

HALLOWEEN GIFT

by

Jay Mountney

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Sally turned the corner into her street with relief. She'd be home soon and could exchange her office heels for comfy slippers and her smart skirt for jogging pants, and have a refreshing brew of something or other too. It was almost dark and she felt the usual cold draught as she opened her gate. Then she felt the tickle of fur round her ankles.

'Datted ghost cat,' she said. 'Even waits for me to get home. Why can't it just walk through the wall like any self respecting ghost would?'

She took out her key, noting as she opened the door that the bay tree she'd put in a pot so hopefully in the summer was drooping in the autumn weather. Or perhaps in the especially cold microclimate of what passed as a front garden. It was the only scrap of greenery. She'd had the rest paved, for easy maintenance, but people had assured her that the little tree would be hardy and would cope with just summer rain. Still, maybe she'd better consider moving it indoors for the winter.

The cat, which was still invisible but still insistent, was weaving around her feet, getting in the way. Usually she motioned it off to the gate but tonight she didn't.

‘You won’t like it if I stand on you in these shoes,’ she told it crossly. ‘I wish I could see you. Don’t you know it’s Halloween and the veils are thin? You could manifest or something, couldn’t you? Come in, anyway.’

She shrugged off her coat and scarf, hanging them on a peg in the hall, and kicked off her shoes. They could stay wherever they landed till Monday. It was Friday and the best holiday of the year. A whole weekend to be comfortable and happy. Her skirt followed the shoes and her slippers and black jogging pants were on before she opened the living room door.

The cat tried its hardest to trip her, or just to be first into the warmth. Thank goodness she’d set the heating to come on early. Even so, the room was cool.

Sally clicked her fingers and frowned when the spell failed. Being a witch usually came with advantages but apparently these were in sulking mode today.

Then she gasped as she saw the beautiful black cat on the sofa, sitting poised as if on a throne.

‘Perfect!’ She clapped her hands. ‘I should have known you’d make an ideal witch’s familiar. You glorious thing! Now, am I supposed to feed you? I have no idea whether ghosts eat once they’re visible. I think I have some tuna in the cupboard, so we can experiment.’

The cat narrowed its eyes. It seemed to be saying that caviar would be preferable but tuna would do if there was nothing else on offer.

‘Let me get warmed up first, then I’ll see about feeding both of us,’ said Sally, moving to the other end of the sofa which was nearest the radiator. She put out her hand and realised that the metal was already too hot to touch, but the warmth didn’t seem to be altering the temperature of the room. Something to do with her feline visitor? Perhaps. Still, there were other ways to protect herself against the cold and she grabbed her cloak which she had slung over the sofa end the previous evening. She cast a warming spell on it and slipped it round her shoulders, sighing as the cosiness kicked in. The same attention to her slippers brought much needed relief to cold toes. Her mother had always said that if the extremities were warm, the rest would follow. Maybe mittens would be in order too. Although...

She looked speculatively at the cat. Its fur was luxurious. Would it let her stroke it? Only one way to find out. And yes, in fact it settled on her lap, purring furiously as she buried her fingers in its coat. Yet the fur, so beguiling, felt like thread-thin icicles. She paused and the cat butted her hand, cross to find her ministrations had stopped.

‘Mittens,’ she told it. ‘I need mittens if I’m to sit here petting you.’ She lifted the cat gently back onto the cushions and went back to the hall, found her fingerless mittens in a drawer in the hallstand. She could cope with cold fingertips, she thought. It would be a privilege to share time with this creature.

There was a faint draught swirling round her head when she eventually got up to close the curtains and she shivered. Maybe her hat? But there might be trick or treaters at the door soon and whilst she didn’t mind the constant mutters from local adults about young women who dressed in Goth style she didn’t want to scare any children. A beanie would be fine but she didn’t think she had one.

Before sitting back down she retrieved her hat from the hall and snapped her fingers. The point seemed to melt into the crown and the wide brim receded. The fabric changed, too, till she held a black beanie in her hands. She wasted no time in putting it on her head. Right; all extremities dealt with. She'd read somewhere that it was most important to keep the head warm in winter. She bespelled the beanie, just in case it took a notion to copy the cat's cold fur.

She made sure she had a bowl of sweets ready near the front door. Jelly snakes, gobstoppers like miniature eyeballs, chocolate with popping candy, and vivid green liquorice laces. Always Be Prepared. She had never been a Brownie or a Girl Guide even before her witch powers had manifested but she thought the general principle was sound.

To the kitchen, then. She assumed the cat, if it could eat, would follow her if it heard the tin opener.

To her surprise, there was a young woman sitting on top of the refrigerator, her long legs curled under her. The kitchen was, if anything, colder than the living room and Sally checked to see that the fridge door was closed then looked up at the latest manifestation.

'Not that I mind,' she said, 'but just what are you doing here?' She didn't really expect a reply. In her admittedly limited experience, ghosts, and this had to be another ghost, didn't talk. The cat had purred, and in films she had noticed groans, and sometimes the clank of chains. But not talking.

'I thought I'd be out of your way.' The tone was apologetic and questioning.

'Well, yes, though it isn't as if there aren't perfectly comfortable chairs at the table, but I really meant "here" as in "here in my house".' Sally wasn't sure why anyone, ghost or otherwise, would sit on a fridge but that didn't seem to be the most pressing question.

'You can see me.' The ghost shook long black ringlets and opened deep amber eyes wide.

'Of course I can see you.'

'Well, I sort of hoped. It's Halloween, after all. But I wasn't sure. So I came in my other form first. And even then...' She trailed off into an expectant silence and Sally carefully stopped herself going back to check whether the cat was still on the sofa.

'Witches,' she said, 'have an affinity with anything supernatural or paranormal. So yes, on Halloween I was definitely going to see you. You're welcome, you know. Except I'd rather you didn't make it so cold, but then I don't suppose you can help it.'

'No. I'm sorry. But you seem to be coping.' The visitor gestured at the cloak and the beanie.

Sally nodded. 'I'll cope even better with a hot meal inside me. I don't suppose you're interested in cold tuna now, but you can share my dinner with pleasure. That's if you can eat.'

'I can eat.' The young woman's eyes lit up. 'I'd really like a hot meal. I can't stop making things cold, you know, and mostly I have to scrounge leftovers that are cold to begin with. I feel as if I've been eating nothing but ice cream since it happened.'

As she spoke she slithered down off the refrigerator with a peculiarly cat-like grace, and sat in one of the kitchen chairs at the small table. 'I'm Annabelle, by the way,' she said.

‘Sally. Pleased to meet you.’ Sally replied automatically. She was looking in the freezer for something suitable. ‘I can’t offer eye of newt or anything exotic,’ she explained. Not even frogs’ legs, I’m afraid. Would macaroni cheese be OK?’

Annabelle’s eyes got even huger, if that was possible, and she licked her lips.

‘Hot macaroni cheese?’ she asked.

‘Not yet it isn’t,’ said Sally, ‘but it’ll only take ten minutes in the microwave. Five to thaw and five to heat.’ She took the lid off the container and found the microwave cover.

‘But if you’re a witch,’ said Annabelle, ‘can’t you just get it ready in an instant? I mean, the way you warmed your clothes.’ She snapped her own fingers, frowning as she did. There was no click, of course, and nothing happened.

‘I could,’ said Sally. ‘But magic takes energy, you know. I’d rather keep it for important things. If I got dinner ready by magic every night I’d be exhausted all the time. As you pointed out, I’ve already warmed things but that was essential.’ She glared at Annabelle who looked vaguely ashamed.

While they were waiting for the microwave to work its own brand of magic there was a knock at the door. Sally had almost forgotten about the trick or treaters till she was faced, on the doorstep, with a small figure dressed in a sheet with a hole for its eyes.

‘Trick or treat, missus,’ it mumbled. Sally offered the bowl and the child took at least three jelly snakes then headed back down the path. ‘It’s bloody cold in your garden,’ it called back over its shoulder as it reached the gate. Sally saw an adult grab its hand but didn’t hear any remonstrations about the swearing.

Before she could close the door another child came, this one wearing a close fitting suit painted to look like a skeleton. Again, the gender was not obvious. After the ritual exchange of the traditional phrase and the proffered bowl (this time a gobstopper was palmed) the child looked over Sally’s shoulder. Blinked. Looked again and opened its mouth in a silent scream. Then it ran back down the path, dropping the treat in its haste.

‘Mum, mum,’ Sally heard. ‘That lady has another lady and you can see right through her. Mum, I want to go home.’

Sally could feel the chill even through her cloak and knew Annabelle was immediately behind her.

Meanwhile, the child’s mother was storming up the path. ‘How come you’re scaring our Denise?’ she asked belligerently.

‘I’m not,’ said Sally. ‘Or at least I’m not trying to.’

‘She says you’ve got some kind of ghost effect going on.’

‘I’m on my own, as you can no doubt see,’ said Sally. If the mother could see Annabelle, they could discuss the situation rationally, but if she couldn’t there was no real point in trying to explain that Denise was probably a fledgling witch. It would be all too obvious before long, and didn’t need to involve Sally. Though she made a mental note to warn the coven.

The mother said something uncomplimentary under her breath and turned to go. Then she turned back and pointed at Sally. 'You're that goth. Just you watch yourself. Scaring little 'uns.' She gave a triumphant smirk and turned away again.

Sally rolled her eyes and this time managed to get the door closed before any more small monsters appeared. After a moment's thought she put out the lights in the hall and living room. Hopefully, trick or treaters would think she was out, and she'd just have to eat up the sweets herself. They could have them for dessert, though maybe Annabelle would prefer a hot pudding. A chocolate mug cake would be the work of moments and she was pretty sure she had all the ingredients. Perhaps they could break up the Halloween chocolate with candy and use it as a topping. The popping bits shouldn't melt too quickly.

Wondering if she'd just invented a new dessert, Sally went back to the kitchen. The microwave was complaining loudly that it had finished its work and dinner was ready. Annabelle was looking for plates and cutlery and had managed to open a bottle of wine.

'Unless you'd rather drink some kind of herbal tea with belladonna,' she said. 'It's Halloween, after all, and I don't know if you have any special traditions.'

'Not belladonna,' said Sally. 'I have no intention of flying tonight. I'm too tired after a week's work, and I was thinking more of putting my feet up in the living room and maybe reading a ghost story, but since you're here, I'll settle for an audio ghost story instead.'

Annabelle giggled. 'It's not all that interesting,' she said.

'But you're definitely a ghost,' said Sally, dishing up the macaroni cheese and sprinkling extra grated parmesan on top.

Annabelle clearly didn't combine eating with talking and there was silence as both women finished their meal. The popping chocolate pudding was a success and they took their wine to the living room. Sally risked a lamp. Trick or treating should surely be over by now.

'Well,' she said, 'I'm waiting. I want to know how you became a ghost, why you decided to haunt me, what makes you a werecat or a werghost or whatever, and whether you're likely to stick around.'

'Not much, then,' said Annabelle.

She described the accident as though it had happened to someone else. Sally winced as she heard about the car that had mounted the pavement, out of control as the driver had a heart attack.

'So you see,' said Annabelle, 'it wasn't really my time to go. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time but I hadn't done anything to deserve it.'

Sally nodded. 'That doesn't explain the werecat part,' she prompted.

'There was a cat passing at the time and we got kind of merged. Physically, yes,' she confirmed as Sally winced again. 'And apparently metaphysically or something, too. It wasn't her time, either. Oh, and I'm Anna and she's Belle so we merged names by common agreement.'

‘What about the driver?’ Sally expected Annabelle, or Anna to say he or she had died too and was not mistaken.

‘That’s how I knew what to do,’ said Anna. ‘They came for him first and asked if he had unfinished business. He said not and went with them like a lamb. Then they turned to me and I said I had plenty of unfinished business so they offered an extension and said somebody would check up on me later.’

Sally was fascinated. ‘What was your unfinished business?’ she asked.

‘Living, of course,’ said Anna.

‘But...’

‘Well I know that, but at least I can see lots of places and experience lots of things. Like warm macaroni cheese. And Belle insisted on living the rest of her nine lives even if they had to be in spirit form.’

‘And how long will it be before they come for you? Did they say?’

Anna shook her head, her glossy curls bouncing and gleaming. ‘I think it’ll be ages,’ she said. ‘I met this other ghost. Ben, his name is. He got an extension much the same way I did, for a similar reason and because he’d just seen somebody else go with them. And he’s been around ever since.’

‘Ever since when?’ said Sally.

‘He died during the first world war,’ said Anna. ‘So I expect to be around for at least another hundred years.’ She sounded very cheerful and indeed Sally couldn’t see many drawbacks. Apart from cold food.

‘So it was you, or rather Belle, in the front garden all this time,’ she said slowly. The garden had been haunted for months.

‘Yes. I saw you in the street and thought you were so pretty. And I could tell somehow that you were a witch, so I hoped... But it took Halloween to let you see me.’

‘I can see you now. But maybe tomorrow I won’t be able to.’ Somehow, that was a really disappointing thought.

‘Oh I think you will. Ben says once someone can see a ghost that’s it. They’re attuned, or something.’

‘So you’re going to stay?’ Sally spoke almost shyly.

‘I hope so. Only if you invite me, of course. Like I couldn’t come into the house till you opened the door and didn’t tell me to scat.’ Sally immediately felt bad about telling Belle to scat for months on end. She hadn’t been so unfriendly tonight. Perhaps she could have had her intriguing visitor earlier, though maybe Halloween was the deciding factor. And walking through walls evidently required invitation just as much as coming through the front door.

‘You’re very welcome,’ she said now. ‘And I can easily feed two of us. But what will you do all day while I’m at work?’

‘Watch telly mostly,’ said Anna promptly. ‘But I’ll go out, too, and explore. If you have a cat flap put in the back door I can come and go as Belle and nobody will be any the wiser.’

Sally blinked. It appeared she’d just acquired a cat and a lodger. A werecat lodger. And hopefully a friend. Friends, for witches living in suburbia, were few and far between. There was the coven, of course, but most of the members were old enough to be her grandmother.

‘Should I keep you a secret from the coven?’ she asked now.

‘Of course not. I can even come and see them and find out if anyone else can see me,’ Anna reassured her.

‘Aunt Judith might,’ said Sally. ‘She’s into afterlife things.’ Then she explained how witches each had their own specialism. Hers was manipulating energy. She could make things warmer, cooler, lighter, darker and so on. ‘And I can make things alter their shape but not their core essence,’ she finished. ‘I can make my hat into a beanie but not into a cardigan.’

‘And you can keep yourself warm,’ said Anna, satisfaction in every syllable.

They switched on the television and found their tastes ran in tandem. Soon they were snuggled up on the sofa watching an old episode of Death in Paradise. Then Anna morphed into Belle and slid onto Sally’s lap, purring. Sally stroked the silky fur throughout the programme.

Afterwards, she fell asleep during News at Ten (which was actually News at Ten Minutes past Ten because of some scheduling glitch) because she was tired after all the warming spells. At about midnight she woke with a start to find her lap full of Anna. Her fingers had found Anna’s cheek and were automatically stroking. Anna’s skin was icy but still soft, like packed snow, and Sally found herself wondering what it would be like to share a bed with someone as cold as the Arctic.

She had two bedrooms but only one bed. Of course, she could ask Anna to sleep on the sofa, but the bed was a double, so that would seem mean. She told herself virtuously that she was just being hospitable but Anna’s knowing look when she offered to share the bed told her that her virtue was questionable at best and that Anna knew it.

She tried to backtrack out of some sense of self preservation.

‘I don’t want to get too involved,’ she said. ‘What if they remember and come for you?’

Anna shrugged. ‘I don’t think they will. But then what if you get run over on your way home from work? What if I’d met you before my accident? Life and Death are full of what ifs so we should just enjoy the here and now.’

She was right, Sally decided. She dimmed the lamp, checked the doors and tried to lead the way upstairs to her bedroom. But Anna streaked past her in feline form and by the time she reached the doorway was Anna again. Delectably Anna, and naked in her bed.

The good hostess bit of her brain kicked in again and offered pyjamas which were indignantly rejected.

She dithered about her own. On the one hand, they could be warmed with a spell. On the other, she really wanted to know how all that chilled skin felt.

It felt wonderful. Sally gave a happy sigh, one echoed by Anna. She found their activities kept her warm enough despite Anna's cold exterior, and if her nose was a little cool as she tucked it into Anna's shoulder afterwards, well, it was worth it.

For once, she would be the one with something important to tell the coven on Saturday.

'How I spent Halloween,' she would begin. And when she told Anna, the idea elicited a giggle and then an instruction to go back to sleep. It was long after midnight now, and Anna was perfectly visible in the moonlight that came through the thin curtains, and solid, too. Perfectly solid.

In fact, perfect in every respect. Her very own holiday present, absolutely suitable for a witch, but for life, she thought, not just for Halloween.