

The Witch's Three Wishes

by Tim Harrower

A note to the reader:

This story was written to be read aloud to your son or your daughter. Or your grandson or granddaughter.

Or even your niece. But NOT your nephew. Nephews are wicked and naughty, and don't deserve to hear stories read aloud.

Now, most children's stories happen to other people: that princess, those dwarfs, that evil queen, and so on.

But since this is a story meant to be read by YOU, I wanted it to seem like it actually HAPPENED to you.

That's why it's written in the first person.

That's rare for children's stories, and for good reason:

How do we know whether you, the reader, are male or female? To dodge that pesky problem, I carefully worded the story so that it works whatever the narrator's sex.

Because sex has no place in a children's story.

By the way, I was just kidding about nephews.

(No, I wasn't. I'm lookin' at YOU, Pete.)

The Witch's Three Wishes



hen I was a child, we lived on a small farm at the edge of a huge forest — a forest so dark, and so forbidding, that it was known as the Wretched Woods. And in the middle of the Wretched Woods there lived a very old, very powerful witch.

Though few of us had ever seen her, we all knew the stories about her. But no one has ever heard the tale I am about to tell you now.

You must swear to keep it secret.

One autumn, many years ago, when I was just 16, my father grew gravely ill. He desperately needed medicine, so he begged me to rush to the nearby town of Rumpweasel and fetch a doctor. Since we were poor, the only way to reach Rumpweasel was by foot — on an old dirt road that ran right through the heart of the Wretched Woods.

I had never made that frightful journey alone.

As I prepared to leave, I knelt by his bedside. “Be strong, Father,” I said. “I will return by nightfall.”

“No, my child. It is *you* who must be strong,” my father said. “For when you enter the Wretched Woods, you will find yourself in grave danger. So listen closely. You must promise to obey these three rules:

- ◆ *Do not stray from the road, no matter what you think you hear.*
- ◆ *Do not trust your eyes, no matter what you think you see.*
- ◆ *Do not accept any gift, no matter what you think it is.”*

“I promise, Father,” I said. I kissed his forehead. He smiled at me. And with that, I headed off into the Wretched Woods.



The road into the forest twisted and turned through trees so thick, the air was black as midnight. Dead limbs loomed overhead like skeletons, their branches drooping down like long, bony fingers. No birds sang. No crickets chirped. Even the wind was afraid to blow through the Wretched Woods.

In the distance, wolves howled. A crow screeched. My heart raced, and my legs raced faster, racing to escape the forest as fast as I could. I ran for miles along the rocky road, terrified of what might happen if I stopped, or stumbled, or fell.

Soon I heard another strange and startling cry, and the splash of thrashing water. Up ahead, I saw a clearing in the trees where an old stone cottage stood beside a pond.

As I drew closer, the cry grew louder, more frightened, more frantic.

I could see a small animal — a white lamb — flailing furiously in the water. It was drowning. The poor lamb was tangled up in seaweed, soaking wet, screaming for help. So I left the road, jumped into the pond, wrapped my arms around the shaking, shrieking lamb, and carried it safely to shore.

I laid the lamb down on a clump of grass. It struggled to its feet, shook the water from its fur, and then — with a *poof!* — it vanished in a puff of smoke.

There, in its place, stood an old, ugly, straggly-haired witch. Black robe. Green skin. Crooked nose. Yellow eyes.

“Well, well, well,” said the witch. She smiled a toothless grin at me. “Do not be frightened, my child, for I am deeply grateful to you. I was picking waterberries when I slipped and fell. And as you know, we witches cannot swim.”

My lips trembled. I struggled to speak. “But . . . but . . . how can that *be??* I pulled a *lamb* from the water, not a witch.”

“With a simple magic spell, I can be any creature I choose,” she cackled. “And I know you *love* little lambs, yes you do, yes you do. You see, my child, I am quite familiar with your farm at the edge of the forest. I sometimes amuse myself by pretending to be one of your lambs, or your chickens, or even your big brown dog.”

I was horrified to think that the witch knew so much about me, but I did not utter a word. She continued:

“As I struggled and sank, I saw you approach. I knew you would *never* rescue a drowning witch, but you’d rush to save a helpless lamb. And so you did. I owe you my life. And as a reward, I shall offer you a rare and wonderful gift.”

She drew closer to me. Her eyes twinkled.

“I will grant you three wishes — anything your heart desires.”

She grinned again, and took hold of my hand. Her fingers were wrinkled and cold. “So tell me, sweet child: what will be your first wish?”

A chill ran down my spine. I remembered the promises I had made to my father. I had promised not to wander from the road; I had promised not to trust my eyes. I had just broken two of my three promises. There was no way I would accept a gift from this witch.

“I am flattered by your kindness,” I said, “but I must refuse your offer. I have heard too many stories where terrible things happen to people who make selfish wishes. They wish for money, and then they are crushed beneath a pile of gold. Or they wish to fly, and they get turned into a goose.

“I am happy just the way I am. Foolish wishes will only bring me trouble.”

“You are wise for one so young,” the witch said. “Your father would be proud of you. But he would be ashamed of you, too, if you let good wishes go to waste while so many people are suffering. Why not use this magic to help those less fortunate than you? Would it be selfish to grant a wish to others in need?”

This seemed like a sensible idea to me. After all, families throughout the land were poor and hungry. It had been a hot, dry summer. Crops had withered. Cattle had died. And the sheriff — the cruel and corrupt Sheriff of Rumpweasel — kept raising taxes higher and higher. If you were unable to pay, or if you dared to protest, the sheriff’s guards threw you into prison, tortured you . . . or *worse*.

Besides, I thought, what can go wrong if I make a wish to help others, and not me?

“Very well,” I said. “I wish that every poor, hungry family in this county will enjoy a big, fine feast this very day.”

The witch still clutched my hand in her cold, bony fingers. She bobbed her head and blinked her eyes. “Done,” she said.

With that, I backed away and bid the witch farewell. As she watched me go, she chuckled and said, “Goodbye, sweet child *for now.*”



set off down the road again, and I thought to myself, “Well, I certainly outfoxed that old hag! Things *could* have gone very badly, but I think I did rather well.”

I jogged along toward Rumpweasel, the forest growing greener and sunnier with each passing mile.

Soon I left the woods, the road rolling by fields, farms, and houses as it curled toward the village in the valley below.

Entering the town, I realized how hungry I was, so I stopped for a bite to eat at the Weasel Rump Inn. All the townspeople in the tavern were shouting about the astonishing event that had just occurred. Families across the land had seen huge feasts magically appear — out of nowhere! — their kitchen tables suddenly brimming with soups and stews, meats and cheeses, cakes and candies.

And nobody knew where the food had come from.

“It’s a miracle!” the tavernkeeper said to me. “And I know who did it, too! It was the good Sheriff of Rumpweasel. Who else could afford such splendid feasts? It shows what a kind and generous lord he is.”

“No, no, no!” I said. “The Sheriff of Rumpweasel? He’s a selfish tyrant who *hates* peasants like us. Why, that sheriff is as wicked and heartless as the devil himself.”

Hearing this, the tavernkeeper grew angry. “So where did all that

food come from, then? I suppose *you* conjured it up — by *magic!*”

“Well, yeah!” I blurted out. “As a matter of fact, I *DID!*”

Two of the sheriff’s guards were drinking ale at a nearby table. When they heard my reckless boast, they leapt to their feet and drew their swords.

“How dare you speak such lies!” they said. “How dare you insult our noble Sheriff!”

They arrested me on the spot. They hauled me out the door and yanked me up the street to the county jail. In front of the jailhouse was a giant oak tree known as the Hanging Oak. And dangling from its stoutest limb was a noose at the end of a rope.

“Foul traitor!” the guards said. “You shall be hanged at sunset!” They hurled me down the dungeon steps and slammed the door.



will not lie to you: I shook the bars of my cell and wept with shame. What had I *done*? How could things have gone so terribly *wrong*?

High up on the wall, just out of reach, was a small window where I could see the sky. As the hours crept by, the sunlight began to fade. It reminded me of how, back on the farm, at the end of the day, when our chores were done, we would sit in the pasture, my father and I, watching the sheep as the sun went down. The little lambs would come sit in our laps. We’d feed them flowers in the twilight.

As I relived those happy memories, a shadow slithered across the window. I looked up to see the witch of the Wretched Woods.

“*YOU!*” I cried. “Look at the misery you have caused me! I will surely

be hanged within the hour.”

“Oh, *boo-hoo*,” said the witch. “Have you forgotten? You have two wishes left.” She reached her gnarly arm through the bars and grabbed my hand. “So tell me, sweet child: what will be your second wish?”

Without hesitating, I said: “I wish to be freed from this prison cell!”

Poof! In the blink of an eye, I found myself standing alongside the witch in the dusty street outside the jail. I let out a loud laugh as I looked around — and then I saw the sheriff’s men tightening the rope on the Hanging Oak.

Their eyes met mine. “*Look!*” they shouted. “The prisoner has *escaped!*” Before I could move, the men raced over and grabbed me by the throat. “It’s time to hang this troublemaker!” a guard snarled.

They started dragging me toward the Hanging Oak, but I snatched the witch’s hand. “This is all *your* doing!” I cried. “I wish it was *you* being hanged instead of *me!*”

As I spoke those words, the strangest thing happened. A jolt ran up my arm, straight to my heart. The world spun in circles, and *poof!* I suddenly found myself standing *exactly* where the witch had stood.

I had a black robe. Green skin. Crooked nose. Long, straggly hair. I watched, amazed, as the guards dragged *me* away toward the Hanging Oak.

Somehow, by magic, the witch and I had switched places. I was now in the witch’s body, and she was in mine. I was free, but *she* had a noose around her neck — *my* old neck!

As a crowd gathered, the hangman cried, “Behold the fate that awaits all traitors!” And with a sharp *SNAP!*, the noose pulled tight.

My body swang in the Hanging Oak.

The crowd of people turned away, but I just had to look. There I was, lifeless and limp — *my* body, yes, but with a dead witch inside. And here I stood . . . alive! A toothless, bearded hag, yes — but fully alive, thanks to my final, desperate wish.

I did not dare to linger there, for fear the sheriff's men would see their mistake. I turned and headed toward the forest, but my witch's body was too old and weak to run. I remember thinking, "*If only I could fly like a bird.*" And instantly, as if by some leftover magic, I had wings! Transformed into a raven, I soared on feathers black as coal deep into the Wretched Woods.

Can you imagine how I felt? It was like being trapped in some wonderful, horrible dream. I had magic powers. I was *flying!* I was *free!* But sadly, too, I realized my life would never be the same. Never again would I be who I once was.

And oh, my father! What would he say if he saw me now? He was still sick, still dying, still waiting at home for my return.



flew through the forest until I came at last to the witch's cottage. I landed by the front door, changed back into my human, witchly form, and went inside.

The room was dark, crawling with cats, bats, spiders and frogs. Along one wall were hundreds of small, smelly bottles filled with potions, powders, eyeballs and monkey brains. On the table was a thick black book with gold lettering that said *1001 Supernatural Spells and Peculiar Potions.*

To my surprise, I discovered I had the witch's memory for magic. So I mixed up a powerful potion that would cure my father's illness

(and add long years to his life, too). I poured the bubbling brew into a bottle and set off toward our farm.

I arrived just as night fell. My father was in his bed, half asleep. The room was dark, with just a murmur of moonlight shimmering in the window. I stood in the shadows.

“Is it you?” my father asked.

“Yes,” I whispered. “I promised I would return by nightfall, and here I am. I brought you medicine.”

Father gasped for breath and shook his head. “But the neighbors . . . the neighbors came with news that you were in prison — that you were *hanged*.”

“Shhhh,” I said, as I crept toward his bed. In the dark room, he could not see how I now looked.

“Drink this,” I said. I held the bottle to his lips. He drank the potion.

“Close your eyes and sleep now, Father. I must go. But always remember this: Though you may think that I have gone away, I promise I will never, ever leave you.”

I bent down and kissed his forehead.

My father fell fast asleep. And as the potion worked its healing magic, I slipped back into the forest. I have lived there, in my lonely cottage, ever since.

I never spoke to my father again.

But sometimes, in the spring, as evening approaches, I’ll creep to the edge of the woods. I’ll see my father sitting there, alone in the pasture, watching the sheep with their children. I’ll change into a small, white lamb, run to my father, sit in his lap — and together, we’ll watch the sun go down. For a few magic moments, we are as happy as we ever were, back in the days when I was his devoted child.



nyway, that all happened a long, long time ago. Over the years, my powers have grown. I can now disguise myself as anything I please: as your cat, your dog, a chair, this book — even *a member of your own family*.

But I have never shared this story with anyone before. No one else knows of this, so you must promise to keep my secret. And in return, as a reward, I shall offer you a rare and wonderful gift.

I will grant you three wishes — anything your heart desires.

So tell me, sweet child what will be your first wish?