

CIRCLE of DOOM



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CIRCLE of DOOM

Tim Andersen

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藏书章



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For Tom and Ruth

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Hocus Pocus

The Sharp family had lived at Cleve Cottage for so long that even Lizzie, who was the oldest of the children and who had been three when they moved there, could remember no other home. Cleve Cottage was at the very farthest end of Cleve Road, which was the very last road in the village, and apart from The Briars, which was directly opposite, and didn't count, the nearest house was a fifteen-minute walk away, and you had go three times that far to get to houses where other children lived.

The Briars didn't count because nobody young lived there and nobody ever visited. It was the home of a very, very old couple called Mr and Mrs Potward, who kept themselves to themselves, and were generally unhelpful and irritated about perfectly reasonable things. If a ball landed in their garden they might not let you have it back till next week, to teach you a lesson. They were the sort of people who turned the lights off and pretended to be out if they heard carol singers approaching, and cheerful noise of any kind caused them great agitation. They were mean-spirited and cross, and the house was much too big for them, and there was nothing left in the world that gave them any pleasure, and it was the opinion of the Sharp children (though they did not say so in front of their parents) that they really might as well be dead.

And of course the worst of it was that as long as the Potwards lived at The Briars there was not the slightest chance of a proper family with children moving in.

On Lizzie's thirteenth birthday the Potwards ruined her party and she decided to become a witch and magic them to destruction. It was a garden party, and the sun shone and it would have been perfect. But after only half an hour the Potwards arrived at her front door to complain about the noise, which was mostly the sound of children enjoying themselves, a thing they found particularly distressing.

'It brings on Stanley's arthritis,' said Mrs Potward. 'I should have thought you might show some consideration.'

'Young people nowadays haven't got any consideration,' said Mr Potward, all shrivelled and grey and grumpy.

'And me at my age, with my hips!'

'And her nerves!'

The Sharp children looked at their parents without much hope. They all knew perfectly well that noise didn't make hips or arthritis worse and that there was nothing wrong with the Potwards except bad temper, most of which was caused by living longer than they rightfully should. But:

'We'll move the party indoors, Mrs Potward,' said their father, who believed in keeping on the right side of their neighbours. He also believed that you should never let the sun go down on your anger, that you all had to live together so you might as well try to get along, and

that there was good in everybody. His children thought he was soft.

The party had to be moved. It was the last straw.

'I'm going to make a magic potion,' said Lizzie the next day. 'I am going to cast a spell upon the Grotwards. I have had *enough*.'

'There's no such thing as magic,' said Dan, who was ten, and sensible.

Max was only seven, and was not completely sure yet about magic. There were so many puzzling things in the world. He had only just worked out answerphones, and still couldn't understand fax machines, which seemed excellent evidence that magic was everywhere.

'Well, I'm going to try,' said Lizzie, who had a mass of dark hair, and a longer nose than she would have liked, and who did indeed look quite witchy at times. She went into the kitchen and assembled her ingredients. First she picked out a rather mouldy-looking apple and orange from the fruitbowl, and a small tomato from the vegetable rack. She chopped them up and threw them into the Sharps' largest stewpot, which made a wonderful cauldron, added a pint of water and turned it up to boil. Her brothers watched in silence. Max's mouth was gaping wide open with amazement; Dan was shaking his head at the madness of it all.

'Four of the magic ingredients are already boiling!' said Lizzie. 'Only two remain.'

'Can I fetch one?' asked Max. 'Please?'

Lizzie thought for a few moments and said: 'Pepper!'

Max handed Lizzie the pepper mill and climbed up on

a stool so he could see into the pot.

‘Ten turns!’ said Lizzie, grinding the mill. A cloud of black pepper drifted down into the cauldron. Lizzie sneezed, three times in a row.

Pepper, thought Dan. An orange and an apple. A tomato. Was there any meaning to it? Lizzie might be mad but she was generally mad in a logical sort of way, whereas most girls he knew were just mad, full stop. Why had she not used the mushrooms, which looked just the thing to boil up in a potion? Or that nasty shrivelled courgette? There must be a pattern. One thing was for sure: he wasn’t having anything to do with it. ‘And so, what’s the last thing going to be then?’ he asked. ‘Shredded batwing? Toad’s toenails? Frog warts? Powdered spider?’

‘The last ingredient is indeed the most difficult,’ said Lizzie, stirring vigorously.

‘I’ll get it for you, Lizzie,’ said Max. He had never been a witch’s assistant before, and he was starting to think it was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to him since they’d let him be goalkeeper in the playground football game the day Nathan Dursley was away.

Lizzie gave him a long look.

‘The fetching of the last ingredient is a very special task,’ she said, in a ghostly sort of whisper. ‘You must not fail.’

‘Tell me!’ begged Max. He wanted to do this more than anything in the world, especially as it couldn’t possibly involve letting in twenty-three goals and being called a useless bogslime.

Lizzie bent down and whispered in his ear. His eyes widened.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Positive!’ said Lizzie. ‘Take a piece of enchanted binding cloth!’

‘Looks like kitchen roll to me,’ said Dan, but they ignored him. Max scampered off into the garden, returning a few minutes later with something carefully folded inside the enchanted binding cloth. Lizzie was sneezing again. Dan wrinkled his nose. The magic potion was beginning to smell rather nasty, and the adding of the final ingredient made it a good deal worse.

‘Wash your hands!’ Lizzie told Max. Max scuttled towards the sink and started scrubbing. ‘And then, fetch me the magic potion vial!’

‘Wossthat?’ said Max.

Lizzie pointed towards the back door.

‘Looks like an empty milk bottle to me,’ said Dan. Lizzie turned off the cooker, rummaged in the cupboards till she found a plastic funnel, and carefully poured her potion into the vial. ‘There!’ she said.

The potion looked absolutely disgusting. It was a pinky-brown colour, with clods of tomato and orange mush floating and disintegrating in the most unpleasant way. It looked like what would happen in your stomach just before you were sick.

‘It’s brilliant!’ said Max, gazing with admiration.

‘If you go and drink that you needn’t expect me to call the ambulance,’ said Dan, although they all knew he would.

Max gulped, and turned rather pale. He hadn't yet thought about what Lizzie was going to do with the potion when it was made. Was she going to drink it? Surely she wasn't going to ask *him* to drink it? He didn't want to let her down, especially not when she was letting him be her assistant, but he knew what the secret ingredient was and he thought quite honestly that if he had to drink any he would probably die.

'Of course I'm not going to drink it,' said Lizzie scornfully. 'We are going to sprinkle it. It must be sprinkled to the North, the South, the East and the West, completing a Circle of Doom.'

'You're making this up as you go along,' said Dan.

Lizzie marched out through the back door, and round the side of Cleve Cottage to the front, where she dodged down behind the hedge and peeked through the edge of the gate at The Briars opposite. Max arrived by her side and squinted through the hedge. Dan strolled across some way behind, whistling. You had to keep an eye on lunatics, for their own good.

'All clear?' asked Lizzie.

'All clear!' whispered Max.

'Follow me,' said Lizzie. She opened the gate, ran across the lane, leapt over the low stone wall at the front of The Briars and dived for cover in the long grass at the side. Max scrambled after her, shaking with excitement and terror. They were *in the Potwards' garden*. What if the Potwards were to come out and catch them? What if old Mrs Potward was looking out of her window this very minute? There would be tremendous trouble. It was

worse than anything he had ever done, and more scary and more deliciously exciting.

Lizzie seemed to read his thoughts.

‘If anybody sees us, we’re looking for specimens!’ she hissed. She had no clear idea of what specimens were, but in books when you spotted suspicious characters hiding behind hedges or squatting in shrubberies, they were more often than not perfectly innocent people looking for specimens.

Max squeaked.

‘Hocus pocus, double bubble,’ said Lizzie mysteriously, and they set off, wriggling through the grass on their stomachs round the very edges of the Potwards’ garden, Lizzie sprinkling potion all about.

Dan watched from the safety of the lane that separated their house from The Briars. So many things to worry about all at once. Not only might the Potwards appear, but his parents would be back from the village at any moment. He had to be on the alert. If either of these things happened he would say they had seen a hedgehog with a broken leg. Lizzie and Max had gone to try and find it and save it. He would also have to be ready with first aid in case of damage to his brother and sister. It would probably be poisoning (administer a salt water solution until patient is sick), but it was quite possible that the Potwards kept animal traps in their shrubbery, in which case you were looking at severe blood loss, mangled flesh and possible amputation.

It seemed as if hours passed before Lizzie and Max appeared at the other side of The Briars, along by Potters

Field. They raced down the last stretch and clambered over the wall. Max's cheeks were bright pink and his knees cut and scratched. He looked blissfully happy. He looked like a goalie who has had a hard match but kept a clean sheet.

'Hocus pocus!' said Lizzie, collapsing in a heap on the ground.

'You'll want to get inside and clean that stewpot before Mum and Dad get back,' said Dan, changing back from being anxious to being irritated as soon as he saw they were safe.

'What's this then?' said a voice from inside the Potwards' garden.

It was Mr Potward.

The children froze. Lizzie's heart was pounding like a hammer. Now what could they do?

Mr Potward approached the wall, with a pair of pruning shears in his hand and a look of pure hatred on his face.

Lizzie blurted something about specimens.

Dan blurted something about hedgehogs.

Max squeaked.

Lizzie scrambled to her feet.

'What's all this?' said Mr Potward, pointing to the empty milk bottle in her hand.

'M-m-milk!' said Lizzie. She would have probably gone on to say 'b-b-bottle!' but: 'For the hedgehog!' said Dan.

'What hedgehog?' said Max. He was getting confused. If Lizzie had gone and turned Mrs Potward

into a hedgehog, there was *definitely* going to be trouble.

'Take your noise away back to your own house, before Mrs Potward hears you, her with her hip and all!' said Mr Potward. 'And you don't want to be carrying bottles, that's glass, that, what if that breaks and bits go in our garden? Did you want to see Mrs Potward fall and break her neck on a piece of broken glass? Did you?'

The children said nothing. None of them had ever thought of this particular actual mishap befalling Mrs Potward, but there had been many that were extremely similar.

'Surprised your parents allow such gallivanting,' said Mr Potward, and wandered off to prune his roses in a general moany mumbling.

'He didn't see us!' said Lizzie. 'He didn't! For a moment I thought we were dead meat. But he was just looking like that because that's the way he always looks. Gallivanting!' she added. 'Standing in the lane with a milk bottle, and he calls it gallivanting! I expect when he was young his parents kept him in a cage.'

'*You're* likely to end up in a cage if you don't clean that stewpot,' said Dan, and they trailed back indoors, friends again. All of a sudden Lizzie had completely stopped being a witch and gone back to her proper self. This was a huge relief to Dan, who liked things to be straightforward. He didn't even like to see people dressed up for fancy dress parties. It made him very uneasy.

'Is that *all*?' said Max, looking disappointed. Where was the hedgehog? Had the magic worked? He looked

back over his shoulder, in case Mr Potward might even at that moment be disappearing in a puff of smoke.

‘We’ve just made a potion, sprinkled a Circle of Doom and nearly been eaten alive by Mr Grotward,’ said Lizzie. ‘What more do you want?’

‘Talking about that potion,’ said Dan.

‘What about it?’ said Lizzie.

‘Why did you choose those things to go in it? Why not mushrooms?’

Lizzie laughed. ‘Can’t you work it out?’

‘I know there’s some pattern,’ said Dan. ‘But I can’t see what it is.’

‘Orange, apple, tomato,’ said Lizzie. ‘Pepper. I mightn’t have used the pepper, because it always makes me sneeze so much. But we were out of parsnips, and Mum’s port costs a fortune.’

Dan thought about this. ‘It had to begin with P?’

‘P for Potward,’ said Lizzie. ‘Pepper, orange, tomato, water, apple...’

‘P, O, T, W, A!’ said Dan. All of a sudden it made sense, of a sort. ‘I get it. But what about the R and the D?’ They walked across the kitchen towards the sink. The unforgettable smell of potion still lingered in the air.

‘They were the secret ingredient,’ said Lizzie, and set about scrubbing the stewpot. Dan squirted fresh air spray around the room. He wrinkled his brow, trying to work out what the RD could have been. ‘Rubber ducks?’ he said. ‘Rotten daisies? Rabid dog?’

‘Not even close,’ said Lizzie.

'Erm... Ribena drink,' said Dan, without much hope.
'Roger Dumpling.'

'Roger *Dumpling*?'

Max, who knew the right answer, found this so funny he dissolved into a fit of uncontrollable giggles.

'Raspberry doughnut!' said Dan in desperation.
'Roast duvet!'

'Give up?' said Lizzie.

Dan nodded.

'Rabbit droppings!' said Lizzie.

'Rabbit droppings? You mean Max went out there and... out of Poppy's hutch... but you can't!'

'Lucky it wasn't last week when Poppy was poorly,' said Lizzie, 'or it would have been rabbit diarrhoea.'

'That is *gross*,' said Dan.

'Roger Dumpling!' howled Max. Lizzie and Dan looked at him. It was important that Max, who was not yet very good at keeping secrets, shouldn't tell their parents anything about the Potward Potion. It was not something you could expect parents to understand, not even theirs. But it seemed that if they were to arrive now, all they would get out of Max was a lot of total nonsense about potions, magic hedgehogs and Roger Dumpling. They wouldn't even *listen*.

And of course, Lizzie had only meant the whole thing as a piece of fun to make her feel better about the Potwards spoiling her party. There was no such thing as magic, and she was going to grow up to be an actress, not a witch.

Except that the very next day Mrs Potward fell and

hurt her hip, and was bundled away in an ambulance together with her nerves and her rheumatics and Mr Potward, and they never came back ever again.

Mortal Remedies

Three weeks later a FOR SALE sign appeared in the garden of The Briars.

‘So they’re really really gone?’ asked Max, who had somehow never quite believed this. The Potwards were just exactly the sort of people who would sneak back in the middle of the night to give you a nasty surprise and teach you a lesson.

‘Really *really* gone,’ said Lizzie, happily. Lizzie had hastily revised her career plans as a result of recent events. Witchcraft was definitely the correct option. People were always telling her that actresses were continually out of work, resting between jobs starving and penniless. As a witch however she would be self-employed and independent. She would be a GOOD witch, only ever harming those who truly deserved it. The rest of the time she would make love potions and wealth and health and happiness potions and generally provide people with all the things they wanted to have. She would of course charge them a great deal of money for this, because her spells would be of the very highest quality and she would be famous. A *celebrity* witch. She would have her own TV show called *The Witching Hour*, publish books of easy spells for beginners and market her own line in shiny copper cauldrons. She