

Mrs Hotchkiss

LAST night my son asked me for advice and it took me back many years to my childhood and Mrs Hotchkiss.

Mrs Hotchkiss lived at the far end of the village in a long, shabby caravan in the field behind the old post office. She had lived there ever since I could then remember. She seemed old, but now I know she wasn't even forty. This was when I was very young and saw everything through a young boy's eyes. Mrs Hotchkiss lived alone and had a cat, a ginger tom.

If there was a Mr Hotchkiss, we never saw him. Her first name was Brenda, but we always called her Mrs Hotchkiss. You didn't call grown-ups by their first name, not in those days. She had jet-black hair that surely came from a bottle, and she was very friendly, nicer to us than many of the other grown-ups in the village. They complained about us to our parents, but she invited us into her caravan for a biscuit and a glass of pop and made us laugh. She let us walk through her garden when we came up from the woods to go home. It wasn't a real garden. It was just a piece of the field fenced off by a low, broken lattice fence, with great tufts of grass and bits of junk here and there. On one side, Mrs Hotchkiss or someone who lived in the caravan before her had started a vegetable patch. Nothing was growing there, but a frame for runner beans to climb up was still standing. Sometimes she worked in the village shop by the church. When she didn't I suppose she had a job in Ravenham like most folk in the village if they didn't work at the local cider factory, because on the way to school we sometimes saw her waiting at the bus shelter.

We liked Mrs Hotchkiss. We liked most people unless we had a reason not to like them. We didn't like Mr Watson and his wife who ran the pub because they wouldn't let us in and made us sit outside if we went to buy pop and crisps. We didn't like the vicar because he didn't like us except my friend Ian. He was always stopping and talking to Ian and smoothing his hair, and Ian said the vicar gave him the creeps. But we liked Mrs Hotchkiss, and when Mandy Loveridge told us her mum said Mrs Hotchkiss was a witch, we were really surprised.

'How does she know?'

'I heard her telling my dad to keep away from that witch.'

'Is she a good witch or a bad witch?'

'Thought all witches were bad.'

'Not all of them, some are good witches and do good things.'

'I don't know. That's all she said.'

After that we wondered whether Mrs Hotchkiss was a good witch or a bad witch. I said she was a good witch because she was nice to us. Robert said she must be a bad witch because she had black hair.

‘But her cat isn’t black. If she was a bad witch she’d have a black cat.’

‘How do you know about witches?’

‘Everyone knows about witches.’

‘Maybe good witches have a cat but it’s not black. That’s why she’s got a ginger cat.’

That made sense. We decided Mrs Hotchkiss was a good witch.

‘Does that mean she can do magic?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘What kind of magic do good witches do?’

‘They cure people. If you’ve got something they give you a potion and it cures you.’

‘Instead of going to the doctor? Why don’t they go to the doctor?’

‘Maybe it’s a disease doctors can’t cure. That’s why you go to a good witch to get a potion.’

Mandy didn’t know what a potion was.

‘It’s all kinds of stuff boiled up.’

‘What kind of stuff?’

‘Toads and berries and stuff from the hedges, stinging nettles, that kind of stuff. You boil it all up and say spells and it turns into a potion that can cure you.’

‘And Mrs Hotchkiss does that?’

‘I suppose she does.’

‘What do bad witches do?’

‘They make potions, too, but they want to harm you. They use different spells and make poisonous potions.’

Ian wasn’t convinced.

‘She might be a clever bad witch pretending to be a good witch. That’s why she’s got a ginger cat not a black one. So no one will suspect.’

Down the lane Mrs Loveridge called Ian and Mandy home to tea.

‘Ask your mum how she knows Mrs Hotchkiss is a witch, Mandy.’

When I got home, I asked my mum if Mrs Hotchkiss was a witch.

‘I wouldn’t be surprised.’

‘So she is?’

‘Come on, you’ve got better things to do, tea’ll be ready in a bit.’

That night I heard my mum and dad arguing in the room next door where they slept. They were whispering, but you could tell they were arguing. They argued a lot. The next day my mum told me my dad didn’t want me to see Mrs Hotchkiss any more.

‘Is that because she’s a witch?’

‘She’s not a witch, she’s just not a very nice person.’

‘She’s nice to us.’

‘Doesn’t matter, Dad doesn’t want you seeing her any more.’

‘What’s she done?’

But my mum didn’t answer. She suddenly left the kitchen and I saw she was about to start crying.

It’s a big thing for a child to see their parents cry. I don’t suppose you forget the first time you see it. I only saw my dad cry once, when he was 62 and the cancer was hurting him too much, and he died a few weeks later. I saw my mum cry a few times more, but that was the first time and it was odd. Your mum and dad are these two people who can do everything, anything, sort everything out and you can’t think they can’t. They are not like everyone else.

I heard my mum go upstairs and into the bathroom. When she came downstairs, she came back to the kitchen and kissed me on the top of my head.

‘Hurry up, you’ll be late for school.’

‘You all right, Mum?’

She said nothing.

A few weeks later there was trouble at Mrs Hotchkiss’s caravan one night. I was lying in bed and only heard a lot of yelling and shouting and banging. The next day in the playground Ian told me the police had arrested Mrs Hotchkiss.

‘Why?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘Who told you?’

'I heard Miss Gilchrist tell Mrs Olszowski.'

'Was it because she's a witch?'

'Don't know.'

After school and before going home, Ian and I walked to the end of the village to Mrs Hotchkiss's caravan. She was sitting outside on a stool in the sun, smoking a cigarette. The door to her caravan had a huge dent. We stayed in the road

'Have you come for a glass of pop?'

'Mum says we can't see you any more.'

'Why not?'

'She says Dad says we can't.'

'The little shit.'

I was shocked. I've since heard worse, far worse, but I was young then and saw everything through a young boy's eyes. She had been rude, very rude, about my dad.

'Did the police arrest you yesterday?'

'No, Ian, they didn't. Who says they did?'

'I heard Miss Gilchrist tell Mrs Olszowski at school.'

'Ah those two clucking hens, never happy unless there's scandal.'

In those days I didn't know what scandal meant, but I remember Mrs Hotchkiss using a word I'd never heard before.

'You mustn't believe everything people say, my loves, in fact I wouldn't believe anything anyone says, it's usually just a lot of lies. Are you sure you don't want a glass of pop and a biscuit?'

'Mum says I can't see you.'

'Well, you're here now.'

'Yes, but . . .'

'She'll tell you off anyway, so you might as well have a glass of pop and a biscuit.'

'Please, Mrs Hotchkiss . . .'

'Oh, all right, I don't want you getting into trouble. You'd better go home for your tea. And say hello to your dads from me will you?'

Then Mrs Hotchkiss burst out laughing.

When I got home, Mum told me Dad had gone to visit my gran. I knew something was wrong, I could tell, but I didn't want to ask Mum. She didn't say much else and after tea she told me to go out and play. I went round to Ian and Mandy's up the road. But they weren't home. Mr Loveridge answered the door. He had a big bruise on his forehead and was drunk. I'd seen him drunk before, lots of times, so I knew he was drunk.

'Ian and Mandy in?'

'They're not here. They've gone.'

'Oh.'

'Yes, oh.' Mr Loveridge shut the door. I started going home again, but saw a police car up the road at Mrs Hotchkiss's caravan and went to take a look. I waited on the road for a few minutes, then a constable came out of the caravan and began to walk to his car.

'All right, laddie?'

'Was Mrs Hotchkiss arrested?'

'Who says that?'

'Was she arrested because she's a witch?'

'She wasn't arrested and I don't think she's a witch. She's in trouble perhaps but . . .' and then he stopped.

'Nothing for you here, laddie, unless you've come to see Mrs Hotchkiss.'

'I'm not supposed to any more.'

'Why not?'

'Mums says Dad says I can't.'

The copper looked at me for a moment.

'What's your surname?'

'What's a surname?'

'Your second name.'

I told him.

'What's your dad's name?'

I told him.

'Ah. Maybe don't see Mrs Hotchkiss then.'

'Why not?'

‘Well, you said your dad told you not to, so best do as he says.’

Ian and Mandy weren't at school the next day or the next, and then it was Saturday. Dad was still at his mum's. My mum wasn't saying much and I heard her crying in her bedroom. At assembly on the Monday, Miss Gilchrist told the class Ian and Mandy weren't coming back to school and there was a big goodbye card for all of us to sign.

Dad was away for a few weeks and then he came home again. It seemed like it was before but it was different. He and Mum didn't talk much. One day Mum told me I was going to have a new brother or sister, but she didn't seem very happy. The baby wasn't born. Sometimes I heard Mum and Dad arguing in quiet voices in their room next to mine, then one day they had a really, really loud row and Dad left to stay at his mum's again.

‘Dad might not be coming back this time,’ she paused. ‘Actually . . .’

Dad didn't come back this time. He never came back at all. A few months before he died he went to live with Mum and my stepdad until he died. By then I wasn't living at home any more and had my own wife and children.

Mrs Hotchkiss was still living in her caravan when I left for college, and after going away to college, I never came home much. Mum married again and she and my stepdad went to live in Bristol (he was originally from Bristol). They had two children, my stepbrothers Martin and David.

Mrs Hotchkiss must be dead by now but whether she lived in the village until she died or moved I don't know. I do know that she wasn't witch. Well, not the kind of witch we read about in fairy tales. Perhaps she was the kind of witch who frightens wives and other women, the kind who can indeed cast spells, and I now realise she did cast a spell over Dad and Mr Loveridge and who knows who else. No one ever talked about what happened, the scandal, but now that I'm a 'grown-up', I'm pretty certain I know what had gone on.

I liked Mrs Hotchkiss. I know I was just seven then and seven-year-olds don't know a lot about human nature, but I got to know her better as I got older, and she was more honest than many of the folk in the village. They were always gossiping, falling out, sticking the knife in, being two-faced, a smile when they met you, slagging you off as soon as you'd gone on your way. Mrs Hotchkiss wasn't like that. I don't doubt she was sharing her favours with both my dad and Mr Loveridge and neither knew about the other, and it all kicked off that night when one called at the caravan to find the other already there. Who knows, who cares? It wasn't the first time that kind of thing happened and it won't be the last.

Looking back there must have been much else wrong between my mum and my dad for her to boot him out and divorce him. Maybe it wasn't the first time. But she

had had enough and only did what any sane man or woman would do, she got out. My stepdad, Roger, was a good guy and he made Mum happy. He'd been married before, too, and although his first wife divorced him, it wasn't because he had been playing away but because she wanted to be with her fancy man who owned three motor shops and thought he was a big shot. That didn't last either, I heard, and she moved on to husband number three.

I was thinking about all this last night when my son came for advice. He's a nice looking chap, a right charmer and was never short of a girl. But, in my view, he married too young, far too soon before he'd got all the jack-the-lad out of his system. And now, he says, he's fallen in love with another woman. I asked him about her. She's older than him, he said, but you wouldn't know it. She lives locally. She's fun, he says and he's bored in his marriage, it's not been the same since the twins came along, his wife is always tired and she's no fun, but this other woman . . .

'I don't know what to do, Dad,'

I told him what he could bloody do: he could stick it out, forget the other piece, stick it out, if not for his wife's sake, then for the sake of the twins. They've just started school and they hurt easily. You don't notice it, but they hurt like hell when parents split. I know I did, I hurt badly when my dad left, and I didn't get over it for a long time. Stick it out, I told the selfish little bastard. That's what I told myself when I met my own Mrs Hotchkiss and I'm bloody glad I listened to my own advice.