

Eaten Out of House and Home

By John C. Tremblay

Lies.

Eleanor Goodich—Grandma Goodwitch to the locals of Dilbeshire—knew they came with a price. The question was, who would pay it... the one who lied or the one who let him?

“I’m warning you Granny Good-at-making-you-itch,” Duba growled, waving a pointed finger at her. “You will undo this curse or I will ensure that you are burned at the stake.”

“Duba, for the last time, I didn’t curse you. Though it serves you right for not telling me the truth. I warned you that the ointment would only make a poison-oak rash go away; nothing more.”

The man’s eyes opened wide. A thick vein throbbed down the middle of his forehead, looking like a worm squiggling under the skin. His cheeks blazed red.

"ENOUGH!" he screamed and promptly began scratching his arms and legs vigorously. White flakes fell onto the cottage floor like snow.

He stopped scratching and howled, holding his arms away from his body. Blood beaded up on his face where his skin was rubbed raw. He breathed heavily and turned towards her. "You had your chance. Now it's too late. Everyone in town will know what a witch you really are."

Without allowing Grandma to stand up and say goodbye, he stormed out of the cottage and slammed the door so hard it knocked one of her ingredients jars off its shelf—thankfully not one of the valuable ones. Grandma set down her teacup, whispered something to the broom in the corner, and rubbed her chin as it swept up the mess.

"What isn't he telling me?"

Grandma tossed and turned that night, unable to get the events from the day out of her mind. She had abused her gifts by making Duba learn his lesson, rather than curing his true malady. Now she was facing the consequences.

"Perhaps some nice warm milk would help me sleep," she said as she sat up.

CRASH.

Grandma froze.

The chattering of breaking glass echoed from the other room. Someone was in her cottage. But who? Wards were set up to keep out intruders. Only those she had invited could enter.

Grandma's stomach tightened as she remembered a time long ago, when she told a frightened book-loving boy with an abusive father that he could always find welcome at her home.

"Who's there?" she shouted as she snapped her fingers.

The hearth burst into flame in the adjoining room and another jar shattered. She must have surprised him.

"I'll defend myself and my home at all costs," she continued, inching through the beaded curtain that marked the doorway to her bedroom.

A dark shadow fled the cottage. Grandma followed him to the threshold. Though the moon was full and bright, the intruder was nowhere to be seen. She shook her head wearily and closed the elm-wood door. Broken glass littered the floor like an infestation of ants. Many of the jars containing the most precious of herbs were missing, but thankfully the intruder hadn't noticed the one hidden amongst the ordinary ingredients like clove and rosehips; that one was the most dangerous of all.

Early the next morning, Grandma strolled into the backyard to her herb garden so that she could replenish some of her supplies. It was warm, but not unbearable. Strangely enough though, the air was sweet with the scents of baking, despite the fact that there wasn't another cottage near hers.

Grandma looked back at the house.

"It couldn't be," she whispered.

She blinked a few times to be sure, but the odd scene remained.

"Foolish man," she muttered. It was time she put a stop to his nonsense, before he got himself really hurt.

She marched into town, and pounded on the door to his shop.

"Duba, open this door at once!" she commanded.

There was a chance that he was just upstairs in his living quarters and didn't hear her, but most likely, he was ignoring her. She grabbed the handle of the door and concentrated.

"You will unlock for me," she told it in her own special language.

There was a click and the door opened.

Grandma stepped into the shop. Curtains covered the storefront windows and blocked most of the light, so Grandma crept cautiously past the bookshelves and scroll lined tables.

"Duba, I must speak with you," she called out.

There was no answer, only the creaking of the floorboards as she moved across them. Grandma inched closer. A boot appeared to be sticking out from the darkness. She moved towards it and gasped.

Things were even more serious than she thought.

Grandma closed the door to the shop carefully, glancing around to make sure she wasn't spotted. It was still fairly early in the morning, and given that it was Annūté's Day, most people were still resting.

She crossed the town square and scurried up the cobblestone road, passing some of Dilbshire's most notable establishments along the way... Madame Lola's Lounge of Loving and the Talt Ale Tavern. Obviously, it wasn't Duba who had sabotaged her house, given that Duba was lying on the floor of his shop looking quite dead. Grandma would have investigated further, but it appeared that whoever had put Duba out of his misery was also trying to frame her for his murder. A couple of empty jars were strewn about near the body and the scorched remains of fireberries had damaged the counter.

It was better for her to get back to her cottage and not be seen.

"Sound the alarms!" A voice screamed from the direction in which she'd come.

Apparently, someone else had found Duba. Grandma darted into a nearby stable, managing to hide behind one of the walls just as the gong sounded and the streets flooded with townsfolk.

"What's going on?"

"What's happening?"

"What's wrong?"

A hundred voices clamored for attention as the gong echoed in the distance. Grandma stood out of sight, keeping completely still.

"It's foul play!" a voice bellowed over the din. "Everyone gather in the town square at once."

As the crowds attempted to follow the order and move in a less chaotic fashion, Grandma caught whispers about why they were gathering. It wasn't Duba that was the problem. It was something far worse.

Grandma made her way through the underbrush as fast as her little old legs could carry her. When she broke into the clearing and saw the two figures outside her cottage, her stomach lurched. It was exactly as she had feared.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

The sound grew louder as she approached, each one timed to match her beating heart.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

“May I ask what you’re doing?” Grandma snapped at the two fat children sitting in her flowerbeds.

If she hadn’t known the two children who were missing, she wouldn’t have recognized them. Their faces were swollen with three chins apiece, and their torsos were so round that they looked more like eggs than people.

“Oh hello!” the muddy-eyed Andel said cheerfully between bites, his crooked smile revealing that one of his front teeth was missing. “Grandma, this is a most delicious house you have.”

“Oh yes! Absolutely,” the freckle-faced Petal answered. She tried to curtsy but couldn’t seem to find the edge of her garments.

“Children, you must stop this at once at return to your father. He’s got the whole town searching for you!”

“But we can’t,” Andel said quickly, grabbing for another bit of the door. “From the moment we took the first bite, we haven’t been able to stop. It’s like there’s this little voice in our heads saying we must eat the whole thing. And it tastes better

than anything else we've ever eaten."

"So true, dear brother," Petal chimed in, and then turning to Grandma, "Oh and you really should stop shouting. It's not polite."

Grandma walked over, flicked one of the girl's blonde pigtails, and knocked a piece of the house from the girl's hand. "And I suppose eating my house is perfect manners, is it?"

"HMPH!"

Petal stood up, waddled over to the doorframe, broke off a piece of the wall and chomped down on it. Andel picked up the other piece from the ground and wolfed it down before the Grandma could stop him.

Rolling her eyes, Grandma approached the nearest wall. She scraped a few crumbs off and tasted one. It wasn't spicy exactly, but it did have a bit of zip to it, almost like a spice cake. Her body shivered for a brief moment and she had a strong desire to lick the walls. Whoever had cast this spell, knew what they were doing.

"Children, how long have you been eating this cottage?"

The boy stopped chewing for a moment so he could answer. As spoke, gingerbread bits spewed from his mouth. "Oh, just for a few minutes. We were walking in the woods, and this yucky looking man told us where to find it."

The girl giggled in agreement. "He had skin like sun-dried doggy doo!"

Andel chuckled, spraying more gingerbread all over himself. Grandma tried to ignore the queasy feeling in her stomach as the boy started to lick the bits of gingerbread mush off of his shirt.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

"You wouldn't happen to have some water to wash this down with, would you?"

Andel asked sweetly. "Your walls are rather dry."

Grandma shook her head, trying to remain calm. "If you two don't stop eating soon, you're going to burst."

"And then I'll cover you with Gingerbread goo!" Petal roared as she collapsed onto the grass in a laughing fit. Her face burned as red as her freckles. Her arms and legs skittered back and forth through the air, making her look like an upturned pill bug. Andel stared at Petal, bobbing his head up and down in agreement. Instead of helping her up, he wiped his chin on his sleeve, hobbled over to the cottage, and broke off another piece of the wall.

Petal wailed. Her stomach gurgled as she pushed herself up. Her body shuddered. Her eyes grew wide and a high-pitched whistle hissed from somewhere deep in her throat.

BOOM!

Bits of flesh and organs flew on all directions. Grandma darted behind a tree, just in time to avoid being hit by the tidal wave of muck.

"Are you ok?" Andel asked.

The girl had blown up. How could she be ok? But there she was, alive and smiling. Her top half from her chest up was still there, as was the part of her body below the bellybutton. It was just the middle that was missing, with the exception of the spine. That remained intact and connected her upper and lower body.

"Oh yes, brother!" Petal said excitedly.

As Grandma watched in amazement, Petal flopped on the ground. She dragged her body towards the house with her arms, her lower half following as if her spine was a leash. Upon reaching one of the gingerbread walls, the little girl broke off a piece and started eating it. The goo sputtered out through the bottom of her exposed ribcage.

Grandma turned away as her head grew warm and sound became hazy. Her mouth was watering. If she stayed any longer she was going to be sick.

SLWOOSH.

Grandma turned back in time to see Petal's midsection close back up again. Without waiting for an explanation, Grandma grabbed her skirts and scampered through the clearing towards the stream behind the cottage.

It was imperative that she got away from here before someone found the children and decided she was responsible. In the distance there was more rumbling, another BOOM, and then the pitter-patter of gingerbread rain.

With all the townsfolk searching for the children, it wasn't too difficult for Grandma to sneak back into Duba's bookstore. She suspected that whatever answers she needed she would find there.

She walked towards where the body had been and found that it was missing. "One lie always leads to another," she muttered. It seemed Duba was responsible for this mess after all, and that his apparent death was just another deception.

Grandma turned to the books nearest the counter and looked at the bindings. One of them had a burn mark that looked familiar to the fireberry scorches on the counter. She grabbed the book, laid it down, and flipped through the pages.

It was an old spell book, the kind dark witches liked to use. Thankfully it was already unlocked; she didn't have the time to counteract any locking curses right now. Halfway through the book she found what she was looking for. It was the spell for the gingerbread. And sure enough, many of the ingredients needed to make the potion to cover the cottage walls were items stolen from Grandma's pantry.

Duba had warned her that he was going to let everyone know how much of a witch she was, and he now he'd followed through on it.

Grandma read how to reverse the spell.

"Oh, Duba, what have you done?" she whispered.

Grandma tore stems, roots, and leaves from her garden and tossed them into the cauldron she had set up in the backyard. The children had told her that a man had just talked to them a few moments ago and that he was going to go back to town to gather the villagers. That meant she had only a few minutes to finish the potion before they'd tie her to a stake and burn her.

She said the right words to make the mixture boil faster. She hit the cauldron with the spoon. She pricked her finger and let a single drop of blood fall into the bubbling brew. It sizzled and fizzed. The scents of grapes, flour, and mold surrounded her. Grandma lowered a bucket into the brew, scooped up as much as the bucket would hold and raced into the kitchen.

The kids had already eaten through a third of the house and this would probably destroy the rest of it. But there was no time to dwell on petty vanities. She had a job to do.

She tossed the contents of the bucket at her oven and told it to “grow up” in the special tongue. The cottage rumbled as the oven shook and grew outwards. It broke through the back wall and reached up to the ceiling. It was big enough now to cook a person—more specifically—two fat children.

Grandma took her club and started beating down the walls. The kids screamed at her. In the distance, she heard the angry mob. There was no time. Grandma grabbed as many pieces of the gingerbread as she could and threw them into the oven. She ran outside, put her hands on the ground, and whispered in her special tongue.

An army of ants swarmed the cottage.

The outraged children tried to brush the bugs off the walls but there were too many of them. Realizing that the only place left with uncontaminated gingerbread was the oven, the kids crawled inside.

Grandma ran back into the cottage, latched the oven door closed, and filled the bottom with logs. She told the ants to depart just as the mob broke into the clearing. Then with a word, she set the wood in the oven ablaze.

The children's screaming echoed through the ruins of the cottage.

The mob hollered bloody murder in response. Grandma couldn't let them put out the fire yet; but she didn't have the strength to stop them on her own.

She snatched up the jar Duba had missed before and pulled off the lid. Inside was a single piece of dried meat. If she ate it, there was no going back. Her life would be altered forever. But if she didn't...

Closing her eyes and muttering a few well chosen words, she tossed the jerky into her mouth and began to chew as the townsfolk stormed the ruins of her home.

Grandma stared out the window at the full moon overhead. It had been a month since the incident with the children, and Grandma's wounds were finally starting to heal; though her spirit was shaken. The fear and hatred in the eyes of former friends would haunt her as much as her decision had; and even though Andel & Petal's father had finally realized she was saving the children and called off the hunt, the damage had still been done.

As Grandma sat at her table, sipping her tea and rubbing the fur on her knuckles, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," she called out.

A hooded man entered. Grandma had expected his visit. This time she was ready for him.

"Please sit down and have a cup of tea with me, won't you?"

"I haven't come for tea, hellspawn. I've come to claim what should have been claimed a month ago."

He held up a dagger and walked towards her slowly.

"Well at least let me get a good look at you before you kill me."

Duba lifted his hood. His hair was streaked with white. His eyes were the color of blood. His skin was the cracked mud of a dried riverbed.

Grandma grabbed a teacup from the table and tossed the contents at his face. His skin fizzled and he let out a gut-wrenching scream as he collapsed to the floor.

"Before you attempt to plunge your dagger into my heart, you may want to look in the mirror."

Duba held the blade up and looked at his reflection.

“The scarring will be permanent I’m afraid,” she said softly, “but the pain and decay will have stopped. That’s what comes of dabbling with magic. I’m guessing that you first noticed the symptoms after you broke the seal on that magic book of yours.”

Duba looked up at her and gasped as he saw her face.

“Don’t worry. I was able to limit the effects of the transformation to just my form rather than my mind. You’re in no danger.”

“But... but...”

She offered him a chair and a cup of tea. He sat down with her, eyes welling up with tears. “Will it always be like this?”

She nodded. “Every time there’s a full moon. It was the only way for me to keep the mob at bay, while the dark magic was roasted out of the children.”

“I’m so sorry, Grandma,” he said, looking away, voice cracking. “I was too ashamed to tell about the breaking the seal on the book, because I couldn’t bear to see you look at me with disappointment in your eyes. You were the only one who ever treated me with kindness. And then when you didn’t cure me, I became convinced that you were trying to hurt me on purpose. Anger. Jealousy. Insecurity. All my emotions spiraled out of control. And now, both of us have suffered for it.”

Grandma shrugged. At her age, appearances were the last of her worries.

“There’s no point in dwelling on our failings,” she said as she passed him a cookie. “Just be grateful that I’m not the witch you made me out to be. Otherwise you might’ve found yourself baking like a gingerbread cookies instead of eating one.”

The End