

An Excerpt From:

The Witch in the Gingerbread House

By Tara Meddaugh

A Play in One Act

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The Witch in the Gingerbread House

Character Breakdown

DELPHINE	A woman in her 20s-50s
JAD *	A man in his 20s-50s
CHILD 1	A child.
CHILD 2	A child.
CHILDREN 3-10	Children with no speaking parts. May be played by children, teenagers, or representatives of children (such as cardboard cut-outs, lighting effects, etc)
HANSEL *	A teenage boy.
GRETEL	A teenage girl.
MISC ADULTS	These may be extra adults, or these may be played by the older/teenage children, or representatives of adults (such as cardboard cut-outs, lighting effects, etc)

Setting

Timeless. The woods in the land of fairytales...A Witches' Estate, A Cornfield, Delphine's Gingerbread House, inside and out. The settings may be representatives or impressions of place and need not be realistic.

*If Jad is played by a young man, this actor may double as Hansel, if needed.

AT RISE: DELPHINE, a witch in her 20s-50s, is in an oven. She wears a flowered dress, and no witch's hat. As she invites us into her story, she steps out into her world leading up to this point. We are in Timeless Fairytale-land.

DELPHINE (out)

It's cold right now. I know it will get warmer. I know it will get warm, then hot, then hotter until...well...I've baked dumplings enough times to know what happens in an oven.

(pause)

Everyone in the land will hail them as heroes.

(pause)

Justice has been served, they'll say.

(pause)

I can't rule on justice, but I can see no other way that this could end.

(pause)

I've been pushed to this point. No one will remember that, but—I've never had the desire to eat children. I like candy. Clearly. Look at my house! I didn't construct it with the intention of luring children into my house to devour them—despite what legends may tell you. I did it because...I love to be surrounded in...sweetness.

(pause)

Do you know what it's like to fall asleep with the scent of gingerbread enveloping you? Covering you like a blanket? Or warm lemon pudding filtering to your pillow to give you the most delicious dreams? I never slept a sound night before I built this. A moss-covered tudor house, an abandoned castle growing ivy—these aren't warm places to live, but these are where witches must live. These are cold, damp, solitary. They send shivers through your spine and you hear creaking at night.

(pause)

But I got out. I lost everything from my life until that point, but I got out.

(JAD, a young warlock, dressed in traditional warlock-garb, enters. They are at the WITCHES' ESTATE in the deep of the woods, a few years earlier. DELPHINE wears a black robe and a black witch's hat.)

JAD

Today?

DELPHINE

I'm through delaying.

JAD

Wait one more day. Just think [about it more]—

DELPHINE

They're moving me to the dungeon. Tonight.

JAD

That's not a punishment.

DELPHINE

For most witches, maybe, no. But for me—they know I love the sun. I've pleaded my case but they won't listen to me. And—and—I won't sleep there. Not tonight. Not any night.

JAD

You're overreacting. Delphine, please. That's not a reason to leave. Look at all the good around you. A life of ease. Everything is provided for you. You have food—

DELPHINE

I don't like the caldron—or eating toads or oils or—

JAD

You know that's not all we eat.

DELPHINE

It's part of it.

JAD

It's not just food—you have your clothing provided, your—

DELPHINE

Always black! I don't want—

JAD

Then change your gown! You don't have to wear black. Wear a ruby cloak like Filnden—no one cares!

DELPHINE

They do. They look at her like she's [crazy!]

JAD

So be the crazy witch!

(embraces her)

I love this crazy witch! Wear your yellow dresses and decorate your room with your colorful paintings.

DELPHINE

Jad...

JAD

You're being selfish. You always say you want change—you have to stay to make change. If you

run away, good for you, but then your voice goes with you. Nothing will change here if you don't stay to change it.

DELPHINE

I've tried! You know I've tried and they laugh at me, they dismiss me as foolish and young. They don't want the kinds of changes my heart desires!

JAD

You don't—

DELPHINE

It's not just a matter of color and food and clothing! It's what underlies that. You know this, Jad. If you consider, if you take the quiet and consider—you know my changes are too big for this life.

JAD

You're wrong. You're—people always say that. But it takes hard work and persistence, and sacrifice and then [future generations]—

DELPHINE

I don't want to work at that anymore.

(pause)

JAD

So you give up?

DELPHINE

I'm tired of fighting them. I want happiness for myself. Is that so wrong? My life—it doesn't belong here.

JAD

I don't...I don't make you happy?

(pause)

DELPHINE

You do, but...you won't come with me.

JAD

You won't stay!

(pause)

DELPHINE

I'm sorry...

(pause)

JAD

You will live a life cursed with unhappiness.

DELPHINE

Don't curse me, Jad. I would never curse you. No matter how—I would never—

JAD

I'm not cursing you. You're tearing my heart out, yes, but I still love you. You get that, right? This is not a curse I put on you.

DELPHINE

So?

JAD

I know you.

(pause)

It's a prediction.

(DELPHINE stares at Jad for a moment. She takes off her large black brimmed hat and gives it to him. She then turns to leave.)

DELPHINE (out)

This day of my escape—walls or no, it is my escape—I sleep under the stars at night.

(JAD exits)

I'm in a farmer's field. Husks of corn bristle against my cheek. I hear frogs peeping at night, but these are not frogs to boil in a potion. These are frogs who are my brothers and sisters of the land. And they wake me in the morning to encourage me to journey on. Which I do. Because as cold and as tired and hungry as I feel... I am strong, and alert; I am nourished and warm...

(Delphine's HOUSE grows around her as she speaks)

It takes months before I have the ingredients coupled with the magical skill to create my house, but even in the process, I am joyful. I sleep on a bare molasses floor with no walls, but it heaven. As my gingerbread roof is constructed, I breathe in the scent of sugar and it fuels my mind, body and heart all in one. My licorice door frames are soft and my walls are smooth with the subtle warmth of a sugar cookie.

(pause)

My house is complete. I am living in a world of light, of brightness, color. Sweetness. Life is as perfect as I have ever known it. And I am happy. For the first time in my life—from the inside out, in every dark corner of my being—I am happy. But I become happier still.

(CHILD 1 enters)

I am in my garden when I encounter the first other speaking Being since my flight from the Witches' Estate.

CHILD 1

Are those lollypops?

DELPHINE

Oh—these?

(CHILD 1 nods)

Why, yes, they are. Lollypop flowers. Have you ever seen such a thing?

(CHILD 1 shakes her head no)

That is because where I live is the most magical and beautiful place in the land. Have you ever seen a window sill you can chew?

(CHILD 1 shakes her head no)

Would you like to?

(CHILD 1 nods)

DELPHINE (out)

As I lead her to my cherry gumdrop window, I am filled with pride. And I realize, what is a house of candy if you can not share it with others?

(CHILD 1 bites down on a gumdrop window)

As she sinks her teeth into the sugary tartness, her face fills with delight, and my heart fills with the joy this shared experience brings.

(to CHILD 1)

There now...it's good, isn't it?

(CHILD 1 nods)

(out)

The next day, she comes back.

(CHILD 2 enters and rushes to CHILD 1's side)

With a friend of hers.

(to children)

Would you like to try my caramel cookie daisies?

(CHILD 1 and CHILD 2 squeal with excitement, holding hands. DELPHINE picks a few caramel cookie daisies and hands it to them)

And a bit of lemon pudding on the bottom of the stem.

CHILD 1 (to CHILD 2)

To help the flower grow!

DELPHINE

Yes, darling!

(she gives Child 1 a small hug)

To help the flower grow!

(out)

By the end of the week, word spreads, and my garden is filled with children.

(ENTER CHILDREN 3-10, or, in lieu of children, CHILD 1 and CHILD 2 may run out and return holding cardboard cut-outs of other children.)

I am happy to share my candy, my cakes, my custards. The sound of laughter, of novelty, and the true magic of a child's happiness fill my home. I am fulfilled.

(pause)

I give them all that they ask for, and more.

(pause)

There is no need for children to steal.

(pause)

No need.

(DELPHINE is in her house. CHILDREN hide around the garden and outside of the house, whispering)

CHILD 2

Oh, Witchy! Here Witchy Witchy Witch!

(DELPHINE comes out of her house)

DELPHINE

Children?

CHILD 2

Over here!

(DELPHINE looks toward the sound of the child and walks toward her)

DELPHINE

I've just been baking the most—

(CHILD 2 throws a rock at her)

DELPHINE

Oh!

(As DELPHINE is stunned for a moment, CHILDREN rush into her house and slam the door, locking it behind them)

DELPHINE

What—why would you—? Where did you go?

(rubs the spot where the rock has hit her. She walks around the garden for a bit, then goes to enter her house again. She tries the doorknob but it is locked)

I—

(she goes to the side and peers in the window. A child greets her gaze with his tongue sticking out)

Oh, my! Are you—don't—don't tear the fireplace apart! That is—I can give you peppermint sticks from my pantry. You don't need to—Oh! My bedroom! Please don't—the walls are—please don't pound at the walls! They will come down! You must be careful! I've molasses cookies baking to give you! There's no need—no need to...children...children...

(The CHILDREN rush out of her house with armfuls of sweets, as her house begins to crumble around her. They squeal with delight and run off/exit. DELPHINE watches, weakened, crumpled, like her house.)

(pause)

I must re-build my house thirty seven times over the course of those early years. Each time, it takes all of my energy, all of the magic I can muster, to complete the building. They don't always come in droves. Sometimes it is just one boy, sneaking in through the window to destroy my vanilla wafer kitchen table. Sometimes it is a quiet girl on a quest to take every chocolate rose from my garden. But the worst raids are the ones where they come in packs. A mob with the excitement of a thrill they know only numbers can enforce. It happens over and over. Day after day. I don't want to lose my comrades. I try to be nice. That is my nature. I want to be respectful of their child-like mischief. I first put up a sign.

(A SIGN appears saying, "KNOCK IF YOU WANT CANDY. HAPPY TO SHARE. PLEASE DO NOT DESTROY MY HOME. I LIVE HERE.")

(CHILD 1 enters. She squints her eyes at the sign.)

CHILD 1

Kuh—Kuh—nuh—nuh—

(She gives up, takes a large hammer and smashes it to the side of the house. She grabs a piece of the wall, bites into it and runs off)

DELPHINE (out)

Children don't read signs. I set up alarms.

(CHILD 2 enters. He tiptoes to the window and begins to pry it open with a crow-bar-like stick. An alarm sounds. He is surprised but instead of running away, he smashes the window instead, grabs a piece of window-pane colored candy, and runs off/exits.)

DELPHINE (out)

It frightens them at first, but they only get sneakier, bolder.

(CHILDREN 1-5 enter)

I try to use my spells to create a rainbow candy wall around my house—

(A short wall appears)

A pudding mote around my yard—

(A chocolate mote appears)

But such magic takes time, and before the weeks pass which I need to construct these things—

(Her house is destroyed. CHILDREN 1-5 cheer)

The children have already destroyed my home within it. I cease my spells. I did not leave the Witches' Estate, filled with motes and walls, and dungeons...only to recreate it here.

(CHILDREN 6-10 enter and join the others)

So I plead with them, appeal to them, living creature to living creature.

(CHILDREN run around, grab and destroy inside her house, outside of her house)

Please! Children! Wait! That is my bed! I sleep there—how would you like someone knocking down your walls?

(CHILDREN scream and run around, not listening. Some throw rocks and dirt at Delphine)

Please! That hurts! How would you—have you—have you ever had someone do something mean to you before?

(CHILDREN still run and scream and destroy.)

Children! Please! I—I'm begging you! Have compassion! Children! Please!

(CHILDREN all run off with candy in their hands. DELPHINE nurses her wounds.)

(out)

They laugh at me. They are unruly. Uncaring. Unsympathetic.

(pause)

I am the witch no one fears.

(DELPHINE begins repairing her house)

Every moment of the day is filled with repairs. Every moment of the night is filled with stressful watching. Each sound I hear could be a child scraping off the icing on my porch. A giggle might be a boy pulling at my cat's sweet-tart collar.

(pause)

My peaceful sleep is gone.

(pause)

My happiness is gone.

(pause)

(A CHILD runs screaming across the way. Exits)

DELPHINE (out)

I did nothing to that child. She came to steal sweets, but was chased by a bear into the forest, and her fate was not in my control.

(pause)

She did not return to her mother that night.

(pause)

I don't know who started the rumor—a parent, perhaps, tired of children returning with full bellies and leaving their dinner plates untouched. A boy with a penchant for scaring the girls. An off handed threat I once make when I have been pushed to my limit. But...it is only a rumor.

(CHILDREN 1-10 enter)

CHILDREN

*The witch in the gingerbread house,
Not a friend, not even a mouse.
You ask me why?
I cannot lie!
She ate them all herself!*

DELPHINE (out)

It's a game to the children now.

(CHILDREN run through a sequence of movements as they sing through the melody)

CHILDREN

*The witch with the candy door,
No friends—she's such a bore!
You ask me why?
I cannot lie!
She ate them, then said, "MORE!"*

DELPHINE (out)

I'm horrified, at first. For all the kindness I've shown...to be blamed for such atrocious acts...it crushes the top of my heart...it weighs on me.

(pause)

But...

(pause)

This keeps the children away from my house for a time. This...newly found sense of fear, undeserved as it is...it...protects me...in a way I have never felt protection before. I was never feared at the Witches' Estate, but surely, I thought, in the villages, in the country, my being a witch would hold more...weight, if not fear. It doesn't—until this rumor. And...it isn't who I want to be, but...the joy of children has been long muffled since the fear of children consumed.

So—to regain a sense of authority...I accept this...I embrace it.

(pause)

But in order for anyone to believe this rumor, even for a moment, I could not wear long flowered dresses, aprons with butterflies on the cloth, and hats made of yellow straw. This isn't the attire of a witch.

(DELPHINE puts on a long black robe)

The blackness of my robe seeps through my skin, and into my heart.

(DELPHINE puts on a black witch's hat)

The darkness of my hat runs through my skull and into my mind.

(pause)

I cannot be weak. I cannot be soft.

(pause)

I cannot be kind.

(CHILD 2 enters. He crouches behind a bush, staring at Delphine. DELPHINE sweeps dirt from her walk. CHILD 2 makes a run for it and grabs a potted plant of jelly beans as he dashes by Delphine.)

(in a screechy “witch” voice, to CHILD 2)

Stop!

(CHILD 2 stops for a beat to look at her, then runs)

Stop or I'll cast a spell on you!

(CHILD 2 stops again.)

Drop that potted jelly bean plant.

CHILD 2

I—

DELPHINE

Drop it or I'll roast you in my oven!

(CHILD 2 drops the plant. It falls to the ground and the pot breaks or spills over. He trembles.)

Be off with you! Now!

(CHILD 2 is frozen. DELPHINE raises her broom at him)

NOW!

(CHILD 2 runs off.)

(DELPHINE stands still, breathing heavily, trembling herself. She slowly lowers her broom and drops it to the ground. She walks to the broken/spilled jelly bean pot and tries to repair it. She moves it back to where it has been sitting before. Her trembling hands drop it once more, and it spills out/breaks again. She falls to the ground beside it.)

(out)

(her regular voice again)

I miss my dresses. Expressing who I am. Or—who I was.

(stands and brushes herself off)

But, at least now, I don't have to rebuild my house. Not quite as often anyway. The children who do come now...it's—it's different. The children—as the rumor develops, as more children harbor this fear—the good ones and the merely mischievous ones stay away. If a child is lost in the woods, never to return again, I am to blame. If a child is drowned in the river, it is “the witch in the gingerbread house.” If a child goes sick and dies, it is from one of my “curses.”

(pause)

I am more witch now than I was when I lived surrounded by witches.

(pause)

The only children who dare step foot in my yard now are the ones who have hatred. They've lost a brother or baby sister to what they believe is a witch's spell. Or they are just mean, very mean, and have been filled with anger from the day they were born, or when something undeservedly terrible has happened to them. These children are the ones who have nothing to lose by trying to destroy me.

(CHILD 1 enters, holding something behind her back)

CHILD 1

Come here, Witch.

DELPHINE

Leave at once!

CHILD 1

Oh, I'll leave. I wouldn't want to stay near your crummy house. But come here first.

Why?
DELPHINE

I have something for you.
CHILD 1

I don't accept gifts.
DELPHINE

It's not a gift.
CHILD 1

What is it?
DELPHINE

I have to show you. You have to come here.
CHILD 1

I don't have to do anything, child.
DELPHINE

You're a witch but you're so scared. I'm just a kid. And you're so scared of me. What's wrong with you?
CHILD 1

(pause)

If you stay on my grounds another moment, I'll lay a curse on you and your family.
DELPHINE

Go ahead. I have no family. You'd know that if you were a real witch. I live with my step-father and I hate him. I hate you too. So curse us. But I'd really like to give this to you first.
CHILD 1

(CHILD 1 starts walking toward Delphine. DELPHINE backs away.)

See how scared you are! You're so funny!

(DELPHINE stands still.)

I am not frightened. I just don't like to be near children.
DELPHINE

Hm. Well, maybe this will help keep the kids away.
CHILD 1

(CHILD 1 pulls out a bucket of poisonous chemicals from behind her back and throws it onto Delphine. DELPHINE screams and clutches at her neck)

Oh, I missed your face!

(DELPHINE keeps screaming)

This is all the apothecary gave me! Maybe another time then!

(CHILD 1 starts to leave)

I'll burn your face later!

(CHILD 1 runs off. DELPHINE walks to her house and wraps a large black scarf around her neck to the bottom of her chin.)

DELPHINE (out)

She's deformed me.

(pause)

My heart is a rock.

(pause)

And the rumors of curses, of spells—they become no longer rumors. Not all of them. I've seen witches with rocks as hearts and they are the witches I thought were born this way. Or who strove to become this way. Not witches who liked to dance with yellow flowing dresses and sleep in the sunlight of a cornfield.

(pause)

The children who terrorize me at night—I cast spells on them. The one who pours boiling water on me while I sleep—I give her a rash which burns her skin day and night. The one who breaks the legs of my cat—I give him feeble bones so he can no longer run. The ones who defecate on my caramel popcorn grass—I give them stomach pains every time they eat something sweet. This is not what spells are for, but it is what I must use them for now.

(pause)

When I hear that a child I've given knobbly knees has tripped and fallen over a cliff to his demise, his...death... I get sick in the back yard.

(pause)

I never smile at their misfortune, whether I cast it or not. I am sad for who I am.

(pause)

And I am so very lonely.

(HANSEL and GRETEL enter. They are older children, or teenagers, perhaps. They wear traditional fairy-tale outfits and maintain an other-worldly, sing-songy, air about them. Their speech is rhythmic. They smile almost all of the time.)

And then they come.

(HANSEL and GRETEL nibble at the candy house)

HANSEL

Delightful!

GRETEL
Wouldn't you say, Hansel?

HANSEL
Delightful!

GRETEL
Wouldn't you say!

(HANSEL and GRETEL eat more)

(DELPHINE peeks around the corner to watch them. She narrows her eyes and picks up her broom. She is puzzled that they eat with such earnestness, no fear.)

(DELPHINE pokes Gretel with her broom stick)

DELPHINE
Curses on you!

GRETEL
(she jumps back)
Oh, my!

HANSEL
A witch!

GRETEL
Wouldn't you say, Hansel!

HANSEL
A witch!

GRETEL
Wouldn't you say!

(pause.)

(DELPHINE looks them over. THEY stare back at her.)

DELPHINE
What's wrong with you?

GRETEL
Ever, it's not a secret. We're lost, we're lost, we're lost!

(pause)

DELPHINE

Do you think you have a right to eat someone's house?

HANSEL

It's your house!

GRETEL

Wouldn't you say, Hansel!

HANSEL

Your house!

GRETEL

Wouldn't you—

DELPHINE

Yes, yes, I live here. I'm a witch. You're correct.

HANSEL

What a hat you have!

GRETEL

Wouldn't [you say]—

DELPHINE

Okay. You're lost. Well, go find your home then. Curses on you. Be gone!

GRETEL

Curses...

HANSEL

Oh, curses...

GRETEL

Dear curses!

HANSEL

Oh, my!

(pause)

DELPHINE

Yes, well...maybe you've learned your lesson. What...town are you from? Maybe I can...maybe I can...direct you back?

Oh, I'm afraid not. GRETEL

What's the name of your home? DELPHINE

The name of our home, you ask? HANSEL

(quick pause)

The name of our home, she asks. GRETEL

(quick pause)

The name of our home? HANSEL

(quick pause)

The name of our home! GRETEL

(pause)

I'm not sure what's going on here. Do you know the name of your town or not? DELPHINE

Certainly not. HANSEL

Not. GRETEL

Not? HANSEL

Not. GRETEL

Not. HANSEL

Not. GRETEL

GRETEL/HANSEL

Not!

(DELPHINE stares at them for a moment, deliberating. HANSEL and GRETEL stare back at her, smiling.)

DELPHINE

You have not been to the village near this house?

HANSEL

Village?

GRETEL

No village.

HANSEL

No village.

GRETEL

No, no.

(DELPHINE nods)

DELPHINE

You must be in need of some proper food. You may have candy, of course. But let me serve you dinner. If I may. Roast pumpkin and cod fish?

HANSEL

Delightful!

GRETEL

Wouldn't you say, Hansel?

HANSEL

Delightful!

GRETEL

Wouldn't you say!

DELPHINE

Very well then.

(pause)

Come...inside.

(DELPHINE, HANSEL and GRETEL move to inside her house.)

DELPHINE (out)

I intend for them to stay for a few hours—perhaps the night, so that they may begin their journey again in the morning, under fresh sunlight. But...there is something about them...they are most definitely lost, but not only in the woods. They speak, sadly, of their father—how he is never around, and their step-mother, who berates them, who has numerous times tried to abandon them in the woods.

HANSEL (out)

We're two too many mouths to feed.

GRETEL (out)

We've two too many mouths!

DELPHINE (out)

I have pity on this strange pair. They don't seem to belong to this world. They're somehow in a story of their own.

(pause)

And so am I.

GRETEL

I've finished the cleaning, Miss Delphine.

DELPHINE

Thank you, Gretel.

HANSEL

I've finished the wood.

DELPHINE (out)

They want to stay on. They enjoy helping. Finding purpose amidst the house. I enjoy...having company, seeing their smiling faces. They never complain. They never argue, there's no deceit in them. They're pure. I sense this. It's a relief to me. To find this pureness again in children.

(to Hansel)

You're a dear, Hansel.

(HANSEL beams)

I try to shield them from the cruelty outside my gingerbread walls, so I take pains to keep them close, to only go out in the mornings, when the village children are having breakfast at home. They've experienced enough in their short lives, and we cling to each other. One morning, as we stroll along the brook, Gretel finds her own little treasure.

END OF EXCERPT

**For more information about *The Witch in the Gingerbread House* please visit:
<http://www.tameddaugh.com/the-witch-in-the-gingerbread-house>**