinks of that new couple she saw from her front window, the ones with the baby who moved in last week. Echoes from down these stairs, down and round the corridors, down through seven storeys of lives below her. Then the motion, the colours, the shape of it. Children. There's a young boy standing before her, two steps from the top. Ginger crop. Freckled. Arm raised, hand poised for the knock he'll not be delivering now.

The older boys at the foot of the stairs are in hysterics. This is better than they imagined. She beat them to it. The ginger boy does nothing. He doesn't look afraid. He looks blank. He stares. What he's looking at is worse than flies and wasps. It's enough to freeze him.

She begins to stoop, the little mite close enough to hold if she could only reach out and touch him. Don't worry, little one. I'm not so bad if you'll only stop for a chat. Don't listen to them. No flies. No wasps, see.

Just the one of them would have done. One child. In her time. If it could have been. Or one gentle squeeze just now.

But there's a game to play. A child to grow. Beware the bitch at the top of the stairs. Her flies. Her wasps. Her thousand dark growths. So she growls the quiet growl of a cornered cat, grabs for the pans, raises them high, crashes them once and again, half thinking to shriek with the clatter but saying nothing. She doesn't need to.

As the ginger boy disappears round the corner at the bottom of the stairs, half screaming, half laughing, and calling "Mom, I did it, I did it - " and her front door swings shut gently, she walks slow to the

kitchen where she slides the pans into place in the cupboard.

She returns to her armchair under the pitch roof, lowers herself, clenching her teeth, then lifts her chipped white china teacup from its saucer. Takes a tepid sip.

