

CRITCH

By Judith Gorog

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AT THE FAR END OF THE VALLEY, just at the foot of the mountain, lived a witch so mean and crotchety that not a single bat, not even a black cat, would live with her. Spiders, who are the most tolerant of creatures, agreed to remain in her house only as long as she left them strictly alone.

Whenever she woke up, Critch snarled her hair, rubbed sleep into her eyes, put on her tall black hat, then her rusty, dusty, musty black gown. She clump, clump, clumped down the stairs with her shoes on the wrong feet.

In the kitchen she grumbled and complained as she got her breakfast. Her kettle never sang; her pot never bubbled merrily. All was murky gloom in the kitchen, just the way Critch liked it.

Just outside the messy courtyard of her messy cottage was a tumbledown shed, where Critch kept four sad hens. She rarely fed them, so they were thin and never laid even one egg. Critch didn't care. She got all her food through magic. At one time, long ago, she had known all her spells by heart, but now she often had to peer into her great black spell book before she could get anything to eat. No matter what the food was, Critch always complained.

A little bit past Critch's house lay a small forest. On the other side of the forest were tidy farms along a dusty road that led to a quiet village.

After her breakfast, Critch messed up her kitchen and her courtyard. Then, grumbling, she set off to work.

On Mondays she blew clouds of black soot on all the clean laundry that was hanging out to dry throughout the valley.

On Tuesdays she put knots in the wood, just where they would break the saw. Whoever was sawing wood for the fires that day would not finish in time for supper.

Critch broke many tools on Tuesdays. She broke the mill wheel so often on Tuesdays that the miller would have been disappointed if the wheel had indeed ground flour that day. He rather counted on a day spent gossiping with the blacksmith and the carpenter while they all fixed the mill wheel.

On Wednesdays, Critch made all the milk sour.

On Thursdays, she gave stomachache to all the babies, made all the children cranky, and put out all the cooking fires.

On Fridays, Critch made something different happen each week. She spent

hours reading spells to find just the right thing to do for Friday. One of her favorite spells was to put incredible snarls into the hair of all the schoolchildren. As mother or big sister or big brother combed and brushed, the snarls got worse. The combing hurt; the children wriggled and cried out. Someone was sure to get a smack, and sometimes, even before breakfast, Critch could get all the children in a family crying and angry, and mothers and fathers, too. All the grandparents and old aunts and uncles nodded and said, "Yes, it's the witch. She did it when we were children, too."

After a really good hair snarling, all the children would be late for school and miserable for the better part of the day. At home, the fathers and mothers would be in a bad mood for half the morning.

On a good day, Critch cackled over her dinner and fell into bed, smiling happily, to dream of what she would do on Saturday and Sunday.

Generally on Saturday Critch stuck close to the market in the village, making fresh eggs rotten. It was wonderful to hear all the angry customers return to the egg woman, demanding their money and calling her names.

Sometimes Critch would tickle a horse so that the black smith got a smart kick, or make a cow run crazy among the fruits and vegetables. But best of all, she liked to call up a great windstorm to tumble all the baskets, tables, and stalls. She blew great clouds of sand into the food. Sand got into everyone's eyes, mouths, ears, hair, and shoes. The sand stung when it hit your skin. After just half an hour of wind, everything was a mess. Market day was ruined. Critch enjoyed Saturdays.

Every Sunday, Critch tried to do something special. Sometimes she studied her spell book; sometimes she just had an inspiration. Passing the church one Sunday, Critch stopped awhile to study the peaceful scene. Everyone was inside the church. She could hear music and singing. Outside stood horses and wagons from every farm. Very quietly, she unhitched the horses and sent them home. Then, rapidly saying one spell after another, she made all the carts and wagons roll into the churchyard, then sent one wheel from each cart and wagon rolling down the hill away from the church. So many carts and wagons were jammed into the churchyard that it was nearly impossible to move. But, just to be sure that her wonderful idea would be a success, Critch said yet another spell to call into the churchyard all the carts and wagons from the village. Saying all those spells, and laughing to herself as she worked, had made Critch very tired, so she took a little nap under a bush near the churchyard while she waited for the people to come out of church.

Critch awoke, refreshed, to enjoy a splendid scene. It took them hours to find the wheels, put them back on the wagons, undo the wagon jam, bring the horses, hitch them to the wagons, and start for home. While the men and children tried to clean up the mess, the women had to walk home to make sure the dinner did not burn. For some it was a long, long walk. Critch loved the smell of burned food that hung over the valley that day. And because she wanted to provide absolutely equal

misery throughout the valley, Critch herself burned all the dinners in the village and in the farms near the church.

For six hundred years or so Critch had toiled and tormented, with great success. But slowly, almost before she noticed it, things began to change. Critch had not captured a child for her dinner in years. Indeed, she could not even successfully turn a child into a toad. She tried repeatedly at the pond beside the forest, where there were plenty of round-faced children with plump pink toes. Time and again she cast her toad spell on a child she surprised playing near the pond.

“Craw, Craw, Craw,” the old witch crowed, “turn that brat into a toad!” But every time, Critch screamed out with rage. Instead of a muddy brat turning into a plump green, yellow, or brown toad, Critch had turned a perfectly fine toad into yet another brat. At the sound of Critch’s scream, all the children raced home.

Soon the farm families grew accustomed to these extra children. Because there was food, work, and love enough to go around, the new arrivals were welcomed, even though they looked different. Most of the farm children were blond; the “magic pond” children often had green eyes and brown or black or even red hair. Nevertheless, they ran home to supper with their new brothers and sisters and found a place to sleep in the loft, and a name as well. Meanwhile Critch stomped home to grind her stubby teeth and pore over her spell book in the smoky gloom of her kitchen.

As the years passed, more and more of Critch’s spells went awry. One bright morning she decided it would be wonderful to have a flood. She wanted miles of mud, houses floating down the valley, clothes, books, and blankets ruined, the stink of rotten crops in the fields.

“M-m-m-m,” Critch grinned, “it sounds delicious.” Critch smacked her lips as she called her broom to take her over the forest and farms. She had pored over her spell book half the night to get the spell just right. Now she repeated it to herself as she flew, just so she would not forget it. Critch began with a spell for heavy showers. And indeed, it began to rain.

But, it did not rain water! It rained flowers.

“No!” yelled Critch, “Not flowers! Showers! Water! Mud!” But she could not change the spell. Blossoms of every color fell from sunny skies. Flowers filled the roads and farmyards. Everyone went out to see. Critch kept repeating the curse, and as she spoke, more flowers fell. The children had blossom fights. The bees made more honey than ever before. There were mountains of flowers. At first the farmers and villagers just stood scratching their whiskers, and watching. Then they got out their biggest cooking pots, sent the children to gather the flowers, and began to make gallons of sweet-smelling perfume.

While Critch sulked, the people of the valley rejoiced at their good fortune.

There were quantities of honey and perfume to trade at the great market in the city. The valley had a celebration, with dances and games and prizes for everyone. Critch stayed home.

Finally, Critch flew off to see the witch doctor. “Why dearie,” he crooned. “You merely need spectacles. We are all getting on in years, you know. I wear them myself.”

Critch was amazed. It was all so simple. Once she got home, she went straight to her spell book and began to read with glee.

“Now I can do something special. Hm-m-m-m. fire, flood, earthquake, perhaps a volcano in the village square. Heeeee, heeee, hee.” As she read, Critch fell asleep to dream happily of all the damage she could do. But in the morning Critch discovered she had mislaid her spectacles. Try as she might, she could not find them. She tried a few spells from memory; nothing worked, not even breakfast. Her day was ruined. For weeks she grew gloomier and gloomier. Critch spent most of her time looking for her spectacles and fell behind in her work. She tried calling them with a spell, but instead of coming to her, the spectacles all too often went to the top ledge of the hen house and set the hens to clucking.

Just when she was most miserable, Critch had a marvelous piece of good luck. She was near the forest when it happened. As she was walking along, Critch stumbled. She tried to catch herself, but failed. Down she fell, onto something soft. Critch grabbed the something, then peered closely at it. Critch could not believe her eyes. It was a seven-year-old child, with long black braids. Critch had stumbled over the child asleep on the soft green grass near a blackberry patch. Holding the nasty thing by the neck, Critch stood up. Two full berry baskets were on the grass at her feet. The child’s face and hands were stained with blackberry juice. Overjoyed, Critch tied up the girl, threw her over her shoulder and started for home.

Maydee, for that was the child’s name, did not weep, nor struggle, nor try to cry out. She merely opened her great green eyes and looked and looked. She made Critch feel uneasy. That girl made Critch feel so uneasy that Critch nearly ate her on the spot. But Critch had a plan. Hungry as she was, Critch smiled and muttered to herself. “This farm brat can find my glasses. Then I can either fatten her up to eat, or find that spell to get myself another, more appetizing, child for supper. Once I can keep those spectacles where they belong, I can cast all my spells. Oh, everything will be dandy.”

Skinny as she was, Maydee was heavy, and Critch was tired when they reached the kitchen. Critch tied a rope to the girl’s neck. “Find my spectacles,” she snarled in her meanest witch voice.

Maydee silently handed Critch the spectacles, which had been on the table near the big black book.

“Oh,” said Critch, and put them on her long bony nose. She leaned over the

book to find a spell for dinner. Before Critch could read two lines, she had fallen asleep.

Maydee, who was clever, brave, and terribly curious, immediately realized that Critch was a witch. She had listened carefully to Critch's muttering and had observed the path as they came to Critch's house. Maydee could have run home, but she did not. Instead, she took the rope from her neck and tiptoed over to Critch. Carefully, slowly, she slid the big black book from under Critch's snoring head. Quietly she crept close to the fire so that she could read. Maydee opened the book and turned the pages, her eye fell upon a spell for transporting people or things from one place to another. It was almost as if the book had turned itself to that page. Looking at Critch, Maydee repeated the spell. Zap! Critch was gone. Putting down the book, Maydee raced upstairs. There was Critch, snoring loudly, completely entwined in the covers of the messiest bed Maydee had ever seen.

Maydee returned to the kitchen, where she read spell after spell until she became very hungry. Immediately the pages of the book seemed to flutter in her hands, and she found all she needed for dinner. Maydee was having such a wonderful time that she never got even the least bit sleepy. Finally, she put down the spell book and began to explore the house and courtyard. She returned to the book now and then for the spells she needed. When the sun came up, she washed her face and hands, brushed her teeth, combed and braided her hair, then made breakfast.

After breakfast she thought for a while; then she wrote a letter to her mother and carried it down the hill to the road, where she met a goatherd on his way to pasture. He promised to give the letter to her mother that night when he returned with the goats. Maydee had written: "Dear Mama and Papa, I will be home in a few days. I am helping an old lady find her glasses. Love, Maydee." Maydee crossed her fingers. It was not exactly a lie, but . . . well, she just had to read more of that book.

Critch awoke with a start. Sun was in her eyes. She sat up in her bed, then got out on the wrong side, as was her custom. She messed up her hair, then clomped down the stairs. Something was wrong. What was it?

Well, everything was wrong, that's what. In the kitchen Critch couldn't see a thing. She squinted. Maydee handed Critch her spectacles. Sunlight. There was bright sunlight everywhere. The kettle was polished and sang on the hearth. The kitchen smelled of porridge, and the table had—what? flowers on it. Critch was outraged and hurled her spectacles to the floor.

"What is this mess!" she bellowed at Maydee.

"I made breakfast," said Maydee as she led Critch to the chair. "The porridge is for me. I made some witches' food for you, but there is porridge if you'd like to try it." She handed Critch a cup of something hot, black, and wonderfully bitter.

"What is this?" demanded Critch.

"Coffee," said Maydee.

"Oh," said Critch.

After breakfast Critch stumbled out into the courtyard muttering, "I'll eat that girl for lunch. What a mess she has made of my cozy kitchen."

But the sight of the courtyard made Critch stop dead. "Great gobs of glop!" she yelled. "Bring my spectacles." Maydee brought the spectacles. Critch put them on and looked in amazement at the courtyard. It had a green tree in the corner, and flowers along the edge. The courtyard was neatly swept. Beneath the tree was a bench. That was not all.

"What is that racket?" screamed Critch.

"The chickens are laying eggs," said Maydee calmly.

"They should lay rabbits," snarled Critch. As she spoke six baby rabbits hopped out of the hen house. Critch looked again; the hen house was straight, tidy, perhaps even freshly painted.

"Oh, no," she moaned as she sank onto the bench. It was all too much to bear.

She took off the spectacles so that she wouldn't have to see any more.

Maydee stroked a baby rabbit and looked at Critch with her great green eyes. Then Maydee put down the rabbit and went into the kitchen. The rabbit took one look at Critch, then followed Maydee.

"Go home, girl. I don't even want to eat you. I'd get indigestion," moaned Critch. "Go home. I won't even eat your little brothers and sisters. I won't have anything to do with children. Just leave me. You have ruined my house, my hen house, my courtyard," Critch wailed.

Maydee came out of the house and stood in front of her, saying nothing. Silently, she brought her hand from behind her back. Critch jumped.

"My pipe! I haven't been able to find it in years. Where was it?"

"Over the kitchen hearth," said Maydee.

"Dear old pipe," said Critch.

Like all good children in those days, Maydee know how to clean and fill a pipe, and how to light it with a twig from the kitchen fire. Critch hated children, especially good children, but she loved her pipe. She took it, drew on it, and closed her eyes. What joy.

When she opened them, Maydee was sitting at her feet on a little stool, shelling green peas. Critch grumbled and complained. Then, slowly, she began to tell Maydee about being a witch, about the good old bad old days, about all the wicked spells, about all the mischief, about sending swarm of bees into the village to sting everyone. Critch chuckled "That was a terrific spell. If I had my spectacles I could read it. I don't remember how it goes."

Maydee once again handed Critch the spectacles "Oh well, I'll just finish my pipe first," said Critch.

After the pipe Critch went inside, read in her book, then set off for the village.

What a good idea she had. She would fill the village with a swarm of skunks. She chuckled and muttered to herself, “What a fine sight. What a fine smell.”

Chattering and laughing, Critch approached the village and said her spell, then waited expectantly. Commotion in the village. Critch went closer for a better look. The streets were full. Full of swarms of—of—monks!

“No, no, not monks, skunks!” Critch wailed. She was sure she had got the spell right. It couldn’t fail! Yet there were dozens of brown-robed monks, all looking bewildered, crowding the streets of the village. The people came out of their houses and shops and began to talk with the monks. The amazed villagers kindly offered the monks food and shelter until the monks could figure out where they were and how to get back home again. In exchange the monks offered to teach the villagers a secret only they knew. These monks knew how to make special, very delicious cheeses. The village was full of happy conversation. Critch was full of fury. She clenched her fists, muttered, then turned around one hundred times, spat, and clumped away dizzily toward home. She couldn’t even fly.

Critch walked along the dusty road, deep in gloom. From a distance, she heard a young man singing. A wagon approached, driven by a young farmer with a fine black moustache and sparkling blue eyes. Singing merrily, he drove his lively team of fat gray horses.

“Good afternoon, granny,” he said politely to Critch.

Critch was beside herself. “Fool! Lout!” she snarled. Couldn’t he see that she was a witch? He and his horses should be terrified. Critch muttered a long-forgotten curse, “Fie, fie, fie, put a cinder in your eye!” As she spoke the poor farmer pulled up his team and grabbed at his eye in excruciating pain. Tears streamed down his face, but still the cinder Critch had put into his eye hurt like fire. Satisfied, Critch walked on.

But as she turned back to gloat at the young farmer’s pain, a pretty young woman came out of the courtyard of a nearby farm. In her hand was a snow-white handkerchief. Gently, she removed the cinder from the young man’s eye, then led him to the courtyard, where she gave him a cool drink of water and a tender smile. Before long, the two were happily conversing. Their faces showed how glad they were to have found one another.

It was too much for Critch. She went home and sulked for days.

Maydee was helpful. Too helpful. She got Critch a pair of spectacles on a long silver chain. She sewed Critch a pocket to hold the other pair of spectacles. Still, the spells did not work as they should.

And Critch found the child so very strange.

One night after dinner Maydee took a kettle from the fire and filled a tub with warm water and sweet-smelling soap. Critch looked at Maydee with real wonder. What a mysterious child!

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“I’m going to take a bath,” said Maydee, with a smile. She looked at Critch with those great green eyes and did not blink once.

“Aug-g-gh!” shuddered Critch. “A bath! How disgusting That is really too much. A bath! How horrible!” Critch turned, left the kitchen, and stomped up the stairs to bed shuddering and muttering in horror.

At first Critch yelled at Maydee all the time. She snarled and whined. Nearly every day she told Maydee what a mess Maydee had made of her cozy house, of her cozy life. “Go home,” said Critch at least once a day.

But Maydee stayed.

At last Critch stopped yelling. She grew sad. She ignored the big black spell book. She did not even go to the village or to the farms. The missing spectacles and the mis-spells had discouraged her. Critch had stopped trying. She was thinking. One day she called Maydee.

“You won’t leave, so I will. My spells don’t work. My house is disgusting. You aren’t even afraid of me. No one is afraid of me. I am leaving.”

Now Maydee looked sad, which made Critch feel better. Critch went outside to smoke her pipe.

As Critch sat there smoking, a great black cloud covered the sun. A foul-smelling wind blew the dust of the courtyard into hundreds of swirls. Suddenly a black figure stood before Critch. It was Hagatha-Bagatha, one of the oldest, meanest witches of them all.

“Hagatha!” Critch shouted. “I’ve not seen you in three hundred years. How are you?”

“Well,” said Hagatha, as she settled herself on the bench beside Critch. “I’m surprised to see you still here.”

Critch grunted.

“Critch,” said Hagatha, “I’ve been traveling for a long time now. Everywhere it is the same. Very few witches are left anywhere these days. The age of witches is past.” She shook her head, then lit her pipe. “Most witches are gone. Did you know that people no longer believe in us? No one is afraid. The powers of witches are diminished or completely gone. It is a distressing state of affairs.” She puffed in silence for a few minutes.

Critch nodded. “So that is what is happening. I thought it was just me. I have been miserable these last years.” She told Hagatha of her mis-spells. “I’m planning to leave, myself,” she concluded

Silently, the two old witches smoked their pipes.

Suddenly, Hagatha stood up and put on her hat. "I must fly," she said.

"No!" Critch shouted. "Have some coffee. It is a wonderful, bitter witch's brew Maydee makes for me. Then stay for dinner. Maydee can cook; even though it is not real witch's food, it is good. I must warn you, though. She cannot make a bed. It is dreadful—all smooth and white. I must stomp on mine every day for twenty minutes or so to get it right before I can go to sleep. Hagatha, do stay. I haven't had witch conversation in ages. Even though your news is bad, at least now I understand what is happening. Maybe you and I can figure out something to do together."

Hagatha looked thoughtful.

"Maydee!" yelled Critch. Critch never knew where Maydee had been, but Maydee always appeared when Critch called. Except now. "Maydee! Come here!" yelled Critch once more, louder.

"Maydee?" said Hagatha. "That's a funny name for a witch."

"She's no witch," said Critch, and told Hagatha how she had captured Maydee

"Of course, she's a witch," snapped Hagatha. "Critch, not only your eyes are bad! I saw her by the gate as I came in, and thought how lucky you are to have a little witch for company."

"But Maydee is good," whined Critch.

"Well," said Hagatha. "You've got to expect such things. Besides, I could tell. She is not dull and good; she is just not evil and wicked. But she is definitely a witch. Indeed, she may even have had something to do with your mis-spells during the time she has been with you. Some of them sound almost like jokes."

"Really?" said Critch, thinking hard. "Maydee!"

No answer. Critch went into the house.

The kitchen was dark and gloomy. There was no fire in the hearth to warm the room. Critch went back outside. The hen house was silent and tumbled down. Maydee was gone. And, she had changed everything back to the way it was before she came. Two salty tears trembled down alongside Critch's long bony nose. "She has run away."

"Come on," said Hagatha.

Critch and Hagatha flew over the farms. No Maydee. They searched the town. No Maydee.

It was after midnight when they found her, halfway up the mountain, deep in the forest, asleep beneath a tree. In her arms Maydee held a coal-black kitten, which spat and arched its back at Critch and Hagatha.

Gently, Critch touched Maydee on the arm.

The child awoke and looked at them both with her great green eyes. She stroked the kitten to calm it.

"Come home," said Critch as crossly as she could. "We are very hungry, and only you can get the right spells for dinner and coffee." Critch paused. "Please."

"Where did you get the kitten?" asked Hagatha almost kindly.

“I was lonely,” said Maydee, “so I said a spell to get her”

They all flew home.

In a twinkling Maydee had the kitchen bright with light from the hearth and filled with the fine smell of dinner.

Maydee sat with her black kitten in her lap as she listened to Critch and Hagatha tell horrible, creepy, scary tales until dawn. Then the old witches went upstairs when the beds were too smooth and clean for them, so they spent some time getting things just right. Once in bed, they fell into a deep, rumbling, snoring slumber.

After the two old witches had gone to sleep, Maydee whispered a few words; a tub of hot water appeared. Maydee sang softly as she took a bath.

Afterward she put on her nightgown and crept contentedly into her clean, smooth little bed. As she closed her eyes she could feel upon her forehead the soft kiss her farm mother always gave each child before it fell asleep

Maydee awoke just as the sun peered into the courtyard. Singing to herself, she made breakfast and fed the kitten, who purred and rubbed against Maydee’s legs. She tidied the kitchen. Then she and the kitten went into the courtyard with the big black book.

Maydee was reading about the plants witches use to cure sores, to make teas that stop headache, and about the plants that are good to eat, and those that are dangerous. The book seemed to be endless.

Maydee heard a traveler passing on the road. She ran out and asked him to deliver a message to her parents’ farm.

It was afternoon before Critch and Hagatha awoke. “What’s that noise?” they asked each other. Looking outside, they saw children playing with the black kitten in the courtyard. Slowly, holding steaming mugs of coffee and blinking in the sunlight, the two old witches emerged from the house.

Maydee introduced her brothers and sisters from the farm. Critch and Hagatha gave the children their best vinegary smiles and sat down on the bench.

“Will you please tell us some of your scary stories?” asked the children politely.

And so the years passed. Critch and Hagatha became famous far and wide for the endless, fascinating, chilling tales they could tell. They were invited to every gathering in the valley, and people came from miles away to sit in their courtyard and hear a tale or two more.

Maydee’s black kitten grew into a cat, tall and muscular, who always remembered to arch his back and spit whenever the old witches came near.