# The Witch of Weaver's Wood

Allen Donnelly

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The woods were older than the village that butted up against their borders; ancient, twisted trees side by side with regimented rows of Victorian brickwork, the bark scraping against the manufactured stone as if resentful about the incursion. For the adults, the woods were a benefit, a check mark in the list of local amenities - "Proximity to beautiful woodlands" a great thing to have on an estate agent's advert - but for the generations of children who had looked out of their windows at the swaying, densely packed trees, the woods were a place of mystery, adventure and darkness, filled with potential monsters and hidden treasures. The parents would, of course, nod and smile and look knowingly at one another; "What

wonderful imaginations," they would say. "Whatever will they think of next?"

But just because the stories are imagined doesn't mean they aren't also real...

Jimmy stood at the edge of the wood, staring down the bumpy, muddy path into its dark interior. The trees loomed over him, crowding closer, forbidding him entry into their domain. Jimmy took a deep, defiant breath and tried not to populate the shifting shadows with the unblinking eyes of the goblins that everyone knew lived in the woods, and he definitely was not seeing the wood's sprites in the shapes of the fallen, October leaves that danced and swirled in the autumn wind. Jimmy took another deep breath.

"What's wrong, Jimmy, are you chicken?" said the voice from behind him.

Jimmy rolled his eyes and turned to look at his oldest friend, his lifelong compadre who he knew, at all of twelve years of age, would be with him forever.

"Do you want to go first?" he said. The answer was, as he had expected, a reluctant shake of the head. "Shut up then, and don't forget you owe me an ice pop for this."

Will nodded solemnly. A dare was a dare, even in these sorts of extreme situations.

"Why does he get an ice pop?" asked Alex, glaring at Will. "Just for going in to the woods first?"

Will gulped and eyed Alex nervously. It was well known that Alex could hold her own in a scuffle and Will was just reaching that age where the idea of grappling with a girl (a girl! I mean, everyone knew girls had the lurgy) was somehow discomfiting in an unfamiliar way. "I dared him," said Will. "An ice pop if he goes into the woods on Halloween."

"So do I get an ice pop if I go into the woods

first?"
"Uh..." said Will, looking in desperation at Jimmy.

"Don't look at me," said Jimmy. "This was your idea in the first place. I'd have been happy staying out of the wind and playing that new board game you got

but no, you brought up The Dare."

The Dare...a tradition that was possibly as old as the village itself, where the young and the fearless would venture into the dark, depths of Weavers Wood on Halloween and confront the monsters that dwelt therein. Or, as was more frequently the case, they would poke around the edges for a bit until the sound of a tree creaking or a twig snapping would send them away, shrieking in delighted terror. Unless it was raining, in which case they'd just go to the houses nearby to demand sweets on pain of tricks being played. What those tricks might be, none of them were ever that clear on, but there would definitely be tricks, of that they were sure, so it was just as well that the neighbours always stumped up the required treat.

They were so busy arguing about the rights and wrongs of ice pop distribution that they didn't notice the fourth member of their quartet, Hannah, losing patience and strolling jauntily down the path.

"I claim the ice pop!" she shouted back at the

arguing trio when she judged that she had gone far enough in to justify claiming the prize without doing anything as foolhardy as actually entering the woods, because everyone knew that you didn't go into Weavers Wood on Halloween.

The argument ceased and three disgruntled faces turned to look at the outside contender who had entered from left field to steal the coveted prize.

"That's not all the way in!" said Will. As the instigator of The Dare he felt that he ought to have some authority when it came to the matter of adjudication.

"You didn't say it had to be all the way in," said Hannah, looking defiantly back at them, her hands on her hips.

"Everyone knows you need to go all the way in, past the bend in the path," said Will. It was an unwritten, inviolate rule as far as he was concerned.

Hannah turned around. The bend was another twenty feet further into the wood, into the dark, shadowy, creaking woods. "You didn't say that was a

condition."

"Everyone knows..." started Will before he was interrupted by Alex.

"So you'll buy an ice pop for anyone who makes it to the bend?" she said, her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Hannah had a decent head start but Alex was confident that she could make up the distance, especially with the incentive of an ice pop on the line.

"Yes, to the bend," said Will. By the time he had finished the sentence he was speaking to empty air as Jimmy and Alex took off down the path, mud flying up from their heels as they bore down on the wide-eyed Hannah. Realising she was in danger of losing her prize, Hannah turned and started sprinting down the path as well, the other two bare inches behind her, all three of them scrambling for an advantage as they bore down on the right turn that hooked around the back of an ancient oak tree and took the path into the depths of the wood.

Now resigned to having to buy someone an ice pop, Will watched his three friends careening down

the narrow, muddy path with a feeling of inevitability. Although it was true that whatever happened it was going to cost him an ice pop, he had the feeling it would be worth what was about to happen.

It was at about the same moment that the three runners realised that there was a turn coming up that they were going to have to take, a tight turn, a turn with mud on the ground and little in the way of safety barriers. Slipping and sliding, trying to stop without ceding an inch to their fellow competitors, they crashed off the side of the path and into a large fern. Large, green fronds, unchanged since the time of the dinosaurs, bore witness to an undignified mess that in all probability hadn't been witnessed in the entire life span of the species.

With a wary eye on the shadowy depths of the woods, Will walked up to the tangled mass of limbs that was trying to extricate itself from the undergrowth. "So who won, then?" he asked.

The response was a predictable chorus of "I did!"
"I'm not buying all of you an ice pop," said Will,

shaking his head in sadness at the tangled example of humankind's greed that was still somewhat stuck in the fern, and was also now arguing over who had got there first.

"I declare the contest void," he said in his most authoritative tone. The arguing stopped and was replaced by cries of

outrage.

"It's only fair; I can't tell who was first. Judge's decision is final."

There was what can only be described as a hullaballoo from the fern; possibly no other fern in two hundred million years had witnessed such an outpouring of indignation and righteous fury.

"No, no. I've decided," said Will with an air of finality. "Instead I'll buy an ice pop for who wins the first game of Gathering Magic." He was, he decided, determined to get someone to play his new game, even if he had to bribe them to do so.

"The game," said Jimmy, finally freeing himself from the undergrowth's grasp, "that you've been playing for the last week and a half."

"I have not. It's been a week at the most. You

could always race to the next corner..."

Jimmy's eye reluctantly followed the path deeper into the wood, over gnarled, moss-covered roots and past grasping briars to where the next turn carried the track into the sprawling centre of the copse. It was only three o clock in the afternoon but what little light there was had already begun to fade, the few shafts penetrating the interior only serving to accentuate how dark it was everywhere else. Unseen eyes, Jimmy was sure, observed their every move.

"Well how about if I buy you an ice pop if you go all the way to The Dell," said Jimmy.

Will took a step back; there was a collective gasp from the fern as the two girls forgot their entanglement in their shock. The Dell...that was a place to conjure nightmares with; a deep hollow from which a feeble spring emerged, picking its way through the wood to a distant river some four miles away. Even in the summer months, The Dell was generally avoided; a

short distance from the main path it was always dark in there, and damp, with stinging nettles and grasping vines. The rumours were that a witch lived in the cave beyond the narrow gap through which the stream emerged, but what could definitely be said was that it was also the favoured hangout of teenagers being wild and rebellious by doing all the things their own parents had done thirty odd years earlier. An intimidating place for a young boy or girl by any standard of measurement. To challenge someone to go to The Dell was to raise the stakes to dangerous levels

"Not for no ice pop," said Will, defiantly shaking his head.

"That's a double negative," said Hannah, standing up and pulling a fern frond from her hair. "What you actually said there was 'you wouldn't do it for no ice pop, but you might do it for an ice pop'."

Will stared, wide-eyed, at the shorter girl for a moment, momentarily bamboozled by life's hitherto concealed grammatical complexities, before his brain wisely cut in a filter that allowed him to ignore them completely. "Look, I don't care about no double-negativities or whatever, I just know that I'm not going to The Dell for just an ice pop."

"How about a cone?" said Jimmy.

"Nope."

"Cone with a flake?"

"Er...no."

Will hesitated

Sensing weakness, Jimmy unleashed the ultimate weapon. "Cone with a flake and monkey's blood?"

"...and a gobstopper?"

Oh. Oh that was it. This had gone beyond a mere frozen, fruit flavoured strip of dubious origins, this was a full-on throw-down now. You didn't invoke the gobstopper unless it was serious.

"Only if you come with me," said Will, crossing his arms. A gobstopper was all well and good but there was no sense in venturing alone into the heart of darkness.

"If I can stand on the side," said Jimmy; no fool he.

"And they come as witnesses," insisted Will, pointing at the two girls.

"Can we not just go home?" said Alex. "This is stupid."

"Are you scared?" said Hannah, her tone mocking (although she was secretly hoping for an excuse to leave).

"No! Course not, just seems silly. You know, really...stupid."

Their pace slowed as they progressed, edging closer to the dark heart at the centre of Weavers Wood, until before them lay The Dell; a clearing surrounding a rocky crack in the earth through which a feeble stream emerged. Stones surrounded the spring, improvised seats scarred with cigarette stubbings and impetuously carved declarations of undying love that would be washed away and forgotten by Spring. The ground around The Dell was a tangled mass of vines and weeds, with more than

few stinging nettles leering hungrily at the four friends. And everywhere they looked, dew covered spider webs glittered in the fading light like bejewelled necklaces.

"So, down into The Dell?" said Will. It was less a question, more a reluctant, regretful reestablishment of the facts.

"Go and sit on the stone nearest the spring for ten seconds and that'll do it," said Jimmy.

"Ten seconds," said Will.
"Ten seconds," repeated Jimmy.

"With a gobstopper?" asked Will.

"With a gobstopper," repeated Jimmy.

About them, the woods waited, the trees and bushes and weeds and vines, the spiders and flies and crawling beetles a silent audience.

"Sit on the stone?" said Will.

"Just sit on the stone."

It was a challenge, a test of courage and fortitude, a call that went above and beyond the duty of one friend to another, and yet, as Will dimly understood,

there were girls present, and though everyone knew that girls were "icky" there was something there that made Will want to impress them. "Fine," he said, as nonchalantly as he was able.

He picked his way along the narrow track, a sinuous ribbon of dirt between the threatening nettles that wound down to the base of the depression in the wood's earth. Having failed to be stung, and also having not been assaulted by terrible forces beyond the understanding of man, Will picked his way up the stream bed, the waters burbling sluggishly between the rocks beneath his feet until he was standing in front of the largest of the stone "seats" in front of the small crack through which the waters emerged. With a theatrical flourish, worth of a matador, he took a seat on the rock, noting with a calm that was only slightly forced that, according to the lettering below his right thigh, "Jezza" would love "Cheryl" "4 Eva".

Ignoring the proclamations of this latter day
Romeo and Juliet, Will looked defiantly up at his
friends whilst silently counting down the time. Around

him, the weeds swayed back and forth in the breeze and the stream bubbled over the rocks in front of his toes.

"7, 8, 9..."

"Hello dearie," said the voice in his ear.

Will was not, by his own admission, an athletic child. Not for him the record breaking sprints down the sports track at school, nor would he ever be found gracing the top of the climbing rope in the school's gym, but on that day, in that place, he achieved a state of acceleration that would have made physicists working at CERN look at their calculations in disbelief.

Suddenly, the narrow path seemed a lot narrower, the vines grasping around his ankles. He stumbled to the ground, skinning his knee and taking a small chunk out of the knee of his trousers. snagged on a briar, he twisted round and saw the shape of the leaves and branches coalescing into a face, ancient and hungry, that stared down at him from aeons long past.

"Plump little thing aren't you?" the breeze whispered.

"I'm big boned" he shouted. "And me mum's put me on a diet!"

Laughter rippled through the clearing, leaving branches swaying in its wake.

Will ignored the mocking mirth, concentrating instead on disentangling the thorny vines from the leg of his trouser. "You ain't there," he muttered.

"Nothing there but the wind."

"On any other night, sweet little Will, but this is All Hallow's Eve, this is my night," sighed the wind. "Do you know how hungry you get when you can only feed on one night of the year?"

Will said something that may have been "mum" but was too guttural to properly understand and anyway, he wouldn't have been calling for his mum anyway, okay? OKAY?

"Are you all right?" It was Jimmy, closely followed by Alex and Hannah, to see why their friend was thrashing around on the ground. "Witch!" hissed Will. "s the witch!"

Alex laughed. "I never thought you were a fraidy cat," she said, as she tried to untangle his trousers from the grasping thorns of the briar. "There's no dumb witch here."

A sudden gust of wind almost flattened the weeds and energy prickled along their skin, jumping from goose bump to goose bump. A figure, a face formed in the mist that hung in the air, reaching for Will, but then something stopped it, stripping it of its form as it got closer. Again and again it tried, ethereal fingers reaching for the four terrified friends and each time, as the fingers tried to grasp their target, the mist dissipated, condensing on the strands of spider web that seemed to occupy every spare inch of space in The Dell. There was a hiss of anger and frustration, of something thwarted.

"Did anyone else feel that?" said Hannah, stooping down to help untangle the vines.

"Absolutely not!" declared Alex "There was nothing there at all now just...pull that bit, no, the other bit. THE OTHER BIT!"

Time and again, Will could feel the fingers creeping up his leg, the hesitant touch of someone trying not to disturb something they know will disappear, but always the pressure would fade and the spider's webs would be laden with a little more moisture.

"He. Is. MINE!" a voice shrieked. And suddenly she was there, bent-backed yet looming over the four stark-eyed friends. Indistinct, a glistening figure of drifting water-droplets, her face and hands were clear, reaching for them, clawed and ravenous, "MINE!" it shrieked again.

With a tearing of cloth, something that would get him in no small amount of trouble later, Will dragged his leg free.

"NNOOOoooOOooo!" The shadow lunged towards them, its watery mouth gaping far wider than a mouth had any right to, but even as it tried to gather them up its body was dissipated and dispersed.

They staggered backwards, the four friends, vowing as one that this would forge an unshakeable

bond that would last forever, or at least as long they could convince themselves that it wasn't just their imaginations.

"St...stuff the gobstopper," said Will as Jimmy half-dragged, half-carried him up to the path and away from The Dell.

"You don't want it anymore?" asked Jimmy, trying not to sound out of breath.

"Yeah, course!" Stark, staring terror and the possibility of getting eaten by something from beyond the grave was one thing, but a promised gobstopper was a thing above all that, something untouched and pure. "One of the raspberry ones from Ogden's, not the supermarket rubbish that loses its flavour after a few sucks."

"Do I get one?" asked Alex.

"Did you sit on the seat?" replied Will, his confidence bouncing back with the resilience of youth. "No."

Jimmy winced. "I did say ten seconds, and I reckon that was only nine."

The argument devolved into a shouting match, as most of their arguments did, and like most of their arguments it would inevitably be solved by the joint purchase of a bag of assorted sweets (hold the aniseed balls) from the corner shop.

It was much later that night, after Jimmy's parents had listened patiently to his tales of fighting off a terrible monster in The Dell, that his mum would turn to his dad and say, with a laugh tinged by barely-remember adventures in the woods, "Remember that old story of the witch who trapped the children, how she turned them into little spiders only for them to trap her in their webs?"

His dad would laugh. "Oh yeah, I think I read something about that, about how it became the weavers' wood. Funny how it all comes around, isn't it?"

"You don't think it really happened, do you?"
"Nah, they've just got really good imaginations,

