

## Ghost Writing

By Lars Peterson

*The witch searched*—no, no, fumbled—*fumbled through her numerous spells, looking for the right one.* Terrible. It would never fly. He inserted *and incantations* after *spells*. Grunting and shaking his head, he erased *looking for the right one* and replaced it with a period instead. *Somewhere in the pile, heaped through years of research*—yes, much better—*was a particular spell to cast on the city which had*—oh crap! The author ripped the page out of his notebook, and threw it at the wastebasket in the corner. Instead, it bounced off the side only to lie with a dozen other rejected beginnings. He could not do beginnings well, yet was worse at endings.

Jacob Kansly again shook his head in dismay. His All Hallow's Eve just was not going well. Beside him lay a thick manuscript—the latest rejection from the publishing world. He ought to throw that at the wastebasket! It sat there as a painful reminder that nothing had been published in nearly three months and bills were beginning to pile up. Ah, the disadvantages of being a full-time author. He was lying on the floor of the apartment's living room, before the window which made up most of the fourth wall. The room was unlit and he liked it that way. It was also his habit to write lying down by light of the window. Today he was looking particularly like an author. He hadn't shaved and was wearing a checkered, unbuttoned, long-sleeve shirt over a white t-shirt.

Standing, he went to the window and looked over Salem. The weather reflected the day—cloudy and threatening a storm. From his fifth-floor apartment he could see the city square, set diagonally from the building and surrounded by many other towering buildings. Jacob's blue eyes scanned the crowd strutting around the square. The Halloween costume parade was a menagerie of wardrobes ranging from hideous-looking skeletons to cute fairy godmothers, to large walking milk cartons. How they could all share the same crowd he did not know. Only on Halloween.

Was Danny down there? His five-year-old son loved costumes. And parades. Danny seemed to go through three changes of clothes a day, not counting a bed sheet as a cape or a

pot for a helmet. Once he had burst into the kitchen wielding a plastic hammer and garbage lid as a shield, apparently trying to protect his mother from the two-headed dragon sitting on the counter. What an imagination that boy had.

His thoughts turned to his sweet wife, Julie. She had gone last night to her mother's house again (Danny accompanying her). Nothing new. They would separate every time he buried himself in his writing. He would neglect her, and admittedly he did to some degree. They would quarrel and separate for a day or two, then make up. The circle seemed eternally set. They'd never divorce, though. No, they loved each other too much. And their son.

Well, enough musing. The day had turned to evening and he had gotten nothing done. He returned to his writing position, brushing away the writer's block and began again to write soon-to-be-a-bestseller tale. All he needed was a good beginning and the story would practically write itself.

*The witch of Salem sat in her secluded cottage examining a spell from one of her books. She had finally uncovered it at the bottom of her many trunks, beneath black dresses, candles, raven feathers, amulets, goats' blood and other witchcraft paraphernalia. She set the red, leather-bound book on a pulpit next to a large, black cauldron, it's water already boiling.*

Perfect! Well, so far anyway. He got up and went to his kitchen. He liked to write in short bursts like that. It was his style, besides giving him a chance to collect his thoughts. He made himself a cup of hot chocolate, another preference of his, and returned to his story with the mug in his hand.

Upon entering the room he knew something was different. He couldn't say exactly what at first. The sofa was in place with the coffee table in front. The chairs about the room were fine and the carpet . . . where was the carpet? Jacob looked incredulously at the bare floor. What happened to the bloody thing? His notebook was still there. "What the heck!" Nobody could have just taken it.

His eyes slid across the floor, across his notebook, and stopped. He looked back at his notebook and found that there were two paragraphs on the page, not just one. Okay, this was getting way too strange. He sat down and read new paragraph. *The floor of the cottage*

*was bare wood which often creaked. It was a large one-room hut, cluttered with her belongings. Black candles, set all about the room gave the place an eerie brightness. One, thick, black candle . . .* So—what? Somebody came in, rolled up the carpet, wrote a paragraph—and a fairly well-written one at that—but was interrupted because he reentered with a cup of cocoa in his hand? The handwriting was bad, worse than his.

He took a sip from the cup. Maybe he was hallucinating. He set the cup down, checked his forehead—no fever—rubbed his eyes, checked the page again, and his eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. Words were slowly being scrawled on the page . . . *Sits next to the book, lit.* The invisible hand stopped and a black candle, lit, materialized next to his notebook. Jacob stared at the candle, then the page, and snapped his gaping mouth shut.

What was going on? “What’s going on?” The invisible hand continued its scrawling. He should have torn out the page, burned it and run down the hall screaming like a madman, but instead let the hand continue.

*It was All Hallows’ Eve, and she and Salem had a score to settle. Salem would suffer.* Jacob’s heart was nearly pounding out of his chest. Why was this happening? What was happening? One of his stories had finally come to life? *She began her incantation and a hum filled the cottage—and the living room as well. The table beside her began to rattle as the hum persisted—and the coffee table began to quiver.* Well, enough was too much for Jacob. He snatched up his pencil and wrote, *but then the table stopped quivering and the humming stopped humming.* They stopped. He grabbed the notebook and flung it against the wall.

He stared at it for a time and found he was shivering. He looked around and found another addition to the room. Jacob recoiled at the sight of a big black cauldron sitting to the right of the black candle. “What the hell’s up with today?” Perplexed and frustrated, he went about the room looking for anything else that might have magically appeared. He found that Julie’s prized vase had fallen from the table and shattered. Wonderful. All he needed now was Julie to walk in and demand an explanation. Honey, the carpet evaporated, your favorite vase busted during a witch’s incantation from the story I’m writing, and oh yes, she left her

cauldron and black candle—shall we take it to her in the morning? By the way sweetheart, your husband's a madman.

He was chewing on his lip now, staring at the notebook again. Curiosity beckoned him to reopen it, but he dared not. No telling what else could come out of there. On the other hand, maybe that was the only way to fix everything. There was no denying that this was reality. Questioning the why and how would come later—surely there was a logical explanation—but for now everything had to be fixed.

Uncertainly, he picked up the notebook and set it back in its place, sat down and opened it. The writing began immediately, faster than before. *A storm broke as the incantation continued and smoke rose from the cauldron.* It was raining outside, and thunder rolled across the city, even as smoke began to rise from the cauldron, just as the dreaded hand had written. He rubbed his eyes again, for what he was beginning to see was the materialization of a hand. It began as a hand of glass, slowly becoming a hand of mist as it wrote.

This was a dream or surely he was mad. Maybe both. He fought his fear down and let the story continue. Please, please let it end soon. *The witch spoke. Her voice was raspy, filled with wicked amusement. "Light falter, storm flurry, black Salem with my fury!"* Seconds later, the city lights died, and the dark evening covered the city. Shrieks and cries arose from the city square below, and Jacob raced to the window. By traffic's headlight he saw children running everywhere, screaming.

He turned back to his room—no, now half of it was the witch's cottage! In some places thatch replaced the roof, or stone stood instead of wallpaper. Here sat a trunk next to the sofa, there sat a washtub next to the phone. Such anachronisms would have amused him at any other time but the present.

Fear took him as the shape began to materialize beside the cauldron. Misty at first, it soon became a witch. Horror overcame him next. She was old and haggard, bent over her devilish gruel, flames blazing under it now. Her face was a mass of wrinkles and warts, and her clothes were black tatters hiding a deformed, decaying body. One eye puffed shut while the other opened wide, glared at him.

The witch spoke the words which the ghost hand was surely writing. “Demons rise, city quake, hellfire burn, boil and bake!” A deluge of chaos had begun. He looked through the window. Fires were breaking out across the city, and screaming erupted as demonic figures ran amid the crowd. Lightning flashed, striking buildings and thunderclaps shook the apartment.

“What the hell’s going on?”

The witch gave a maniacal shrill. He had to stop this. He fought his paralysis and ran to the notebook. He grabbed it from the ghost hand and reached for his pencil as a diabolical creature rose from the cauldron. Quickly he found what the hand had written last. . . . *Witch laughed in victory. Her spell was nearly complete. A demon began to rise from the brew.* He tried to steady his hand as he wrote, *but the demon died*, and it groaned loudly, sinking into the gruel.

Ghost hands snatched the notebook, beginning to write again. Jacob again took it away as the demon roared and rose a foot above the gruel. The hand had quickly written *yet was revived* after his insertion. Desperately he wrote, *but then the demon flew through the window.* It shattered as the creature sailed through it, opening the room to wind and rain. Now to end it. He closed the notebook and was about to rip it, when a hand knocked him away to the wall. He was stunned, spots dancing madly before him.

The raspy voice began again. “The forbearers out, a roll of the drums, behold something wicked, this way comes!” The earth began to quiver and Jacob knew he had no time. Finding a pen nearby, he dove for the notebook, snatched it, and ran to a corner. He opened it. The words had turned to blood, streaming down the page. He was terrible at endings. Terror was consuming him. Holding the pencil in a death grip he scribbled,

*The End*