

## THE ENTRANCE EXAM

By Mary Carey

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*If at first you don't succeed,  
just keep plaguing them.*

Kate Fotheringay sat in the office of the headmistress of Miss Perkle's School for Young Gentlewomen. She sat in the third largest chair. The headmistress, Miss Perkle herself, sat behind a huge and dusty desk in a chair that was almost a throne. This, thought Kate, was only proper. A headmistress was a headmistress, and Miss Perkle was a very old lady who had earned the right to the biggest chair.

She was indeed old; though how old no one knew. Kate wondered for a moment whether she might once have lived in a castle way back in the Middle Ages. Perhaps she had seen the fall of the Roman Empire. Or watched as the first stones were laid for the Tower of London. Had she really come to America on the *Mayflower*, as Kate's mother said? Had she really been at Salem when the witches were hung?

No matter. She was a lovely old lady with dandelion white hair and wrinkled, pink cheeks. Her office was lovely, too. A black cat snoozed in a basket near the file cabinet. A stuffed monkey sat on top of the bookcase. There was a crystal ball on the windowsill and a hollowed-out skull on the desk. The skull contained Miss Perkle's supply of paper clips.

The school was wonderful beyond Kate's dreams.

Kate and her mother had driven out from town on Cemetery Road. It was a narrow, twisting lane that wound through a grove of oak trees. Then it passed the old graveyard where headstones leaned toward each other as if they were whispering secrets. Across from the cemetery was the school, a soot-stained, ivy covered stone building. It smelled of age and cobwebs and dust, with just a faint hint of mice.

Kate and her mother had waited in the ebony parlor until Miss Perkle could see them. Even the walls in the parlor were black, and the heavy curtains were drawn so that not the tiniest ray of sunlight could enter. A single candle burned on the table, and in the gloom Kate could barely see the pictures on the walls. They were all portraits of women. Kate knew that most of them were very old. She also knew that all of the women had been witches.

It wasn't known in the town, of course, but all graduates of Miss Perkle's School were witches. Kate's mother was a witch. And Kate would be a witch, too. Miss Perkle would see to it. The townspeople only knew that Miss Perkle's School was very, very private and that not many girls were admitted. But Kate knew that witchcraft was what Miss Perkle and her very private school were all about.

When at last Kate and her mother had been summoned from the gloom of the ebony parlor, Kate sat in Miss Perkle's office and watched Miss Perkle open a big book with parchment pages. "How old is the child?" Miss Perkle asked. Her voice was like the rustle of dry leaves.

"Almost ten," said Kate's mother.

"Excellent," said Miss Perkle. She wrote it down with a quill pen. Then she stared at Kate through her square, old-fashioned glasses. "You look clever enough," she said. "Are you clever, Katherine?"

"Yes, Miss Perkle," said Kate. She wasn't bragging. It was the simple truth. Kate was at the head of her class. She knew arithmetic and astronomy and English literature and ancient history and lots of other things besides.

Her mother handed an envelope to Miss Perkle. "Here are Kate's records from the public school," she said. "I've saved all her report cards."

Miss Perkle tumbled the cards out onto her desk. She glanced at them and nodded. Then she wrote again in her big book. The quill pen scratched nicely. Kate liked the sound. The principal at the public school wrote with a ball-point that didn't make any noise at all.

"So far so good," said Miss Perkle. "Now there is a matter of the entrance examination. As you know, Miss Perkle's School is an unusual one. We cannot rely on ordinary records or on ordinary accomplishments. Katherine must have at least a

smattering of Greek. Some fine spells come to us from the Greeks. And she should know Latin. Several of our courses are given entirely in Latin."

"She'll pass the exam," said Kate's mother. "I've been tutoring her at home."

"Very well," said Miss Perkle. "We will schedule the examination for her birthday. When is her birthday?"

Kate's mother paused. "It's ... it's sometime next month. About the fifteenth, I think."

"You think?" echoed Miss Perkle. She laid her quill pen down and looked sternly at Mrs. Fotheringay. "Surely you know your own child's birthday."

"Not... not precisely," said Kate's mother.

"Abigail Constance Murdock Fotheringay!" cried Miss Perkle. When she used all of Kate's mother's names, she sounded quite threatening. "You were a brilliant student. Has your brain turned to oatmeal? You cannot have forgotten the day Katherine was born!"

Mrs. Fotheringay looked down at her own hands. "I wasn't there the day she was born," she said, very softly. "Miss Perkle, Kate is truly gifted. I know the rule that"

Miss Perkle interrupted. "That all young ladies admitted to the school are the daughters of graduates, or at very least their granddaughters. Are you telling me that Katherine is not your daughter?"

"But she is my daughter!" cried Mrs. Fotheringay. "I took her in when she was a tiny baby. I raised her and loved her. If I'm not her mother, who is?"

"I am sure I do not know," said Miss Perkle. She stood up and shut her big book with a clap. "Katherine is not related to you by blood. We accept only those whose mothers or grandmothers have studied with us. A rule is a rule, and we make no exceptions."

"Miss Perkle, please," said Kate's mother.

"Adoption does not count!" snapped Miss Perkle.

Kate decided that Miss Perkle was not a pretty old lady after all. Kate wished she could turn Miss Perkle into a toadstool-an ugly, yellow toadstool with red speckles.

"Don't be silly, child," snapped Miss Perkle, although Kate hadn't said a word. "You cannot turn me into a toadstool. You are not a witch. You are only an ordinary little girl who makes good marks in school."

Suddenly the door banged open and a plump, round faced woman bounced into the office. She was completely out of breath. "Miss Perkle!" The newcomer waved a folded newspaper. "The most terrible thing! On the second page! The paper just came!"

Miss Perkle took the newspaper and opened it. After she read for a moment, her pink, wrinkled cheeks turned ashy white. She looked up from the paper and her eyes were wide and staring.

"Miss Perkle?" said Kate's mother. "What is it?"

Miss Perkle folded the newspaper and put it down on her desk. "The mayor wishes to straighten and widen Cemetery Road," she said. "He intends to ask the town council to condemn our property and tear down our school to make way for this project."

"Oh, no!" cried Kate's mother.

"Please excuse me, Abigail," said Miss Perkle. "I must go and see the mayor."

"But Miss Perkle, about Kate ..."

Miss Perkle shook her head. "We will not discuss the matter further. I have important things to do. I am going into town now."

She did go, leaving Mrs. Fotheringay and Kate in the office.

They drove slowly home along the narrow, twisting road. Mrs. Fotheringay did not talk. Kate cried.

There was another story in the newspaper the next day. It said the mayor wanted Miss Perkle to be paid for her property. It said she could move her school into a new building nearer town. There was a picture above the story showing the mayor sitting behind his desk. He was smiling. At least, he was trying to smile.

"He's got lots of warts," said Kate to her mother.

"I can guess how he got them," said Mrs. Fotheringay. "Miss Perkle was always very good at warts. But it looks as if a few warts aren't going to save the school. Sounds as if the mayor's sticking to his guns."

The next week the members of the town council voted. They approved the new road. They condemned Miss Perkle's School. No sooner had the councilmen voted than one of them came down with chicken pox, in spite of the fact that he had had chicken pox once before. Another council member fell down his cellar stairs and fractured his arm in two places. Soon after that, a third councilman ran out of his house at mid night, screaming that the place was suddenly full of bats.

"Miss Perkle and her teachers are doing their worst," said Mrs. Fotheringay.

But the worst was not bad enough. The council did not change its vote and the mayor did not change his mind.

"Maybe Miss Perkle will like a new building," said Kate.

Her mother sighed. "It would never be the same. Everyone who ever went to Miss Perkle's loves the place.

"Kate, do you know that some of the cobwebs there are two hundred years old? And there are toadstools in the basement and wolfbane in the herb garden out back. It would take years to replace those cobwebs and grow new toadstools. It would take centuries!"

"Well, they won't let me in anyway, so who cares?" said Kate.

But Kate did care. She cared enough to be there with her mother when the bulldozers appeared on Cemetery Road. There was to be quite a fuss about fixing the road. The mayor himself was to dig the first spadeful of earth before the bulldozers started tearing up the old roadway to make way for the new.

The members of the town council came for the ceremony. One of them had bright-green hair, and quite naturally he kept his hat on. The newspaper reporters were there and so was a crew from the television station. Some townspeople were there, and so was each and every teacher and student from Miss Perkle's School. Miss Perkle held her head high, but her lips trembled, and her eyes were red. She had been weeping.

A brass band took its place before the bulldozers and played a brave tune. The television camera focused on the mayor. The mayor bent, and the spade in his extremely warty hand touched the stony surface of the old road.

Suddenly Kate found herself wriggling through the crowd. In a second she was past the members of the town council and the television crew and the news papermen. She was beside the mayor.

He smiled a false smile at her. "Out of the way, little girl," he said.

Kate said something—no one heard quite what and she made a little motion with her hand. Then she turned and walked back through the crowd, back to her mother's side.

The mayor bent again to his digging. His spade broke through the rutted surface. And suddenly, from that break, something green appeared—something green and thorny that grew and grew and grew.

The mayor shouted and leaped backward as the prickly vine caught at his clothes.

The television crew retreated hastily, taking their camera down the road. A long way down the road.

A burly operator who had been waiting on his bulldozer stared for a moment at the giant briar that now blocked the roadway, then he shouted, "Hey! What the heck?" and his machine roared and rumbled at the magical plant.

An instant later the vine had surrounded the machine. It seemed to gobble it up. The bulldozer operator ran for his life.

And so did the mayor.

And the councilmen.

So did the newspapermen and the townspeople.

So did everyone except Miss Perkle and her teachers and students. And of course, Kate and her mother.

"They won't widen the road," said Kate to Miss Perkle. "And they won't tear down the school, either."

She made another motion with her hand and the spiny, thorny, prickly vine withered and shriveled and dried up and blew away, leaving the road empty except for the bulldozers.

Miss Perkle looked extremely alarmed.

"Don't worry," said Kate. "The vine will grow again any time they try to work on the road."

"My dear child," said Miss Perkle, "how on earth do you do that? All of us excel at causing warts and summoning bats and making things fall down or fly up, but never, not since the days of the famous witch Hephzibah Carew, have we been able to cause the magic thorn tree to grow. Where did you learn that marvelous spell?"

"I'm not sure," said Kate. "I think I heard it once in a dream."

They all walked back then, along the narrow, twisting old road to the school. And Miss Perkle and Kate and her mother had tea in the ebony parlor, where the portraits

of the famous old graduates looked down from their frames and the drapes were drawn against the sun and a single candle burned on the table.

"Kate does have power, you see," said Kate's mother. "I tried to tell you. Even if she is a foundling and we don't know who her real mother is, she has power."

"A foundling?" said Miss Perkle.

"Left on my doorstep," admitted Kate's mother. "She was only a tiny thing. But she has power, even if she isn't descended from a graduate."

Miss Perkle looked puzzled. Could an ordinary child be a real witch? Then Miss Perkle looked over her shoulder at one of the dim old pictures that hung on the dark wall. And Miss Perkle took the candle from the table and held it up next to the picture. She looked at the painted face and the painted face looked back at her. It was like looking at a picture of Kate. The girl in the painting was older, of course, but unmistakably like Kate.

"Of course," said Miss Perkle. "I should have noticed. Kate is not an ordinary child. She is without any doubt the descendant of Hephzibah Carew, our most brilliant graduate. The resemblance is striking, and she does have the power."

"Not always," admitted Kate. "Once the Phelps kid swiped my roller skates and I tried to turn him into a frog. It didn't work."

"No?" said Miss Perkle.

"No. He turned into a bumblebee and stung me."

"Never mind." Miss Perkle put the candle back on the table. "You're young. Wait until you've finished your education and are a proper witch with a proper diploma."

"Then you'll take me?" cried Kate.

"You may begin classes on Monday," said Miss Perkle.

Kate looked happily around the ebony walls. She thought of the collection of antique cobwebs, and the herb garden with its wolfbane, and the cellar jammed with delightful toadstools. Then she thought of something else.

"What about the entrance exam?" she asked.

"Dear Katherine," said Miss Perkle. "Do not worry your head about an entrance exam. You have already passed it."