

Greenteeth

by

Molly O'Neill

Chapter 1

The witch looked surprised to see me, her eyes blinking furiously at me through murky waters. I don't know why she was so astonished. It was my lake she'd been thrown into; she should have expected I'd come and see if there was anyone worth eating.

It was an unseasonably hot day in early spring. The frogbit was just starting to regrow, bobbing up and down on the surface of the water, little green buds unfurling into the warm air. I was minding my own business like I always do, just doing a quick tidy up of loose roots at the base of the lake. The sunlight was glittering through the pond weed so I could see all the loose debris I hadn't spotted during the dark winter months. I chivvied away a school of scarlet-finned perch who were crowding around some sunken branches and began to drag them out of the mud.

I like to keep the lake looking neat and tidy. You wouldn't know it from the surface, but my lake is spotless, with excellent water circulation and the best crop of brown trout in western England. Even my frogs look smarter than those in inferior lakes, though they taste much the same. I may not be human but that doesn't mean I can let standards slip. Good lake maintenance is important for fish stocks and water quality, quite apart from the fact that I never could abide mess. A penchant for tidiness is not my most haggish feature to be sure, but then I'm not technically a hag. I've never been quite sure what it is that I am; apart from a Jenny, that is. Jenny Greenteeth, that's my name. And it's my mother's, and her mother's, all the way back upstream to the source of all the rivers and lakes in the country. It's my daughter's name too, though when she lived with me, I always called her Little Jenny and then she was Jenny in the Millpond by the Willow. I suppose my full name would be Jenny Greenteeth in the Lake at Chipping Appleby, but that's more of a mouthful than I like so I just go by Jenny. Jenny by name and Jenny by nature is what my mother said we are, silly old bat that she was. Not an actual bat

though, I should make that clear. Nothing wrong with bats and they make a tasty snack of a summer evening, but I'd rather be a Jenny. Flying seems much riskier than swimming.

I'm sure your own mother or grandmother told you about Jenny Greenteeths. We make a good story for a winter's night when the wind is howling down the chimney and the fire is casting long shadows on the wall. That's the best kind of night for stories. I bet you liked to curl up with a blanket and listen to tales about the bogeymen, the pixies, and the hobgoblins. Jennys belong in fairy stories, and like the other fae creatures, we're more real than your mothers would like to believe.

If you thought those stories were old wives' tales, it might surprise you to know that most of what they told you is true. My teeth aren't green, that's probably the biggest falsehood, but they are long, and sharp enough to bite a fish in half. That's useful for a lake dweller. My skin is green, the same shade as the moss that furs the trees around the lake. My hair is green too, if I dry it out, but in the water it looks darker. I think I'm about the same height as a human, though it's difficult for me to tell. Usually when I see a human, they're either crawling away from me in horror or floating face-down in the lake. Not conducive to accurate height comparison.

Did your mother warn you to stay away from waters you couldn't see through? Did she tell you what might be lurking beneath a thick layer of lily pads, down in the silty waters of a lake or river, just waiting for a child to snatch up and drag down for her dinner?

It's good advice for a child living next to a lake with a Jenny in it, though it's been a while since I felt up to any of that rigamarole. There's a lot of eating to be got out of a child and most days I'm just not that hungry. I'd rather stick to fish or frogs or the occasional bag of kittens that some farmer throws in the lake. Right nice of them that is, I always thought, though it takes me ages to get the fur out of my teeth.

I usually get a few bags of kittens in the springtime – when all the animals are having their babies. So, when I heard the splash that day in spring that was what I thought – the first unwanted litter of the year had been delivered by an obliging young fieldhand.

I looked up from dislodging a rotten log and my immediate thought was that I'd have to track down a rabbit bone to use as a toothpick. I peered up through the water to see where the splash was coming from. I like to be quick about grabbing the bag, so the drowning isn't so slow. Panicked meat always tastes bad to me, and I may be a river monster but I do have principles. My mother used to call me soft for that. When I spotted the edge of the splash at the surface, I noticed the ripples were larger than I would have expected for a sack of kittens. My hearing isn't the best under water but now that I concentrated, I could hear some humans cheering. Or maybe humans laughing, or maybe even screaming. It's difficult to tell the difference, humans are always making a noise for some reason or another. Maybe they'd rolled a cart or something into the lake and were going to make a big fuss about hauling it out. That would be entertaining indeed. The villagers are wary of my lake and if I snuck up and grabbed one of their ankles they'd be guaranteed to shriek loud enough to wake the dead. I chuckled at the thought.

Either way I wanted to investigate this disturbance, so I pushed off from the bottom and shot off through the water. I could feel my long hair streaming behind me as I swam, freshly combed out this morning, and I enjoyed the sense of the sunlight dappling on my skin. I opened my mouth to taste the lake water. There was something metallic that I could smell, possibly blood of some kind, but not much of it. The splash had come from the village side of the lake, and it took me a few minutes to swim over. I came up to just below the surface and peered through the frogbit.

A small crowd of humans was gathered on the shore, waving their little pink arms in the air. I didn't recognise any of their faces, but they all wore the dull linen clothes humans in the village had been wearing for hundreds of years, brown kirtles and britches and greying shirts. The people all looked much the same to my eyes, mostly too young for me to know any by name but too old to be playing childish games on my banks. One human, a male I thought, was standing facing away from me and shouting. He wore a big black hat and a dark overcoat of some kind, newer and less patched than the clothes of the others. He turned a bit so I could glimpse his face, small eyes and a pursed little mouth. His expression was twisted in anger, and he was pointing back at my lake. I thought he looked even sillier than the rest of them and sank back down from the surface.

Satisfied that the humans weren't going to come barging into the lake I looked around for whatever it was they had thrown in. There wasn't anything floating on the surface so the cause of the splash must have sunk to the floor. I floated about a yard below the surface and twisted around to see where it had fallen. There just below me I spotted a trace of tiny bubbles coming up through the weeds. I kicked my legs up and dove a little deeper, brushing the leaves aside with long fingers.

To my intense surprise a human was sitting on the bottom of the lake. A female human, I thought, with pale skin and big eyes. She was looking at me with an expression of shock and terror, as if I was a creature from her nightmares brought to life. I suppose that's exactly what I was. I could tell she was a witch because she was holding one hand up to her mouth and had conjured a small globule of air around her fist. She was trying to breathe from the glob, but she hadn't quite got the spell right and little bubbles of air kept creeping out of her nose and scurrying back to the surface. Every time she messed it up the main globule would shrink, and her fist would tighten a little, as if she was trying to hold the air there by sheer strength of grip.

I didn't think it was too clever of her to be sitting here trying to learn how to breathe underwater. Quite apart from the obvious hazard of river monsters, jumping into the literal deep end seemed an extreme way to practise, compared to say, dunking your head in a bathtub. If this was a new trend among human witches then I didn't like it. I've already said that I like to keep a tidy lake and strange witches jumping in and causing a commotion would be extremely vexing.

I wasn't entirely sure what to make of her being here, but I did know that a Jenny always leads with her teeth. I opened my mouth wide and gave her my best smile. The witch's eyes bulged even wider and the glob of air at her fist exploded in a fizz of effervescence. I was sure that now her air was gone she'd be zipping off back to the surface and leaving me in peace. To my surprise the witch just sat there, opening and closing her hand again, trying to regain the spell.

I moved nearer, still smiling my toothiest grin. I have a lot of teeth, multiple rows on both top and bottom jaw, each needle-sharp and glittering. The effect is quite striking, so I'm told, and this has worked on every human I've ever met before, usually causing them to soil themselves and scream for their mothers. This witch stayed put. I reached out a hand towards her. She shrank back, but awkwardly, floundering around in the water like a landed carp. I inspected a little closer and realised why she was moving so clumsily. Her right hand and left foot had been shackled together. They were bound with some kind of metal manacles, newly forged and shining even in the dim light at the bottom of the lake. That explained the metallic taste on the waters I had noticed earlier. Why would a witch bind herself with iron and jump in a lake? It didn't make any sense to me, but witches are a strange breed, even for humans. Perhaps it was a kind of spell that she was trying to perform, which was why the humans on the banks were shouting and waiting for her. I still didn't think that was a good enough reason to be disturbing my lake.

I waited for the witch to free herself, but she kept thrashing around. I could tell she was getting weaker and weaker, her mouth bulging out with the last breath of air. She looked back at me, and I could see the fear in her eyes. Not fear of me, I thought, the fear of a dying animal caught in a trap.

Maybe, I thought, maybe she didn't jump in. Maybe those yelling creatures on the banks *threw* her in. Threw her like a bag of kittens. That seemed an extreme development and not a particularly welcome one. Witches being lobbed into the lake wasn't any better than witches diving in.

If she had been thrown in, then did that mean I should eat her? I frowned a little. I didn't relish that thought. I hadn't eaten a whole adult human in a very long time, and I'd never eaten a witch before. I wondered if they tasted different. It was probably bad luck to eat one. Adult humans were pretty gamey, not really to my taste at the best of times. While I was pondering this the witch gave a final wriggle and then a last bubble slipped between her lips, and she was still.

I sent a ripple of water towards her to check that she wasn't faking it. Nothing. Her body drifted in the water like a ragdoll.

Was she dead? It was hard to tell without having a closer look. Witches were famously tricky; I didn't want to go over and give her a prod in case she woke up again and cast a spell on me. I wasn't sure if I should leave her there or drag her up to the surface. If the humans on the shore had thrown her in, then they had probably meant for her to drown. Too bad for them if that was the case; I didn't want her to rot here and clog up the bottom of my lake. It would be very untidy. Should I eat her? I wasn't particularly hungry today, and if I ate now when she was fresh then I'd definitely get indigestion. That could put me off my game for days and I had a lot to do around the lake in spring.

The witch's black hair floated up around her like a dark cloud. It reminded me of Little Jenny's hair, way back when she still lived here in the lake with me. She'd had shorter hair then, only down to her shoulders. I didn't want to eat something that made me think of Little Jenny. That settled it then. I wasn't going to eat her, I wasn't going to let her rot here and I couldn't take her to the surface. I would have to take her somewhere else.

I grabbed the witch by her shoulder and pulled her over to me. She was thin underneath the billowing dress and I tucked her right underneath my arm. The manacles would have been heavy for her to lift, but Jennys are strong creatures, and the weight made no difference to me as I sped back through the water to my cave. One of the pike came over for a look as I swam but I shooed it away. It blinked mournfully at me and vanished back into the deep waters.

I don't like to brag but my cave is very cosy. You swim in through a submerged tunnel at the eastern end of the lake that leads into a small cavern full of trapped air. Once you climb out of the water there's enough space that you can walk ten paces to the back wall and ten paces from side to side. There's smaller tunnels that go back into the hillside but I've never explored them much. I keep my bedding section at the back of the cave and arrange my trinkets along the walls. You wouldn't believe the things people lose in a lake over a thousand years. There are stacks and stacks of old coins, stamped with the faces of a dozen different kings and lords. Glass bottles and earthenware cups; little statues and figurines carved from bone, antler and wood. I have an array of interesting skulls, one of each kind of creature that's fallen into the lake. My favourite piece is an old sword someone threw in the lake way back when I was just moving in. It is very fine and has some writing on the hilt though I can't read it.

I even have a will o' the wisp trapped in a glass bottle to give off light. I can see in the dark of course but I thought it would brighten the place up, so I bought it from the fairy tinker who does the rounds of all the magical folk in this part of the world. That was a mistake as now

he's always dropping by and trying to sell me things and chatter to me. The wisplight is nice to have though, and I like the way it flickers.

When I clambered back through the tunnel I felt as happy as I always did when coming into my cave. There was plenty of space for the witch, but I wasn't sure where to put her down. I didn't want her to roll back into the water, but if I put her in my bed then she might mess up my nest. It sounds fussy but it takes a long time for me to organise rushes and reeds properly and I like to curl up small. Eventually I compromised by dropping her on the floor but sitting between her and the water. She landed awkwardly, face down, so I rolled her over. Her wrist and ankle were still shackled together. I lifted up the irons, wincing slightly as the metal touched my skin. Fairies don't like iron; it hurts us to touch it. Jennys are more resistant to it than the high fae, people are always dropping iron bits and pieces in our rivers and lakes, and I was better than most Jennys. I could touch it with only a stinging sensation, like holding a wasp. Once I had a good grasp on the shackles it was an easy thing to snap them apart. I unfolded her arm and laid her out in a more comfortable position.

I looked around the cave and picked up one of the neatly folded linen dresses the pedlar had sold me. I rarely bothered with them except when I did business with him but humans were fussy about clothes and I thought it would be less alarming to the witch if I was dressed. I slid into it, tugging the fabric down to my knees. Pleased with myself I looked at the witch's face. Her eyes were closed, and her chest didn't seem to be moving.

I thought about it some more. Humans are just like other land animals – they like to breathe air – but the witch couldn't breathe air with all the lake water still in her. I needed to get the water out. It was a new experience for me to think about how to stop a human from drowning. Maybe I could tip the water out.

I picked up her feet and lifted them into the air. The witch stayed motionless. I needed to be more aggressive. I lifted her off the ground, so she was dangling by her ankles and shook her up and down. She swung from my hands, hair trailing on the floor. I accidentally hit her head on the ground and hauled her up a little higher. I swung again. At first there was nothing but then I heard a great spluttering sound and brownish lake water started to spurt out of the witch's mouth. I kept on shaking her, until the floor was covered in watery bile and she'd stopped coughing any more up. Her eyes were still closed but her chest was definitely moving now. I was pretty sure that was a good sign.

I started to put her down again but realised I couldn't lay her in the regurgitated water. There wasn't really another good spot to drop her so I slung her over my shoulder and mopped up the mess before setting her back down. It was hard to tell in the wisplight, but I thought there might be some pinkish colour coming back into her face. I was pretty sure that was a good thing for a human.

Getting the witch breathing was a start, but now I that I thought about it, my cave was probably too cold for a human. There are obvious difficulties with bringing firewood into an underwater cave, even if I were inclined to have a fire in my living quarters which I most assuredly am not. Jennys don't like fire, we're very much creatures of the water. Everything here is damp, which is just how I prefer it. I scooted a little closer to feel her forehead. She was warm to the touch, just starting to dry off from her dunking. Her clothes were still wet through and starting to chill. I decided to take off some of the layers humans like to wrap themselves in.

The boots were by far the trickiest part of this endeavour: hooks and laces and tiny knots. I tried very hard not to break any part of them but I did snap a few of the ties. I tipped them out over the tunnel entrance and then set them down on the floor. Next were a pair of knitted socks which I squeezed out and hung next to the wisplight. She was wearing some kind

of thick kirtle, laced over a thinner linen smock. I could feel some interesting shapes in the pockets but resisted the urge to look. The laces on the kirtle were thicker than on the shoes and I managed to undo them without any breaks. Once I peeled her out of that I draped it over the sword, next to the socks. That left the smock, which I decided to leave on. It was light enough that it would probably dry off on its own now that the kirtle was off. After some reflection I decided to remove the human skull from my collection of bones and hide it behind my bedding nest. No need to alarm the witch when she finally woke up.

Now that she was breathing and out of her wet clothes, I thought about the other difficult parts of keeping a human alive.

She would probably be hungry when she came around. I could go and catch her some dinner, but I didn't want her to wake up and try and escape when I was gone. I'd brought a rabbit back here once, intending to keep it as a pet. It hadn't ended well. The stupid thing panicked and ran away and drowned in the tunnel. I hadn't even had the heart to eat it so I gave the corpse to one of the lake pike. Witches should have more sense than rabbits but they're still mortals and a half-dead witch who got herself thrown in a lake might have no sense at all. I gave up and sat down again, settling in to watch the witch breathe, her chest rising up and down.

She really did remind me of my daughter Little Jenny. She had the same small nose and big ears and the dark hair on her head was starting to curl the same way Little Jenny's had back when I first found her as a baby. That had been before I made her my daughter. The resemblance got me thinking about how to make a Jenny. Maybe I should make the witch a Jenny too.

Any Jenny can make another Jenny, but it doesn't happen very often. We don't give birth to our own babies. There aren't any male Jennys and frankly the idea of human reproduction makes me feel a bit sick. We make our children from the unwanted offspring of others.

In the time I've been living in the lake here at Chipping Appleby forty generations of humans have come and gone and I have only had the one daughter. She came to me maybe two hundred winters back. I remember it like it was yesterday. The lake had frozen over around the sides and the deer that live in the woods would edge along the ice to drink from the hole in the middle. I don't get out much in winter and it was even more unusual for me to be swimming at night, but the sky was clear and I wanted to watch the stars. I was floating on the surface near the middle of the lake when I heard a wail like a fox kit crying. When I looked in the direction of the sound I saw a bundle of rags, dropped on the ice and a cloaked figure fleeing back to the shore. I hauled out onto the ice and tentatively scuttled over to grab the bundle.

Inside I saw there was a little baby human, abandoned naked and newborn. It looked up at me with big blue eyes and gave a little toothless grin. I could tell it was a baby girl and dangled a finger in her mouth to suckle on. She was still sticky with afterbirth and blood so I took her into the water to clean her up. She shrieked a bit at the chill but baby humans like to swim and she bobbed around quite happily with me for a while but the lake was cold and I knew she wouldn't last long.

I remembered what my mother taught me about my own rebirth as a Jenny. I bit my own wrist open and put the wound to her mouth, dripping a little blood down her throat. When she swallowed it I brought her back under the surface and held her there until the water filled her lungs. The little body didn't last long before the final breaths of air left her but I cradled her in my arms until the change began. The curly dark hair straightened and pikelet sharp teeth budded in her mouth like fresh grass. The baby blue eyes widened and grew darker, all the better to catch

the light that filters into the lake. By the end of the night she was swimming freely, catching frogs on her own and I began to teach her the ways of a Jenny.

Seventeen years she lived with me until I found her a pond of her own to live in and very nice it was too, though she always was a messy child and I fear she doesn't keep it as tidy as I would like. It had been pleasant to have some company in the lake while she was growing up though. If I made this witch a Jenny then she probably wouldn't stay that long, being already a grown woman. She might not take to the change well. It was a bad idea, I thought, tucking my legs underneath me.

I watched the witch a long while. I could sense the day was ending; the sun would be dipping below the stand of apple trees at the western edge of my lake. The witch hadn't moved since I got her breathing, and I was starting to get bored. I decided to pick up one of the stacks of coins and amuse myself by sorting them according to which of the faces on them had the biggest nose. I leaned over her body to grab for the coins and that's when the witch started awake and opened her eyes.