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The Obscene Kiss: A Novel

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The Obscene Kiss: A Novel

by

Nicholas Alan Kimbro

B.A., Berry College, 2008

A thesis submitted to the

Faculty of the Graduate School of the

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of the requirement for the degree of

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This thesis entitled:
The Obscene Kiss: A Novel
written by Nicholas Alan Kimbro
has been approved for the Department of English

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Abstract

Children are missing in Boulder, Colorado. Four in the past three months, to be exact. There are no leads, no bodies. The most credible theory is that they’ve been victims of a wildlife attack: a rogue mountain lion, most likely. But as time goes on and the calendar drifts closer to the ancient pagan celebration of Samhain, another theory begins to surface: that witches are responsible. Not the new age, earth-is-your-friend kind. The other kind.
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Introduction

My earliest thoughts about *The Obscene Kiss*, I think, occurred while reading *Reality Hunger* by David Shields. There’s a lot not to like about that book. I certainly don’t share his disparaging attitude toward the novel, or toward self-identifying fiction in general, and nor do I have much interest in the alternatives he proposes: collage, and other “non-fictional” forms. However, I did find myself sympathizing with lines like, “Since to live is to make fiction, what need to disguise the world as another, alternate one?”¹ And also: “In imaginative literature [i.e. *fiction*] we’re always constrained from considering alternative scenarios; there are none. This is the way it *is*. Only in nonfiction does the question of what happened and how people thought and felt remain open.”² I started thinking about how neat it would be to write a story in *my* voice, rather than hemming myself in each morning with a set of imaginative circumstances. To write without blinders, as it were.

I started to consider different possibilities for reflexive narrative, different structures. I wanted to write something that would be interesting and “innovative” at a formal level, but which would sacrifice nothing in terms of plot, character, and general entertainment value. I was fortunate during this time to take a summer course in American Renaissance Literature with Marty Bickman, in which we studied, among other

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² Ibid. p. 132
things, *Moby Dick*. That text was a revelation for me; the way it is purely fictional and entertaining, but is, at the same time, unmistakably an act of *writing*. The writing doesn’t attempt to disguise itself, or to become invisible. It is not *secondary* to the story, but absolutely integrated. While Ishmael and Ahab are hunting whales, so is the text, and in so doing the book approaches something even more elusive, something that is, by nature, unapproachable.

*Moby Dick* is ultimately a failure, of course—how could it be otherwise?—although a magnificent one. Everywhere you can feel it surging and straining against its own limits, messy and almost delirious in its obsessiveness, but at the same time held together by a story. A fiction. Without Ahab and *The Pequod* and Moby Dick himself, the whole thing would fall apart. There would be nothing to structure Melville’s investigation of the ineffable. I think it is an excellent response to Shields’ accusations against fiction in *Reality Hunger* and elsewhere. Although I have to admit it was *Reality Hunger* that helped me recognize its significance, particularly in relation to my own work. For this project, *Reality Hunger* was the primer and *Moby Dick* the model.

I arrived in graduate school with a rather conflicted attitude towards Art and entertainment, innovation and convention. In other media—music, painting, sculpture, etc—I felt I was able to recognize this distinction clearly. I was able to see and value “the innovative” as *opposed* to “the conventional.” The innovative was what made art Art, I thought. Art was bold, art was daring. Everything else was designed to be reproduced, consumed. Everything else was a *product*, and as such, inconsequential.

Somehow though, I’ve not been able to persuade myself to see literature this way.
I grew up on literature. I enjoyed it. Some of my fondest memories involve secretly staying up all night and reading by flashlight, simply because I could not put a book down. I never thought about literature as Art. I never cared to. It was entertainment, I suppose, but unlike other forms of entertainment I enjoyed—TV, movies, sports—it was entertainment that had the power to change me.

My love of literature preceded my awareness of Art, my privileging of “innovation” over “convention.” Prior to grad school, I think I took literature’s artiness as a given. In my own work I would incorporate a number of vaguely “innovative” gestures, although primarily I wanted to compose things that would move people, that would engage with an audience I can only describe as, for lack of a better word, popular. I did not see these impulses as being mutually exclusive, and I’m not sure I do now either. But they have been complicated, certainly, by a closer investigation of the issues at stake, by reading Benjamin and Adorno, and by simply existing inside of a program where innovation and experimentation are, I think, privileged terms.

I have a better understanding now of what experimental literature is than when I arrived, and why it is important. Even though I don’t like much of it, and even though I believe, very sincerely, that many of the writers who identify as “experimental” do so disingenuously. At a theoretical level, I am convinced that real experimentation, honest experimentation—whatever that is—is important and something that my own writing should in some way strive toward. An ethical imperative, almost. But I also believe one should write the kinds of books one wants to read, and the kinds of books I like to read have plot, characters, emotional resonance.

3 Particularly young writers, i.e. the HTMLGIANT crowd, etc.
Much of what I’ve read these past three years has conditioned me to believe these values are exclusive of one another, although, thankfully, there are those few shining works of fiction that do seem to embody both sensibilities. *Moby Dick* is one, and as I said before, it is a failure. The white whale escapes. Although I can’t think of a better argument for why such attempts and the failures they inspire are vital. Necessary. *Moby Dick*, I think, is all the license anyone needs to say “fuck it” and to try a thing anyway, especially when it seems impossible.

It’s possible that experimental and popular sensibilities simply don’t mesh; that, at a theoretical level, they are exclusive of one another (perhaps it’s not even an interesting question, although, for me at least, it’s been a useful one). Although, if nothing else, *Moby Dick* exists. And whether or not it’s a success does not detract from its cultural importance, nor the pleasure one feels in reading it.

I like what Jeffrey says about the word “experimental” (which, Jeffrey, I know is not representative of *all* your thoughts on the subject, but is, at least, helpful to me): “I like the word ‘experimental’ because it implies the potential for failure.”

When I began writing *The Obscene Kiss*, my desire was simple: to write a book about everything. Everything going on in my life I wanted to integrate in some way, so that this novel, this thesis, in addition to functioning as a work of literature, would also serve as a comprehensive portrait of my life at this moment: my marriage, my struggles with innovative versus traditional fiction, my interest in horror, boxing, self-reflexive narrative; gender, sexuality. The idea was to keep adding disparate elements until such
that the end result could not fail to be unique, in the same way a diamond’s character is formed by the unique set of pressures around it. Why not?

I find that I am drawn to big, messy texts; to texts in which the author has clearly tried to fit too much. Texts that feel like they’re going to burst with an overabundance of tensions and ideas. I like to be left with ragged edges when I’m done reading, threads left dangling, unresolved. Those types of books are invigorating to me because the ending, I feel, could come from literally anywhere. You don’t have that grinding sense of inevitability you get when working with a smaller set of tensions in a more rigorous way. So my idea was to begin with as many dominant ideas as possible and to find out, through writing, which was most prominent. I began with marriage—*my* marriage, specifically—witches, language, and the thought that somehow, someway, I would bring myself into this. Compose the book *as myself*, as opposed to some generalized writer-god. I also knew sort of how it would end; that, somehow, this ceremony, this *Osculum Obscenum* was going to be a figure that reabsorbed and embodied the different tensions (although I’ve imagined it in a variety of ways since then).

So with all of that loosely floating around in my head, I began reading. About witches, mostly: histories, grimoires, how-to books, and of course, novels. The notes I took were limited. Research, for me, is more like directed brainstorming. The only thing I write down usually are ideas for scenes. I knew I wanted to write about witches since the debut of *Paranormal Activity 3*, when witchcraft suddenly enters the mythos. The way Julie wakes up at the end and her mother’s house, where they are staying, has transformed: suddenly there are candles everywhere, pentagrams and other esoteric symbols drawn on the walls, and that moment when she rushes up to the garage and peers
inside and sees all of these figures, dressed in black, just standing there in a circle in the
dark. The thought of this kind of darkness being concealed within a community, of these
rituals existing beneath a domestic veneer, for some reason creeped me out immensely.
Plus they provided a convenient access point to some of the other things I find truly, non-
ironically, scary: demons, dark rituals, etc.

I also noticed in a number of other places how the introduction of witchcraft
suddenly complicates things in a cool way. Particularly in the found footage genre, which
I guess, ever since The Blair Witch Project, draws a lot of power from the thought that,
since the cameras are handheld and the content unrevised, things are allowed to be more
complicated than they might otherwise be in another kind of feature. Genres blur. Like in
the first [REC] movie, which begins and develops as pretty much a straight zombie flick
until the very end when they find their way up to the attic, discover all that witch
paraphernalia along with “patient zero.” It does something, that movement: enchants the
world (no pun intended).

As Bruce Kawin says in Horror and the Horror Film, “the witch can arrange
pieces of the natural world into supernatural signs, making a malevolent language out of
nature, nature itself becomes frightening.” I thought that, given the centrality of signs and
signifiers to witches’ creep-factor, perhaps I could develop it to function similarly to the
“monster in the window” motif Bruce discusses earlier, specifically with regards to film:

A model of the intrusion of horror into our consciousness…. The window puts
fear in a frame, whether it is a narrated frame like a nightmare or a visible
rectangle that separates and brings together the known world of the bedroom and
the unknown world of the monster.4

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Textual arts, obviously, require a different sort of model to cue “the intrusion of horror into our consciousness,” and I can think of none better than witches’ performative use of language, and the artifact of the book of shadows—something to make accessible the idea that the words you are reading might also be dangerous.

For about two months I restricted myself to just reading. To “research” and note taking, as it were. Then I began using note cards to brainstorm and to develop action, organizing all of the ideas I’d had in the preceding months into a shape vaguely “novelesque.” It wasn’t until I discovered the book of shadows form, however, that I felt comfortable writing. Immediately, I ditched the note cards, choosing instead to develop the chapters one at a time, like short stories, and allowing the overarching narrative to surface that way.

The first draft was much more Nick-centered than subsequent drafts. In addition to the faux introduction that exists presently, every other chapter was also narrated by Nick, describing his summer, the feeling of being newly married, and all the time circling back to the idea of witches and the “situation” in Boulder. For very good reasons, most of these were cut. Apart from being boring and indulgent, they unbalanced things structurally. Every other narrator only gets one chance to speak. And also, they were preventing the plot from escalating like I wanted it to. I cut them—about six chapters or so—and wrote in six more, six different characters inserted into the book’s middle, with the idea of building up to more of a final conflict, a “battle scene,” as SGJ calls it.

Cutting those chapters was an important moment in the development of this project, as they signaled a movement away from the more innovative and reflexive
concerns I’d had toward a more stable and traditional narrative. The reflexivity is still there, I think, although in a way that is more subtle and integrated with the book’s form and plot.

Other decisions I’ve made since then have continued this movement⁵, such as the decision to change the ending. Originally, in a break from the rest of the book, the last chapter was titled “Sabbat (or, The Obscene Kiss)” and was narrated by a devil-type character who was present at the final ceremony but immaterial (really, I intended this voice to represent “The Ineffable” itself). It read as a sort of symbolic mash-up or parade of all of the characters and themes introduced thus far, similar to the final scene in 8 ½. Only in this case the imagery of the Sabbat was confused and conflated with the imagery of a wedding. Different languages and rituals smearing into one another.

I liked the way that worked conceptually, although I have since changed it to be more integrated into the book’s central tensions, and also more self-reflexive. By having the final chapter be narrated by Shannon (my wife’s name), I think it draws attention to its textuality, to the problem of Nick writing this chapter and narrating her perspective. Hopefully by this point in the book it is clear that Shannon is Nick’s wife, and that Nick is the book’s author. Throughout the novel, Nick has moved in and out of the narrative, operating alternately as the book’s author and as a character therein. I hope that, with the current ending, the witches and the tension in Boulder are still able to be “real” and unresolved, although the figure of the author remains looming in the reader’s mind; the artificiality of the book, but also its desire to perform something—the thought that these words Shannon is speaking at the end are words Nick needs to hear, and is therefore writing himself. There’s something dark and invasive about that idea—co-opting

⁵ In our discussions, Stephen and I have been using the metaphor of “arthouse” versus “feature.”
another’s voice, specifically the voice of a loved one—and yet I hope it is also pathetic, if not ultimately sympathetic.

Ultimately, I want the reader to be left with the idea that the book, and that fiction in general is a form of spell-crafting. I want the suspicion and mystery that the book generates to have multiple meanings and applications, and to ultimately open into broader questions, while avoiding the feeling that this is all just a metaphor: the witches a way of talking about writing. If the book is a success—and I’ll go ahead and own that it probably is not—it will operate as both signification and performance. Just like a spell. Just like a prayer.
The Obscene Kiss
When I was a kid growing up outside Chattanooga, a friend’s older brother once told me about a priest who’d been caught abducting small children. According to him, the priest would lure children back to the church and nail their naked bodies to a cross. He would erect the cross upside down above the altar and place a chalice—the one used for communion—beneath them, drain them of blood.

It was close to Halloween when he told me this, and I only half-believed him anyway. But nevertheless, the story has stuck with me my entire life and colored everything I’ve seen or heard about witches. Nothing can un-do it. Whether or not I believe it’s true makes no difference.

When I take communion, a part of me is afraid.

It’s not an accident that the images we associate with witchcraft are so connected to Christian beliefs and iconography. Despite the fact that it’s one of the world’s oldest religious practices, and pre-dates Christianity by a very long, long time. One of the Early Church’s strategies for gaining followers was to build churches on top of pagan sites and hope that they would continue to worship there.

They did.
But though many went to Mass and prayed to God ala his one and only son, Jesus Christ, many also continued to practice the pagan rituals of their ancestors, gathering to perform magic in accordance with the moon’s cycles. Historically, this is how religions evolve: by spreading and acquiring the local flavor of the indigenous religions they mix with. The Church fathers didn’t like it though, and one of their earliest problems in fact was figuring out how to prosecute such outliers. At first, magical acts were handled like any other act and persecuted based on merit; this presupposes that magical acts, like all acts, are subject to free will, and can thus be used for either good or bad. Magic that harmed others was referred to as *maleficia*, and was mostly a private concern. If someone’s crop failed or milk went sour, if someone’s wife committed adultery, it would be blamed on these magicians, creating a real inconvenience for those wishing to practice magic in the tradition of their ancestors.

But that wasn’t good enough for the Church. Eventually, medieval scholastics theorized that all forms of sorcery and magic *necessarily* came from the Devil, and therefore good magic, or harmless magic, or even simple *maleficia*, could not possibly exist. Whatever powers the Devil granted must be used for his own ends. Hence the notion of a pact, and witches’ unwilling alliance with the Devil.

Our house in Chattanooga was situated near some woods. Across the street, in fact, was a trailhead that lead into them, and in these woods my brother and my friends and I would often play. We would come across all kinds of things there: abandoned forts, random ditches (which we imagined were the planned graves of mob killings), campfires,
beer bottles, used condoms. We knew that people went there at night, but since we weren’t allowed there after dark we knew them only by what they left behind.

One evening I was in my room, grounded probably, when I happened to look out my window and saw a number of cars parked at the trailhead across the street. The figures that emerged from those cars were difficult to make out and oddly shaped, and I realized this was because they were wearing robes, dark ones with hoods that made them blend into the night. They proceeded single-file down the path into the woods—the same path we used every day. This was some time after I’d heard about the priest, and one of our make-believe theories about the campfires already involved witches. Let’s just say I was primed.

I never found out what those people were up to that night, and who knows how many nights before and after—could have been any number of things—but it changed the way I played there. I did not avoid the woods, but part of being there from then on was the thrill of imagined danger; the feeling I had, regardless of what game we were playing, that evil was real, and that it was close. And no, I would not go there alone even in daylight.

Prior to the thirteenth century most witchcraft proceedings followed the *accusatorial* method: one person would accuse another person, followed by an investigation of ‘the facts,’ and if by that point no proof or confession had been found the accused would be subjected to *the ordeal*—usually some physical test such as having one’s arm dipped in boiling water. After a few days the accusers would examine the wound for signs of healing, believing that if the defendant were innocent God would
protect him or her (usually her) by causing the arm to heal miraculously. If it did not, the defendant would be found guilty of witchcraft.

Defendants were often found guilty.

Another way to spot a witch was to strip her down and to scour her body for marks belonging to the Devil. It was believed that the Devil marked his own, although he was clever and not above making it look like a mole, a birthmark, or an oddly shaped freckle. Often these marks were thought to be extra nipples, witch’s teets, used to suckle familiars also provided by the Devil. You’d be surprised what unholy signifiers the right set of hands can find hidden on you.

Cole H.
Verra S.
Emily W.
Jordan F.

These are the children who have gone missing in Boulder, CO—where I live—during the past three months. At this time of writing, no information has turned up regarding their whereabouts or what may have happened to them. It was difficult, when the first of them went missing, not to immediately look to the victim’s parents, but when the others followed it soon became clear we had something different, and more pervasive to deal with.

The most accredited theory at present is that they have been the victims of some kind of wildlife attack: mountain lion, most likely. Not very much wildlife wanders into Boulder from the mountains: some elk, coyotes, an occasional black bear stranded in a
tree near Chautauqua Park. But mountain lion sightings are very rare. Not unheard of, but rare.

(I was warned when I arrived here to be careful riding my bike at night, because with my legs pedaling I resembled prey.)

There is no evidence so far to support this theory. No tracks, no bodies, no gory clearings in the woods. Just the disappearances, and the incoherent statements of one elderly couple who claim to have seen something creeping about on all fours near the time and place one of the children was “abducted.” Naturally, alternative theories abound, although it’s worth noting, in the lion’s favor, that mountain lions do tend to drag their prey, sometimes great distances, before feeding.

Authorities are not giving up hope, they assure the families. Until found, the children are presumed to be alive and well, and are a top priority for the Boulder Police Department, for what that’s worth.

During the thirteenth century, however, the accusatorial method was largely replaced by the inquisitorial method. Inquisitions would still often begin with private accusations, but once secular authorities got involved one of the things that changed was the advent of the plea bargain. Accused were offered mitigated sentences in exchange for information concerning other witches (though often the “mitigated sentence” was simply death, as opposed to torture). Authorities believed that the witches in a given area conspired together at regular meetings called Sabbats (an etymological perversion of the Jewish Sabbath) where they would also indulge other naughty behaviors such as orgies, sacrilege, ritual cannibalism, and infanticide. The Devil was often present at these
meetings, usually in the form of a goat, and as tribute the witches were all obliged to kneel and kiss its anus in a gesture known ominously as the *Osculum Obscenum*. Some of the accused claimed to attend these meetings every Thursday, while others attended only the big ones: Walspurgisnacht (April 30) and Hallowe’en (October 31).

*The ordeal* may have been dispensed with as a means for establishing guilt, but torture was very much fair play. Here are some of the more common methods used to elicit confession:

- Pinniewinks (thumbscrews used to crush fingers)
- Strappado (in which the hands are tied behind one’s back and hoisted into the air, often counterbalanced by a weight attached to the subject’s feet)
- Bootikens (a pair of iron leg braces tightened by blows from a hammer and used to crush the subject’s shins and calves)
- Pincers (red hot tongs used to tear pieces of flesh away from accused witches; sometimes inserted into the vagina or rectum)

These and more were all perfectly legal and admissible in a court of law, although that didn’t stop authorities from experimenting with less legal means when situations called for them, such as inserting needles beneath defendants’ fingernails.

When I first heard about the disappearances my mind immediately returned to that childhood story of the priest and the cross and the chalice. I wanted to pray for the missing children, but every time I did I tasted blood in my mouth. I felt, even if I didn’t believe necessarily, that witchcraft or something similar was involved. Something dark and unknowable. Something dangerous to the soul as well as the body. I knew by then
how much witches had suffered at the hands of others’ assumptions, that the kind of witches I was thinking about had more than likely never existed. But I couldn’t help it. Evidently, neither could a great many others, because the witch theory has become one of the leading crackpot alternatives to the lion—a strange turn for citizens of Boulder.

Boulder, CO is a medium-sized town just east of the Colorado Rockies. Home to approximately ninety-five thousand people, ninety percent of whom are white with a median income of $85,000 per year. It’s a wealthy area, and according to newspapers, one of the most liberal towns in America, a beacon of religious tolerance. Lots of yoga studios, Buddhist retreat centers, synagogues, mosques, and, I’m told, a vibrant pagan community.

Even now, the thought that witches might somehow be responsible for the missing children is largely an unofficial one. Only one or two of the most charismatic churches have dared to suggest it publicly; the others only whisper, make jokes, or remain conspicuously silent. Like me, I doubt that most people, even those who defend the theory in conversation, actually believe it to be true. The possibility is mostly an imaginative one which, though probably false, nevertheless contributes to our experience of the situation. Although, even imaginative possibilities have consequences. Just ask the witches of medieval Europe and throughout most of the twentieth century. Ask the pagan community in Boulder, Colorado.

When I was first planning this book, shortly after my wedding, my wife and I received a visit from our officiant and former religion professor, Jeffrey. We sat on our back balcony overlooking the bike trail and the creek behind our apartment complex; we
shared a bottle of wine and passed a half-smoked cigar between us. It was one of those beautiful, rain-soaked afternoons we sometimes have during the summer where the drops are fat and, despite the rain, the sun shines brightly.

I told him about my project, about the situation with the lion and the disappearances. I told him about my fear of witches. Together we reminisced about pagans we’d known at Berry, what they were doing now. And then we started talking about language. My senior year at Berry I’d done a directed study with Jeffrey on contemplative poetics, so the topic was not a new one. We talked about Zen koans, the difference between turning words and dead words. We talked about the Sanskrit tradition, where words, or mantras, represent literally the sound distillation of God. Language as God’s body. And we also talked about Christian prayer. I’d had trouble with prayer for a long time, and also with Church. I was raised Christian and for a time had actually taken it quite seriously. I found though that, at times, the thought of speaking to God and of engaging in the various rituals associated with it, felt very close to something dark. The Mass brought to mind the Black Mass. And that proximity to darkness, even with light on the other side of it, was unsettling.

At my request, during our wedding ceremony Jeffrey had recited a mantra instead of prayer. A blessing given to him by Guru Mayi. It came from the Rig Veda, arguably the world’s oldest continuous scripture, and had existed long before the written word:

Om Purnamadah purnamidam
purnaat purnamudachyate
Purnasya purnamadaya
Purnamevavashushyate.
Means roughly that infinite evolves from infinite, that you can take infinite from infinite, and it remains unchanged. A way of understanding love.

I remember when he recited it, how it sounded almost like a song and how his voice carried, even on the outdoor pier, seeming to dissolve the sound of the water, of the wood creaking underfoot, and the dull, weepy murmurs of our guests. It was different from his normal voice. More powerful. And afterwards I remember being convinced that there was indeed something in it; that, standing there in front of all those people with my soon-to-be wife, I felt some kind of transmission, some pulse of energy.

I looked at Shannon’s face, watched the familiar way she struggled against tears through a carefully choreographed series of facial twitches. And when she looked up at me and tried to time her breathing with my own, I remember feeling so grateful for the mantra and for anything else really that had the power to bless and protect us. The wedding too. Early in our relationship we’d broken up once for about a year, and the fact that we’d been able to do that at all scared me. There was a time when I hadn’t believe in marriage, when I thought that if two people loved one another, that should be enough. How important is the sign when you’ve got the thing it signifies?

Important, it turns out.

The right language doesn’t just signify, it preserves and creates. It takes the abstract and makes it concrete. And the more language you heap upon it, whether in the form of wedding rites or legally binding documents, the more real and steady the thing becomes.
In graduate school I think we’re taught a fairly skeptical attitude towards language. We think of it as something to play with, believe it was not made to do things. We do not consider that there may be a language we’ve not discovered yet, a use for words that is like thunder; that has the ability to both make worlds, and to conceal them. As a writer this thought is exhilarating and frightening. As I told Jeffrey, sitting there on my back porch with Shannon: Sometimes I want my language to perform that way. Sometimes, I wish to conjure.

What follows is mostly a work of fiction, although I’m uncomfortable thinking about it that way. What is the meaning of the word ‘fiction’ when the facts are not misconstrued, but are simply unavailable? A work of nonfiction about the disappearances in Boulder isn’t possible yet. Our experience of it is purely speculative; a mixture of circumstantial evidence and imagination. To suggest though that speech or narrative isn’t possible—or that it is somehow less real for being fiction—I think, is a mistake. Language often exists in places where truth or comprehension is absent. In fact, I find it dwells there in curious abundance.

There is a form I discovered while researching witchcraft called a Book of Shadows. Every coven has one. What it is, is a book shared by witches to record spells; a communal grimoire (literally grammar). Anyone can write in it. Anyone can contribute. And in this way they are able to strengthen their magic, refine their practice, project themselves further into the world, deeper into experience. They are able to approach the ineffable, and to make possible the discovery of that one word that can make and unmake worlds.
What follows is a poor approximation, but it is what it is. Welcome, readers, to my own Book of Shadows.

Nick Kimbro
Boulder, CO
Summer 2012
The night I joined the book club was three weeks after my boys stopped calling, and two weeks after I’d become pretty sure my husband was fucking his assistant. I’d found out about it (the book club) through a flier posted outside one of those new age bookstores on West Pearl, and even then wondered why the phrase “Book Club” was in quotations.

I arrived around eight, parked several houses down because the curb was cramped with other vehicles. We met in the home of a woman named Judith. When she answered the door I was struck by her beauty. Several inches taller than me, she had wavy, auburn hair that reached past her shoulders and dark, green eyes. Something about her posture too—simultaneously tense and relaxed—gave her slender frame the impression of solidity and strength. She wore only a silk robe.

“You must be Helen,” she said to me with a smile, extending her hand past the threshold of the door. “I’m Judith. Won’t you come in?” The light in the foyer was dim, although on each of the glass tables I could see pictures of a man nearly as handsome as she was beautiful.

“Your husband?” I asked, trying to seem amiable. She looked back at me over her shoulder, answered: “Hmm.”
The home was beautiful. The living room had a high, vaulted ceiling with an intimate arrangement of furniture that I could tell was real and not purchased at an outlet like my own. On one wall a set of high windows faced the Flatirons, which were tall and silhouetted by an orange sunset, and on every surface there was a candle. Just walking through the room was a little magical, although Judith strolled straight through, leading me to a doorway and a dark room with flames casting little ovals of light against the walls. A number of women, all wearing different kinds of robes, were gathered there chatting and clutching wine glasses in their hands, and on the walls was a series of canvases or posters depicting strange geometric figures and signs that I could not make out in the dimness. The women looked up when we entered.

“Judith,” I whispered, grabbing at the sleeve of her robe. “This is a book club gathering, isn’t it?”

She laughed. “Of course it is, you goose, though probably different from what you’re thinking.”

“Oh, um, well. Maybe I shouldn’t be here.” It was a question, not a statement, and she must have heard the broken expectation in my voice because she turned and placed both hands on my shoulders. The others watched.

“Why don’t you stay for this one meeting and see what you think? I understand it must seem terribly strange now—that’s because you’re on the outside. Give it a chance though. The best tastes are the ones you acquire.” She smiled then, and her smile was so perfect. Her teeth so gleaming white, her lips so full. I believed it. I felt it. And, of course, I stayed.
I asked her about the robes and she told me that I needn’t bother this time (she said that word—*needn’t*). Just to make myself comfortable; no one had any expectations for me. The other women all were chatting again and she introduced me to a group of them before moving to the front of the room to check on something.

“How do you do?” one of them asked. Her name was Kaleen and she was a big woman, several inches taller than me and also quite a bit heavier. She looked to be in her late fifties. The others introduced themselves too, two younger ladies: Mary Beth and Hanna. I said that I was well, asked what kinds of books the group had been reading.

“Oh, yes,” Kaleen laughed. “A book club, right? Well, we actually do more writing than we do reading. Different kind of book too.”

I stared at her, feeling like there must be a punch line coming. But she only looked back like she was expecting the same thing. I noticed on the far side of the room a triangle painted in white on the hardwood floor, enclosing some smaller designs. And beyond that a larger inscription that I couldn’t quite see through all of the bodies milling about.

“What’s that?” I asked them.

“That?” Hanna replied. “That’s a magic circle.”

“A magic circle?”

“Yeah, you know, a pentagram.”

Without realizing it I grasped her by the forearm—to steady myself, I think. I looked around me again, re-examined each woman’s face, the robes, the candles; scanned the corners of the room for sacrificial goats and inverted crosses. “Is this…” I started.
“A casting party? You betcha.” It was Mary Beth who’d spoken this time, and when she smiled I could see her teeth were all crooked inside her mouth.

“I really shouldn’t be here,” I said, turning toward the exit, afraid for a moment that, since I could see no sacrifice, perhaps that’s why I’d been invited…

“Why not?” Kaleen asked, insinuating herself closer to me as if to prevent others from hearing.

“Aren’t you all…” I lowered my voice. “Satanists?”

At this the three of them burst into laughter, drawing the others’ attention for a moment before waving it off, deciding to keep it between themselves. “Oh dear, what have you been reading?” Hanna explained to me that what they did had nothing to do with Satan; that Satan, in fact, was a made-up character the early Church used to persecute witches. “What we worship—” she began, although she was interrupted by the sudden sound of a bell. Our attention shifted to the front, to Judith.

Without saying anything, each woman left her wineglass on the table at the back of the room and returned, lining up along the outside of the circle. Judith came to my side and whispered in my ear, “I’ve placed a chair for you against the wall. Probably best if you just watch for now until we’ve had a chance to discuss some things.”

I was relieved. I took my seat and in front of me a couple of women made space so I could see into the circle. Kaleen was there alone with a broom, sweeping it out and muttering something. Her movements were clipped, and her eyes kept jerking open again after she’d close them, remembering, evidently, that she needed to see what she was doing. When she was finished she rejoined the others, and Judith, with a bowl of water held in front of her, walked clockwise around, murmuring some kind of chant:
She walked slowly, placing one foot in front of the other and rolling her weight very gently from heel to arch until she’d returned, then she exchanged that bowl for one that looked to be filled with salt. She repeated the process once, then again. grabbing a stick of incense this time: sandalwood, I think.

Once she’d finished, five women came forward with lit candles and placed them at each of the five corners of the pentagram. Then, all at once, their robes dropped to the floor. The sudden sight of their naked bodies almost unseated me. So much flesh: young, old, fat, skinny, and none of them appeared self-conscious. They stood straight up, not attempting to hide, hunch, or cover any part of themselves. They entered the circle through the same spot and lined shoulder to shoulder along the inside.

Judith took a knife from the altar—one with a curved blade and an ornate handle—and walked the outside again, tracing its edges with the knife before stepping inside with the others.

She took her place at the center beside the altar, and the rest were silent for several moments, eyes closed. They looked like they were praying. Judith raised her arms out to the side and I could not take my eyes off her body, her full breasts, the way her ribcage made the light stutter. “Winds from the North that blow with cold, encompass this circle and make us bold. Sweeping away the old for new, bring strength to us that is our due.” She addressed each of the elements: Earth, Air, Fire, Water, and Spirit, and
when she was done she addressed something called the watchtowers, four of them in all, and always in rhyme.

I am no poet, but I’ve read enough Shakespeare to know when a rhyme is strained, and right at this moment it was difficult for me to believe that the words she was speaking contained any special power. They sounded like nursery rhymes, things that children chant while they play. Or like the first prayer I ever learned:

Now I lay me down to sleep  
I pray the Lord, my soul to keep.  
And if I die before I wake  
I pray the Lord, my soul to take.

No one seemed to mind though. They followed along with their eyes closed, moving their lips silently along with Judith’s, and I tried to pay attention, to keep an open mind.

Afterwards, Judith joined the others along the outside and Kaleen, to my surprise, shuffled her considerable bulk to the center and knelt before the altar. It took her a moment to get down; the folds of her body collapsed around her like a loose dress. And even so she had a tough time reaching the objects there because she could only bend so far forward. She leaned her weight onto her knees, which crack against the hardwood floor, and from the altar drew a single strand of rope about two feet long.

“By knot of one this string I tie,” she murmured, tying a knot at one end of the rope, “let the magic begin, banish the lie.” She shifted her hands to the other end and began tying one there as well. “With the second knot I now bind you, from all of the disgusting things you do.” She shifted to the center and began tying again. “And with this
third I hope you learn, never a woman again to spurn.” She went several more times, tying knots on either side of the center one and each time muttering some kind of rhyme, and afterwards she laid the knotted rope down on the altar and slowly lifted herself off her knees. Judith returned to the center and thanked each of the quarters, the Lord and Lady, and “bid them farewell.” She took the knife again and bent down, tracing the circle counterclockwise, which, I supposed, opened it because all of the women then filed out and began to chatter normally. They gathered up their robes and put them back on, retrieved their wine glasses from the back of the room. Another bottle started to go around and Mary Beth brought me a glass.

“So what did you think?” she asked.

“I thought it was interesting,” I said, non-committally. “What was it Kaleen was doing with the knots exactly?”

She glanced back at Kaleen, who seemed quieter than she had before, although with a slight smile on her face. “Oh, she was binding her husband from cheating on her.” My ears perked up. “The little prick. She just found out he’s been seeing someone in Denver for months now—found some emails or something. Won’t be happening anymore though, that’s for sure.”

“You can do that? Just bind somebody from doing something?”

Hanna laughed. “Of course we can! That’s minor magic, babe—no problem, especially with the rest of us helping. Of course some say that free will—”

Mary Beth pinched the back of her arm. “No need to get into that now,” she said. I glanced back and forth between them. “How is it you’re able to help?” I asked.
“By focusing our intention with hers, repeating the chants, imagining Frank’s winkle tied up with a little bow…” She laughed loudly and Judith came over, not bothering to ask what was so funny.

“How did you enjoy yourself, Helen?”

“I really liked it,” I said, trying to sound warm. It had occurred to me to question why I’d been allowed to see this, although if they could bind a man from cheating on his wife I’m certain they could bind me from saying anything about it, no problem. “Mary Beth was just telling me how you’re able to help each other by focusing your intentions.”

“That’s right!” she said with a little too much enthusiasm. She glanced at Mary Beth and Mary Beth nodded, turned to join another group of three or four women chatting nearby. Once she’d gone, Judith continued. “The coven is an important part of working with magic successfully. Some try to practice on their own, but solitaires’ magic can only be so potent. What’s the saying? It takes a village…” She laughed, then leaned in close so that I could almost feel her lips on my ear. “Normally a coven consists of eleven people. Did you notice how many is in ours?”

I looked around and counted quickly. “Ten?”

“That’s right. We just had one leave the area recently. Business promotion. Happens a lot around us.” She looked at me. “Good things happen when you know the right people.”

Mary Beth and Hanna came over again, joined by Kaleen. “So what did you think,” the big woman asked me.

“I thought it was really interesting,” I said. I wanted to ask about her husband, but chickened out. Asked instead: “Where did you learn the words you were saying?”
“Oh, some I made up beforehand, some I got from the book.”

“What book?”

“Our Book of Shadows… It’s where we keep record of all the spells we cast.”

“You see, we are a book club!”

“We’ve done lots of binding ceremonies,” Hanna chimed. “All Kaleen had to do was personalize the words.”

“Can you do that?” I asked. “Change the spell and it will still work?”

“The spell isn’t the words,” she laughed. “It’s the intention. Same way I intend to take a sip of this wine…” She paused to demonstrate. “I had an intention and my brain projected it into my arm, my mouth. Magic’s the same way only your intention has further to travel. The rituals and the rhymes and stuff help project your intention into the world.”

“Do you have to be good at rhyming then,” I asked.

Judith laughed: “Good is a relative thing,” she said. “We’re more interested in being effective, although it’s a skill we all have to practice.” She patted me on the arm.

“The next gathering is two weeks from now. Can we expect you to return?”

I thought a moment and tried to imagine myself among these women, tried to imagine myself as one of them, whether or not that was a positive thing. And oddly enough, I found myself weighing that image against Lewis; the best Lewis that I knew, the one I’d fallen in love with. The one who smiled and showed up places unexpectedly. The one who insisted on groping me in public and who always found out the dark corner in a place, the spot we could be most private for just a few moments. I felt for some
reason, as though I must choose between them, couldn’t have it both ways. “Yes,” I said at last. “Yes, I’ll be back.”

“Good, she said, smiling, and embraced me. “And next time, dear,” she added, “do bring a robe.”

When I went home that night Lewis was not there. There was a message on the answering machine saying he’d gone to get a drink with his colleague, Sam, to discuss their research. I looked at the clock: 11:43 PM. I’d heard a lot about Sam lately, although he was one of the few colleagues I’d never met.

I made myself a cup of tea and sat down at the kitchen table with a pen and notepad. The whole house was dark except for the light above me. My cat, Sage, sat on the table. I petted her and sipped my tea. Outside I could hear crickets chirping. Judith had given me a little manual before I left with just a few notes on etiquette… What to wear, how to behave, how to cast a magic circle, how invocations worked: Witchcraft 101 kinds of stuff. I would probably have to observe again for another week or two before getting involved, but she assured me that, with their help, I would be casting spells before the month was out.

I read through the pamphlet, although when I’d made it to the end I realized that the back page was torn off. I wondered if that was an accident or if it had been torn off intentionally—something I wasn’t meant to know.

The main thing that bothered me, I’d decided, wasn’t that in the span of an evening I’d involved myself with a coven of witches, or how the idea of magic fit into my spiritual schema, but that, in a matter of weeks—if that long—I would be forced to write
my own spells. I’d never written poetry before—couldn’t tell you the difference between an iamb and onomatopoeia—but even though I’d been told it was the intention, not the words, that mattered, I found that hard to believe. Everyone had intentions. Everyone had wishes. What made them potent, what made them spells, were the words, the rituals that carried them. How else could I justify all of the unanswered prayers I’d accumulated over the years, all of the desires that, according to Lewis, I had to learn to “let go of”?

I looked at the blank pad in front of me and began scrawling lines, practicing:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Jack and Jill went up the hill}
\textit{To give them a thrill, and maybe a meal.}
\end{quote}

Just that took me forever to come up with. I tried again:

\begin{quote}
\textit{My dear, sweet, Lewis}
\textit{Why act so foolish?}
\textit{If you cannot behave}
\textit{I’ll dig you your grave.}
\end{quote}

I hadn’t meant to say it. I was only looking for words that rhymed. I closed the notebook and sat back. Funny, how when you’re focused on making a rhyme the words seem to arrange themselves.

\begin{quote}
\textit{Six lines into being a witch and I’m already murdering my husband}, I thought.
\end{quote}

I glanced at the clock again: 12:14 AM. I decided to give Lewis a call on his cell phone.

“Hello?” he answered.
“Are you still with Sam?” I asked. “It’s getting pretty late.” I listened for voices in the background, but heard nothing.

“No, no,” he said, sounding a touch out of breath. “I’m on my way home right now. I’ll see you in a minute.”

“Is everything okay?”


“Are you okay to drive? Do you need me to come get you?”

“No, I’m already in the car. I haven’t had that much.” A brief silence. “How was your evening?”

“My evening was good. More of a writers’ group than a book club.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I liked it though. Everyone seemed really nice. I think I’m going to learn a lot.”

“Well that’s great, honey. I’m so happy for you.”

“Yes, I’m happy too.”

“I’ll be home in a minute.”

“See you then.”

Twenty minutes later we were in bed, silent, and I lay awake thinking of all that I wanted from life, searching my brain for all those unanswered prayers.

*5*

When I was a girl
I found a small turtle
I kept for a pet
Even though it was wet.
In school there were those  
Who laughed at my toes  
So I took some barbed wire  
And hung them in rows.

I was getting better, I knew. Or at least more efficient in my composition. It took me only a few moments to scribble out couplets. The chore was coming up with the first one. By the second I would have already absorbed the rhythm and it basically would write itself. I was surprised though by the dark places that process sometimes took me; I wondered whether my imagination was simply disposed to it, or if language somehow tended that way.

By the time the next Sabbat came around, despite having yet to conjure any magic, I was feeling much more witchy. I went to Victoria Secret and purchased a blue silk robe to wear, along with some lacy new under things for no reason in particular. I’d also begun to jog a little in the mornings so that I wouldn’t feel like such a pastry wearing them. I rode my bike to Judith’s house in Northwest Boulder. It was dusk when I arrived and from the street I could see candles already burning within. I locked my bike to the wooden fence separating her yard from her neighbor’s and walked to the front door. I wore my hair down and gently curled, like Judith’s, my bangs swept carefully to one side.

“Helen!” she said when she opened the door. “You look positively radiant!” She stepped onto the porch and hugged me before leaning back and examining my attire.

“Did you bring…”

I shrugged my backpack off of my shoulder and patted its side.

“Excellent.”
Again she led me through the candle-lit living room and showed me where I could change in the bathroom. I took my time, washing my hands for no reason and savoring the marble wash basin, the organic hand soap: Canadian pine and white sage—lovely.

Inside the spell room most of the women had already arrived and were standing in groups of two and three, cradling glasses of wine. They stopped talking, once again, to notice me enter and, observing my attire, began to clap. I blushed. Several of them came forward, Mary Beth and Kaleen among them, and hugged me, and I could feel our breasts rubbing together through the silk.

“You look fantastic,” Kaleen said. “I can’t tell quite what it is. Not just the robe. Your hair, maybe? But there’s something else, something I can’t quite put my finger on.”

I sipped my wine and asked Kaleen about the binding spell from the week before. I had been dying to know whether or not it worked.

“Of course it worked,” she said, sounding offended, although her face broke into a smile. “There were several nights at first when he came home all sullen and upset. I think he’d been trying to fool around but couldn’t, ahem, rise to the occasion.” She made a perverse gesture with her finger and we both snickered. “By now though I’m pretty sure he’s given up. And you know something? His mood has really improved.”

“Who would have thought doing the right thing could make you feel good,” Mary Beth chimed.

One by one the rest of the coven trickled in until there were eleven of us in all. Most of them I had met at the last meeting, although those whom I hadn’t, I met now: Regina, Agitha, Francine, and Zoe.
At one point Judith whispered that, if I wanted, I could actually participate in the ceremony tonight. “Just stand between Kaleen and Hanna and follow along until you’re in the circle, then it’s just a matter of focusing on whatever spell is being cast and repeating the incantation to yourself, being gracious to whatever spirit we’re working with.”

“Okay,” I said. “If you really think it will be alright.”

She smiled. “Of course, dear. It’s nothing complicated tonight anyway. Just a ceremony, really, to honor one of the spirits we often work with. The one most important thing to remember is the easiest—stay inside the circle. Otherwise whatever magic we’re working with gets out, and whatever spirits we’re working with get in.”

I nodded solemnly.

We followed the same procedure as last time to start. When it came time to drop our robes I was shocked by the sensation of air against my body. I was surprised by how much colder the room felt without any clothes, not even a scrap of silk to buffer me. I was glad to have exercised the past couple of weeks, and wondered if the others were as conscious of my body as I was. The air felt luxurious, like I was bathing in it. I shuddered. Nudity, I realized, was quite a beautiful thing.

Instead of casting a spell this time Judith led us invoking a spirit named Orobus. As she’d explained, the ceremony was designed to worship it, or to honor it, I suppose I should say. Judith did most of the talking, thanking it for its presence and for the power it granted us, although every now and then I would follow the rest of them in prostration.

I say ‘it’ because something about the way she addressed it made the thing’s gender unclear to me. Perhaps spirits don’t have gender, I thought. I kept stealing glances
toward the triangle outside the pinnacle of the circle, the place it was supposed to inhabit, although each time I saw nothing.

Afterwards, as before, we milled about drinking wine and laughing about some rumor going on in the community about a group of witches up to no good. Judith came over to check on me. “How did it go tonight?” she asked.

“It went well,” I said. “I just did what you told me to do, repeated all the words, focused my intention, and watched Hanna and Kaleen for what to do with my arms.”

“Good. That’s very good. Do you feel any different now that the ceremony is over? Empowered, at all?”

“I don’t know,” I said, trying to detect something inside of myself. “Maybe. I kept trying to see or feel some sign of the spirit we were working with. What was its name?”

“Orobus,” she said. “Yes,” and an odd, almost wistful look came over her face. “He’s one of the better demons to work with; dependable, serious, not at all mischievous like some of them can be. It takes a different kind of perception to see it. But give it time. Before long I’m sure he’ll visit you too.”

“That was a demon we invoked?” I asked, the revelation of the thing’s gender lost in the light of this new information.

“Of course. What did you think it was?”

I still hadn’t gotten used to the terminology. The word demon connoted sulphur, flames, little red, reptilian bodies. “Oh, I… I don’t know. Nothing, I guess. Just still getting used to that word. It was a ‘he’ though?”

She smiled and placed a hand on my shoulder. “It’s best not to stress too much over the particulars.”
“Say, what’s your schedule like, Helen?” Mary Beth asked me.

I shrugged. “Both of my sons are staying in Fort Collins for the summer, and my husband usually works late on his book. So my schedule is pretty open right now.”

“We should meet up sometime this week, talk about what your first spell should be.”

I glanced at Judith and she nodded. “If you’d like we can plan on having you cast at the next gathering. There’s still some things we need to go over before then, but no reason we shouldn’t go ahead and get the first one out of the way.”

“Um, okay,” I said, excited but also a bit nervous at the thought of myself, my own naked body, being at the center of the circle, conversing, as it were, with demons. “Sure,” I said to Mary Beth. After all, it had been ages since I’d spent any social time with women my age. “That would be great.”

We met the following Tuesday for cocktails at Brasserie Ten Ten on West Walnut—a nice little French bistro with checkered tile and white table clothes, a patio with a view of the Flatirons. We waited twenty minutes for a seat on the patio. If I had been there with Lewis we would have been seated immediately. He’s charismatic that way, appears to exude wealth and authority despite being an English Professor. We, on the other hand, were obliged to wait, and when a table opened up inside we took it. The waiter brought a carafe of wine, bread, and some butter.

“This place isn’t so bad,” said Mary Beth. “Wish they’d take that TV out of the bar though. Kind of ruins the illusion.”

“The illusion of what?”
“Of being in Paris.” This she pronounced like a French person: Par-ee.

“They have TVs in France,” Kaleen said.

“Not in my version of it.”

“Have you ever been to France?” Hanna asked me.

“Yes,” I said. “My husband, Lewis, and I went there for our honeymoon.”

“Ah! L’amour…” Mary Beth said wistfully, and I blushed a little. “How long have you been married?”

I told her twenty-three years.

“Jeez!” Kaleen laughed. “My first husband and I divorced after eight. The second, after five. Carl and I’ve been married to for seven years now and I’m determined to beat my record if I have to make him bed-ridden.”

I remembered the binding ceremony Kaleen had performed on my first evening with the coven and leaned forward, staring into the bread basket for a minute and considering what I wanted to say. “Kaleen, can I ask you a sort of personal question?”

She looked at me and her forearms moved up to the table, palms facing down. “Of course you can, dear.”

“How did you find out your husband was cheating?”

She took a prolonged sip of wine, spotted the waiter across the room and gestured for another glass. “E-mails,” she said. “I’d suspected it, of course, already. I think women have a sixth sense about these things, especially when you’ve been married as many times as I have—the late nights, the weird smells, hairs you pick up around the house. He’s a clever man, and careful, but it takes a different sort to put one over on old Kaleen.”
“What made you decide to check his e-mail? Did you ever think it might have been better not to know?”

“Let me tell you something,” she said, leaning on her elbow across the table. Her face was grave. “There’s nothing graceful about ignorance; it’s just ignorance. I suppose I could have gone on pretending that nothing was up, ignoring the signs and hoping that maybe I could win him back through ordinary means, but why on Earth would I?”

She looked at me. Evidently this was not a rhetorical question. “I don’t know,” I said.

“What about you, ladies,” she asked Mary Beth and Hanna. “Would you want to know for sure, or ignore it?”

“I’d want to know,” Mary Beth said immediately. “Can’t fix something unless you figure out, first, what’s wrong.”

Hanna seemed less sure. She was the youngest of us and, at this point, had never been married. “I don’t know,” she said. “I think sometimes love should be the one thing we don’t mess with.”

Kaleen rolled her eyes at me and smiled. I smiled too, uncertain of exactly why. “That’s a good thought for you to have at your age,” she said, patting her on the forearm. “Although screwing with love isn’t any different from any of the other magic we work.”

She turned to me: “Some people believe influencing free will at all is wrong, that that’s the difference between white and black magic. I can’t imagine what white witches must do with their time. Just send positive energy out? Work with magic in a general, non-specific way? Sounds like a cope out. That’s magic neutered.”
I listened to her, although my concentration was interrupted by something I saw at the entrance by the hostess’s table. A man and a girl. Lewis, and what I can only assume to be his research assistant. I didn’t say anything at first, just watched the two of them, how his hand guided the small of her back, just the tips of his fingers, almost innocent. He smiled and leaned across the desk to the hostess, exchanged a few laughing remarks, and a minute later they followed her out to a table on the patio.

I continued watching them, although half of their table was hidden behind a stone column so the only one I could see was Lewis. He was at his best, I could tell, smiling like I haven’t seen him smile in a long time, not a trace of cynicism, laughing. I could only imagine the abundance of witty remarks bubbling out of him as I sat there, watching.

“Helen? Helen!” Mary Beth said from across the table. I snapped out of it.

“Yes? What is it?”

They exchanged glances. “We were asking if you’ve been working on any spells.”

“Oh, spells. Um, yes. Yes I have, some. Really just rhyming, mostly, but I’ve been trying to think about what I might like to do.” I was flustered and knew that my words weren’t coming out right.

“Who’s that you keep looking at?” Kaleen said, turning very obviously to see what was behind her. Fortunately they were outside. She glanced around then looked back at me, waiting for me to point them out.

I looked down at the table, embarrassed and not wanting to talk about it. A quick lie would have sufficed, but I’ve never been particularly quick with lies.

“It’s my husband,” I said. “I just noticed he’s sitting outside on the patio.”
“Really?” Hanna trilled. “Which one is he? Point him out.”

I pointed him out. “Oooh, handsome. Did you two plan on running into each other? What’s he doing here?”

“No,” I said. “He’s here with someone… else.”

Their expressions got serious then. They looked at each other and then at me. “I think it’s his research assistant,” I said in order to break the silence.

“Oh huh,” Kaleen said, her head ticked to one side. “Well, I suppose it could be a professional sort of dinner. Maybe it’s her birthday, or an anniversary of some kind. Maybe they’ve got something work-related to celebrate.”

I looked away, too ashamed to respond.

“The real question, I suppose, is do you want to know for certain, and if so, are you willing to do anything about it?” Her tone was ironic, but not unsympathetic. Maternal, in a way. And sitting there with my head slumped over I felt a sudden flash of anger, intense and searing. I looked up.

“Yes,” I said at last. “Yes, I think I want to know.”

We left before Lewis and the assistant did. I thought about passing the patio and pretending not to notice, put a little fear into him. Instead, I turned in the opposite direction and took the stone alleyway, which was draped in ivy and cut between the restaurant and a costume shop, to where my car was parked on Pearl Street.

At home I waited for him at the kitchen table. I waited a long time. Sage rubbed her back against my ankles in figure eights and I liked to think she sensed my distress. I did not pet her though, instead focused on what I would say to Lewis, or more
importantly, what he would say. Confronting Lewis was a tricky business. You didn’t want to do it unless you had your case all laid out in black and white, and even then, on occasions when his guilt was clear, he was so preemptive and comprehensive with his apologies it had the effect of taking the heat right out of you, or at least your right to it, before you’d had a chance to say all that you wanted to say. You came off looking like the bad guy, beating a dead horse, as it were.

This wasn’t just failing to clean out the sink though. I wasn’t sure how he would respond to an accusation like this.

When he finally did arrive home it was with his blazer slung over one shoulder, one side of his shirt untucked. He looked tired.

“Hey sweetie,” he said, sounding deflated. He went to the refrigerator and grabbed himself a beer, popped the top and stood in the entryway to the dining room.

“Have you been waiting on me?” he asked.

“Yes, as a matter of fact I have,” I said.

He turned and went back into the kitchen. “Okay then,” he called over his shoulder. “Just let me get changed first. Long day, you know.”

He passed through the kitchen to the hallway on the other side and I could hear him go to the bathroom first, the sink running. Several minutes later he returned wearing shorts and a t-shirt, his suede house shoes. He took a seat at the other end of the table.

“Alright, so what did you want to talk about?”

“Well,” I began. I decided it would be best to get his version first. “What did you do today?”
He looked at me with one of those empty stares designed to make people feel stupid. “You’ve been waiting around here just to ask me about my day?”

I didn’t answer, just straightened in my chair.

“Well, I went to the office, had to spend a little too much time organizing my notes and sources for this next chapter, which took so long I barely got around to writing. Took a break to go to the gym. Came back, worked some more, then went and grabbed a bite to eat on the way home.”

“Is that all?”

“In a nutshell.”

“Where did you go to eat?”

“What difference does it make?” he said, suddenly becoming irritated. “What is this? If you’ve got something to say I wish you’d just come out and say it.”

“I want to see whether or not you’ll tell the truth yourself.”

He looked at me then, awareness suddenly dawning on his face. “What did you do this evening?”

“I met some of the ladies from my book club for happy hour at Brasserie Ten Ten.”

“Oh!” he said, smiling. “Is that what this is about? You saw me dining with Andrea and think, what, we’re sleeping together?”

Again, I didn’t answer and he began to laugh.

“Sheila,” he said, “if I were having an affair I think I would be a little more discreet than to take my research assistant—which, by the way, is a total marital cliché—to a popular restaurant downtown and romance her on the patio for all to see.”
“Just because it’s a cliché doesn’t mean it isn’t true.”

“Ouch.”

I could see now how this was going to go. Already the conversation’s fuse was burning out. I felt embarrassed, and silly: just how I knew I would feel. But I ignored it. I’d prepared for this mentally and had determined that no matter how the conversation went I would not stop until it exploded and the shards were left for me to examine or draw blood with.

“That’s not the only thing,” I said. “There’s also the way you’ve been coming home late with weird smells hanging off you. You’re a professor on sabbatical; there’s no reason for you to be working until eight or nine o’clock at night.”

“It’s when I’m most productive, Helen! And the way I see it, the more I get done this summer the more chance there is of using my actual sabbatical to take you somewhere. A cruise, maybe. Or—”

“You never seduce me anymore.”

That made him pause.

“What?”

“I can’t remember the last time you came onto me. Most nights I come onto you, and either you ignore me or you fuck me for a little while before losing interest. When was the last time you came having sex with me?”

“Helen!”

“Lewis! We’re a married couple, our children are gone—this isn’t the way it’s supposed to be. And I can’t think of any good reason for it unless there’s another woman.”
He looked at me then and I could see something harden in him, a new resolve calcifying his features. It was not a conversation anymore, I knew. It was a fight, which, I reminded myself, was what I’d wanted.

“Okay,” he said at last without a trace of anger. He went to the kitchen counter and grabbed his cell phone. “Let’s give her a call then.”

“Who?”

“Andrea, of course.”

“Lewis—”

“What? You’re so convinced this is happening, and I certainly can’t convince you otherwise. Let’s just check with her.”

“It’s not going to prove anything, Lewis. You’re just trying to embarrass me.”

“Embarrass you? Are you saying anything you should feel embarrassed about?”

I watched while he punched a series of numbers into his phone. “Lewis, if you do this—”

“What, you’ll leave me? You’re accusing me of cheating on you, Helen. I’ve got a right to defend myself.”

He held the phone to his ear and I could hear the ring tone. She had one of those pop song ring tones, an artist I didn’t recognize. Before she could answer I stood up from the table and marched off to our bedroom. Behind me I could hear Lewis say, “Andrea? Andrea, just hold on one second… Helen! Helen, I’ve got her on the phone! Isn’t this what you wanted?”

I slammed the door to our room and locked it, grabbed Lewis’s sound canceling earphones and put them on. They didn’t really cancel out sound. More like muted it, but
it was better than nothing. I could hear dimly Lewis thumping on the bedroom door, murmuring something, either to me or to the girl on the phone, I’m not sure. But I did not pay attention. I laid there with my eyes open trying to focus on a single blade of the ceiling fan as it revolved. I had lost, I knew. In the days that followed Lewis would be especially cold, especially cutting, until, in an effort to put a stop to it, I finally apologized, admitted that I’d been silly to even think it, even though it would not be true. It’s how all of our arguments went.

I laid there and thought of Kaleen, tried to imagine her in my place, what she would have said to Lewis. I doubted he’d be able to get away with this with her. But then it occurred to me that he would not get away with it because she would not have brought it up this way. She would have found out all she needed to know and worked it out on her own. Or rather, with the coven.

I grabbed my notepad off the bedside table:

> My dear, sweet Lewis
> I’ll show you who the fool is
> By this time next week
> You’ll be kissing my feet

The knocking at the door had stopped although I kept the earphones on, thinking wistfully of all it was in my power to do until at last I fell into a deep, solitary sleep. It was the best I’d slept in weeks.

I woke up late the following morning and Lewis had already left the house. The living room smelled like him, that familiar morning stink, and the couch cushions were
all crumpled. On one end a comforter was folded with some extra pillows stacked on top. He must have left wearing the same clothes from the day before because I’d fallen asleep with the bedroom door still locked. The first thing I did was to call Kaleen and tell her about it.

“So he didn’t own up to any of it?” she asked.

“No. He called her at one point; tried to get me to speak to her.”

“Son of a bitch. That proves it if nothing else; no way he’d throw her under the bus like that if he wasn’t already fucking her.”

“So what should I do?”

The line went silent for a moment. “What do you want to do?”

“I want to put a stop to it,” I said, and when she next spoke I could hear in her voice that she was smiling.

“Very well, dear. That we can arrange.”

Judith greeted me at the front door as usual, grinning through the screen and taking her time as she approached. “Hello, you,” she said, drawing it out. “I hear we’re working a special spell for you tonight.”

I blushed and smiled past her.

“Did you bring it?” she asked, and at first I didn’t know what she was talking about, but then it occurred to me and I produced the plastic baggy with Lewis’s hair inside. Lewis didn’t have a whole lot of hair, and didn’t own any brushes or anything I could have drawn from, so I had to settle for the shavings left behind in the sink and in
his electric razor. She looked confused for a moment before realizing what it was, then said: “Splendid. This will work even better.”

We milled about in the spell room for half an hour, sipping wine and chatting. I noticed the others all half-turned toward me, whispering. When I met their eyes they would smile reassuringly, but would say nothing else. Nobody mentioned Lewis or the spell except for Kaleen, to ask, “Did you get the words down alright?”

I nodded solemnly. The truth was that I wasn’t sure they were alright, but they at least rhymed…for the most part. I stepped away from the others and lifted the crumpled piece of notebook paper from my robe pocket, bent toward one of the candles on a side table. Looking at them now, it seemed impossible that they could have any magical value. I kept thinking of the conversation with Lewis—of all conversations with Lewis—how, in the beginning, I would feel so sure of my position and the words I’d rehearsed, and how, by the end, I would feel so confused and ridiculous. What if the same thing happened tonight? What if I failed somehow, couldn’t say the words or worse, what if I did say them and they had no effect?

I turned and saw Judith standing near me, watching. I fumbled with the piece of paper, crumpled it up and hastily returned it to my robe pocket. She stepped forward and took my hand. “Just remember,” she said. “The words are a means. The real spell comes from inside you—your intention.”

“Alright. Thanks, Judith.”

“And don’t worry about it not working. We’ll be helping.” She winked and smiled at me, then turned to go set up the altar. “I’ll go ahead and put your paper up there
if you want,” she said. Reluctantly I reached into my pocket and gave it to her, feeling oddly relieved once I had. It was out of my hands.

I stood with Mary Beth and Hanna until it was time, not really contributing to the conversation so much as distracting myself. Did I really want to cast against Lewis? It seemed, suddenly, like there’d been something in our vows against that, but no, just those lines about cherishing one another in sickness and in health, till death do us part.

When it was almost time I took up the broom and began to sweep out the circle. Once I’d finished I returned to the perimeter and removed my robe like the others. Judith performed her ambulations and blessed the circle, then five other women brought candles and placed them at each of the five corners of the pentagram. We entered from the north, and with her athame Judith raised the circle around us. She then called on the elementals, the watchtowers, and Orobus. Unlike the first couple of gatherings, this time I was sure I could feel them, could feel their power permeating the circle, and I no longer was worried about my spell not working, about my words being inadequate. Orobus was here.

“Lord and Lady protect our spells, protect our Helen and lend your help. Empower what we’ve set out to do, and we will not fail to pay tribute to you.” Slowly, Judith’s hands lowered to her side and, with head bowed, she left the center of the circle and joined the others at its outer edge. It was my turn. I looked around to see if anyone would cue me, but they did not. Their heads were bowed. I stepped to the center of the circle in front of the altar, aware now of my nakedness, of invisible eyes watching—a kingdom of air against my skin. I knelt down and looked at the sheet with my spell on it, at the instructions Judith had given me for mixing the oils and herbs with Lewis’s shavings. I began by placing eucalyptus oil in a small bowl.
“Because you have lied and failed to be true, I summon the spirits to punish you,” I began. “Not for revenge or a permanent sin, but so that, in time, we’ll be together again.” I added in a bushel of stinging nettles, ground them up with a pestle. “Because it’s your vanity that’s caused you to stray, I cast this spell to take it away, to give unto you a deformity that grows, to purify your selfishness, your true self to know.” I added the shavings now and mixed it together. “A blight on you, Lewis, until the day comes, when you remember your vows and your transgressions are done. And if ever again you think to betray, by Orobus I curse you to remember this day.”

I angled a piece of flint into the bowl and struck it, and immediately the potion caught fire. Around me I could hear the others begin to chant quietly, swaying together, while an odor like sulphur rose up from the bowl and filled the room. I too began to chant. Even though I couldn’t understand what they were saying, I chanted anyway, making up gibberish as I went, but meaning it; meaning it more than I’d perhaps meant anything.

The din in the room grew louder, and before long I could feel a hot light pressing against my closed eyelids, although I did not open them to check. Behind me, I felt a pair of arms enfold me. A pair of breasts pressed against my back, and at first I thought it was Judith. But I could hear her voice along with the others somewhere in front of me, and there was something else, something hard pressing against my upper thigh. My eyes jerked open and the others were all watching me, I saw. Their eyes were wild and manic, arms extending toward me and fingers waving. They grinned, each of their faces rapt in a kind of frenzied adulation, and they were not looking at me, I realized, but at whatever it
was behind me, holding me. I considered resisting, briefly, but instead collapsed into it, allowing the arms to support me.

Afterwards I was anxious. There was a part of me that hadn’t actually believed that it would work. What if I’d harmed him? I needed to get home and check on Lewis, make sure he was okay. Although whether I was more concerned or excited is difficult to say.

The house was quiet. Sage was waiting for me on the kitchen table and the ceiling fan had been left on. The room was cool, dark but for a small light in the kitchen casting a faint glow over the living room. I went over to Sage and rubbed her with the front and back of my hand before setting my bag down and walking back to our bedroom. I could see Lewis’s shadow bulging on his side of the bed, flayed by moonlight. Poor man, I thought. Seeing him there, asleep in the dark and beneath the covers, he suddenly looked so small and vulnerable. I felt bad for him, but it was a sly, superior sort of guilt. Guilt was my privilege. I removed my clothes and crawled into bed naked, cradling his hips with my own and kissing the back of his neck softly. I felt him rustle and laid there with my nose pressing into his back, waiting for morning.

I woke to a cry in the bathroom.

“What is it?” I called sleepily from bed. Lewis appeared in the doorway: I could not see very clearly from that distance, but the bottom half of his face looked red and irritated. “Oh my god,” I murmured, acting out my surprise. “What happened?”
“I don’t know,” he said, sounding angry. He sat down on the foot of the bed and began putting his socks on. “I woke up and it was like this.” He moved feverishly, no time to pause and deal with the situation.

“Did you handle any plants or anything that could have caused it?”

“Of course not, Helen.”

“Must have stuck your nose someplace it didn’t belong then.” I giggled and he turned and glared at me, his eyes shifting back and forth, reading my expression. To joke like this was out of character, and I felt it. I relented: “Well, why don’t you stay home and we can put something on it? Where have you got to be?”

“I need to work,” he said. “Plus I scheduled a brunch conference with Sam to talk about some of his research.”

“Cancel it.”

He looked at me again with the same confused and angry look. “Can’t do it,” he said. “Not over some fucking rash.” He buttoned his shirt and tied his tie.

“Well, would you like any make-up to try and cover it?” This time when he looked at me his angry expression was troubled by something, a sudden anxiety that seemed to say, *Does it look that bad?* But he said nothing. As he was walking out the door I called after him, “Lewis?” And he turned, looked at me a moment while I paused. “You look irritated.” And with that I burst into laughter, a shrill, mad cackle that continued long after he’d slammed the door behind him.

The next couple of days I saw little of Lewis. He had scheduled many “conferences” both morning and night that, despite being on sabbatical, he simply
couldn’t get out of. That first night when I’d come home and seen him there in bed I’d made a deal with myself that if he asked for help, I would help him; I would give him the antidote, which I kept in a small vial in my bedside table. But he didn’t and the rash worsened. It was dark red now, nearly purple, and the bumps in his face had grown into large, ragged welts that made it look almost like a burn. A contagious burn.

A few times he would be at home, reading something on the couch and I could actually see this restlessness enter into him until finally he dropped the paper and grabbed his coat, claiming to have left something back at his office. He would return half an hour later, dejected and restless no longer.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” I would ask, only now he wouldn’t even bother to look at me, much less answer. There was an air of defeat about him, but until he appeared before me on hands and knees it would not be enough.

Then one night it happened. I returned home from Sabbat to find him sitting on the toilet in our bathroom weeping. When I appeared in the doorway he looked up and I could see that the blight had risen to just below his eyes, which themselves were wide and blood shot.

“My lord, darling,” I said, crossing the bathroom in my high heels and cradling his face with my hands, holding it against my chest. He was able to hold it together for a moment before the sobs returned and, very slowly, I could feel his hands climbing my back, embracing me.

“Shhh,” I said. “It’s alright. It’s going to be alright.” He only sobbed harder.

When he managed to quiet himself a little I drew away and held his face in front of me, stood looking into it for several long moments, careful to keep my expression
blank and neutral, before bending down and kissing him on the forehead. At this his eyes filled with tears again but before he could start I bent and kissed him long on the lips, pressing my tongue into his wet mouth so fiercely that, after a moment, he had no choice but to reciprocate. When this time I pulled away I could see he was confused and elated. The tears had gone and, though his voice still was shaky, he was nearly recovered when he asked, “But why?”

I grabbed his hands and guided him to his feet, led him backwards toward the bedroom. “I’ll show you,” I said.

When I’d reached the bed I let myself fall backward and pulled him gently over top of me.

“You aren’t disgusted?” he asked.

“Of course I am, darling.” I lifted my dress over my head and removed my bra, next my underwear. When he tried to do the same I stopped him, instead pulled his head down to my chest and he began to kiss me, tentatively at first, still ashamed and conscious of my charity. I stroked his hair and when he saw that I would not complain he became more enthusiastic, kissing my breasts now, my shoulder and neck until I pushed his head lower to my stomach and ribs, next my hip, until finally he was between my legs. The first jolt was almost unpleasant, it had been so long, but soon I relaxed and gripped his head firmly between my legs and began to laugh, not unkindly. He seemed startled for a moment but then relaxed and allowed me to take hold of him. I could feel his ruined face like some kind of knotted shell rubbing against me.

He was working hard, diligently, and I closed my eyes, suddenly imagining myself on a remote beach somewhere staring off into an empty horizon, a still sea stained
by sunset. “Sing to me,” I said, unsure, in that moment, whom exactly I was addressing.

“In sickness and health; sing that you will love me and never leave.”
Joy

Dear Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for all that you’ve given me today. Thank you for my boys, Joseph and Paul, and for the ability to put food on the table. Thank you for my husband, Lord; that he is still with me after all these years. I don’t always like him that much, but, with your blessing, I do believe I still love him. In any case, I don’t know what I’d do if he ever left, so whatever you’re saying to him, Lord, keep saying it. Speak to his heart, and while you’re at it draw him closer to you. That would help us both, I think.

Above all, watch over us against the Villain, whose forces are gathering and who threatens the sanctity of your kingdom on Earth. In God’s name I pray—

—If it be thy will though, Lord, I also pray that you would use me. Use me to fight the Evil closing in around us. I am tormented by its presence: the heathen beliefs of the people here, the college students and their drugs, and worst of all, the witches. No one seems to believe me about them. My family least of all. They have pulled the wool over our eyes, distracted us with all of this lion business. But I’m going to change that, God. With your help, I can change anything.

So use me. Let me be thy sword here on Earth. Allow me to strike against thine enemies and to defend my family, for so long as the Devil’s servants exist among us I
fear for my children, for my Joseph and Paul. Give me the strength to protect them, Lord. Thy will be done. In Jesus’ name I pray—

―But when I search my heart, lying next to Peter in bed, I’m sometimes afraid of the anger there. It is a righteous anger, I believe, directed solely against thine enemies, but when I spoke about it to Pastor John last Tuesday he admonished me. “God calls us to love the sinner, hate the sin,” he said. But is that possible? What about when the sin has infected the person so deeply they are they same?

Some sins are easy to forgive. The students and their drugs, for example. I can forgive such people, because theirs are sins of ignorance and of immaturity. But what am I to do with these witches who know thy name and who believe in you, but who actively work against thy will on Earth? Who bring fear to our community, all so that the Fallen One may be glorified instead of thee? I hate them, Lord, with a hatred I cannot explain unless it is righteous. My hatred keeps me up at night, and when I do sleep it gives me nightmares.

I am in the woods and shadows move about me: large, hooded figures in black cloaks. They are closing in. Up ahead I can see a fire through the trees, and as I get closer I hear laughter: a wrong, malignant sort, and beneath that the squealing of children. My children. I run towards it, tearing myself against stones and branches while at the same time feeling those hooded figures trailing after me, pursuing me. The fire retreats. My children’s squealing resolves into words: Mommy! Mommy! They are crying out for me, God!
Just a bad dream, I know, and perhaps I’m wrong to think it’s so significant. But is it so implausible? What frightens me about the witches is that they exist outside of what I understand and take for granted about the world. Not only do they oppose everything that is holy and noble and good, but they oppose the very foundation of such things—your Word. And so I ask, what mercy can I expect from them? What, besides the most deliberate and awful cruelty?

When I wake, the bed is drenched. My husband is gone to work, my children to catch their buses to school. There is no one to comfort me, Lord. Not even you. All I have is the thought that today I will resist them. With everything in me I will oppose this evil and not rest until it is vanquished, destroyed, uprooted from the face of the Earth and cast into the fires below. I ask thy help in Jesus’ name—

—Because the worst part, Lord, is the occasional feeling I get that I’m doing this alone. It’s just a feeling, I know, and in my better moments it’s easy to dismiss. But there are times when I am struggling for you and I feel almost as though you have withdrawn yourself. Is it wrong for me to be angry? Pastor John says, no. A few Sundays ago he gave a sermon about how it is okay to be angry with you. He says that you are big enough to take our anger; even compared it to a healthy marriage, where love and discord are both necessary.

Not a helpful metaphor in my case.

Saint John wrote about the dark night of the soul, in which you withdraw yourself in order to bring us closer—a union that transcends the senses. But Saint John was a
mystic, and I am not. I need to see you. I need to feel your works. Otherwise I may as well be alone.

If only Peter could understand, it would be better. Then whenever you withdrew yourself I could take refuge in him, in his strength. But that is not the case. There are times when I feel close to him, almost like how it used to be. But I have only to utter your name and he closes up again, like a clam. I think that he regrets marrying me.

The boys don’t understand either, but they are just boys. I can’t expect them to understand the ways of the spirit. They are innocents, Lord. I would do anything for them, but like Peter, the more I try to instruct them in your ways the more they pull away from me. They are embarrassed of me, I think.

The other day I took them to visit the Franklins, whose youngest daughter was taken recently by ‘the lion,’ and had them play with the two older brothers while I talked to her parents. The Franklins do not come to Church often anymore, and I knew they would feel awkward praying with me. It did them some good though, I think. I could tell by the way their eyes welled up when we mentioned Emily’s name.

Meanwhile, the boys played basketball in the driveway.

Afterwards, when I went through the garage to get them I could hear the oldest Franklin boy talking about me. “You know your mom’s crazy, don’t you?” he said. “Emily got eaten by a lion.”

“She’s just trying to help,” Joseph said softly.

“She’s nutty. My parents wish she’d just leave them alone.”

“Why don’t you just shut up,” Joseph said.

“Or what?”
Joseph uttered a curse word then, and immediately I appeared around the corner, snatching them both up and carrying them off to the car. I knew that Joseph was expecting me to lay into him about the cursing, probably assumed that’s the only part of it I’d heard. But once I got them in the car I couldn’t bring myself to say anything. I drove, watching his face in the rearview mirror shift from concern to melancholy again, his head leaned against the window.

Lord, give me the wisdom to let your presence be a positive influence on my family, not one that drives them apart. In Jesus’ name I pray—

—What about a coalition of some kind, something I could advertise in the Church bulletin? An anti-necromancy coalition. I’ve been checking out old books from the library on witch-hunting. Few of the tactics seem appropriate to the age we live in, but still, they are informative. Surely there are ways of adapting them. Anyway, speak to my heart, dear God, and let me know what you think. In Jesus’ name—

—At last, Evil has a face: that woman who owns the bookstore on Pearl Street. The pagan woman. Judith, I think, was her name. I still cannot believe what she said to me, the way she behaved. Here I was, exercising my God-given right to protest outside her store, attempting to bring some sliver of truth to a starving public. It was hot—the living statue had to leave because his bronze paint was sweating—and so far all I’d encountered were unruly teens:

“Man, hatred only leads to more hatred.”

“Do you think Jesus would be carrying that sign?”
These children! I wanted to tell them about the money-lenders in the temple, how Jesus wouldn’t need any sign. “I did not come to bring thee peace,” I quoted, “but a sword.”

“Even the devil can quote scripture,” one of them said.

Clearly!

They didn’t bother me for long though. Most passed with little more than a glance and a shake of the head. Although it wasn’t long before she appeared at the top of the steps, hair flaming behind her although her eyes were like ice.

“What’s this about infanticide?” she asked coolly.

I explained my suspicions, doing my best out of courtesy not to mention her personally. She asked what evidence I had.

“Just prayer and common sense,” I said.

“I see,” she said. “Because they go together.”

I did not comment. She was trying to get me to react, to make me look like the bad guy. But I would not play into her strategy.

She went on: “Let me ask you: supposing someone in the pagan community was responsible for the missing children—and it doesn’t sound like there’s any evidence of that—but supposing for a moment that you’re correct, how does it help matters to vilify the rest of us for one person’s actions?”

Assuming it’s just one person, I wanted to say, but instead I referenced scripture, like Pastor John has instructed us to do in these kinds of disputes. “Lot’s righteousness didn’t save Sodom,” I said.
“And do you feel the same way about Muslims flying planes into buildings, Christians and sexual abuse? Should we persecute them too?”

“Those are Catholics,” I said. “And it’s not isolated incidents I’m interested in. Certain beliefs can’t help but yield evil actions.”

She smiled. A number of people had stopped to watch our exchange. “I see. And what, pray tell, are the beliefs witches have that are so dangerous?”

The question made me stiffen. So far I hadn’t had to say this much out loud, and I don’t know whether I was embarrassed or what, but I balked before replying, “Satan worship.”

Her face cracked. “Ah ha! So we’re a part of the Christian tradition then? I had no idea.”

“You can change the words around all you want, but the fact remains that there is one God, one Devil, and you cannot worship both.”

“You don’t think so?”

I remained quiet. More people were stopping to watch, murmuring amongst themselves. She looked down and chuckled to herself. The prospect of an audience now I could see was making her mean. Her eyes flashed. “Let me tell you something: first, there is no male at the head of our religion, dark or light. We worship the All, which contains both your God as well as your Devil, both the male as well as the female energies. Second, this is something we have had to deal with for centuries, and all because you and your Church cannot seem to imagine a worldview separate from your own. These people are using magic? Must come from the Devil. These people are seeking wisdom through a means other than the Bible? Must be the Devil.”
She paused as if waiting for me to speak—and Lord, how I wanted to!—but I could not. I searched my brain for something to say, some scripture to quote, but I came up blank. And it was then, Lord, that I felt your absence most clearly. All I could do was stand there and try to look dignified, although I could tell by the way the crowd looked at me that I wasn’t doing a very good job.

“Witches have never had a choice of who to worship,” she went on. “We’ve never had a say in our public image—you all gave us brooms and pointy hats and warts! But in this day and age, with religious freedom one of the founding articles of our constitution, and witchcraft itself an acknowledged religion protected by that constitution, to think that we still have to tolerate signs in front of our businesses accusing us of infanticide… It’s just too much. You should be ashamed.”

The people around us cheered. I remained silent, flushed.

“But you know what? I’m not bitter,” her face softened. “Unlike you, I know how to turn the other cheek. Wait right here, I’ve got something.” She turned and shuffled back down the steps, disappeared inside her store. I remained fixed beneath the mocking glares of those around me, trying not to hear the insults being passed from one pair of lips to another. I had to either endure or flee, and I could not flee. Judith returned.

“Here, this is for you,” she said, extending toward me a small, burlap doll. I took it. When everybody else saw what it was, they laughed. A joke, they thought, but I knew better. “On the tag there are the words you should say, and then you just need to imagine who you want to cast against. Be careful though. The law of magic is that whatever you send out comes back to you three times. You’ve got a beautiful pair of boys to think about, after all.”
She knew about Joseph and Paul!

I looked to the others for help although none of them appeared to notice. They were smiling, laughing at the crazy Christian lady getting told off by the witch. Tears began to well up in my eyes, but I choked them back. I was so angry, so ashamed. She watched me suppress my emotion with a sadistic fascination.

“Alright, folks,” she said at last. “Show’s over. Thank you very much for your support. I doubt we’ll have any more trouble out of this one.” She turned back toward the steps and winked at me over her shoulder before descending and going back inside. The crowd also dispersed, and I was left alone, clutching my sign, staring after her.

Is this my dark night, Lord? Is this my Gethsemane?

I’m sorry to say it, for I know it is not true. I can only hope that Pastor John is right and that you will permit my frustration. Indulge me as you would indulge a small child, Lord, for I know that your ways are not my own. In Jesus’ name—

—Forgive me, Lord. Fear of the Fallen One has entered my heart.

When I told Pastor John he reminded me that the Devil has no power on Earth except what you grant him, and I believe that. But in one of the witch books it said that he is still capable of creating illusions, perhaps not to physically harm us, but to torment, which is just as bad.

When I close my eyes now I see Judith—or at least, I think it’s Judith. She has the same look on her face as before: the same dark flame in her eyes, her red hair fanning behind her. Although if I look closely at her skin I can see a dark network of veins spreading beneath its surface, like a widow’s nest. And there is another thing: she is
naked, Lord. Not just that, but her body is different. Perverse. Sometimes she appears almost like a man although it’s hazy, like in a dream.

I’m unable to control it. The image afflicts me. I don’t know what to do and I’m embarrassed to tell Pastor John.

Peter and I consummated this evening—a sweaty, blind kind of love. The room was dark but I closed my eyes anyway, and when I did there was Judith. I imagined her in my place, that it was really she whom he was loving: her red hair, her dark eyes. And the more I imagined it the more I found myself slipping into his perspective, hovering over her like a lover and watching her face arch away from me, smiling, smiling, and when at last she looked me in the eye her expression was sharp and cruel. Recognition blossomed there like some barbed flower, and I woke to find the bed drenched, Peter and I both panting, spent several times over, in fact.

I still have the doll she gave me, the voodoo thing, locked up in my bedside table. I think about it sometimes, wonder whether or not it works. Is it possible to use the Devil’s tools against him? Or is that just what he wants us to believe, one of his tricks? Knowing the answer doesn’t make the question any less urgent. And that’s the Devil’s curse, I suppose: knowing what’s right doesn’t protect you from what is Evil.

I need your help, God. I don’t know how to deal with a threat like this. All I have are these words, this plea: Help me. In Jesus’ name I pray—

—I drive needles beneath her fingernails, I crush her calves in a vice. I suspend her from the ceiling by her wrists and stretch her body until air whistles through the joints. But even then, even in my imagination, I cannot make her scream. She will not
confess. She just stares at me with that same malignant expression, that same crooked smile.

In the *Malleus Maleficarum* they suggest “swimming” them: tossing suspected witches into a lake with a rope tied around their heels. If the woman sinks, you should drag her in because she’s righteous. If she floats, she is under the Devil’s protection and she must burn.

Judith always floats.

But why is it, Lord, that the righteous sink while the evil float? Where is *our* protection? Where is *our* support?

I know I’m at it again.

I read also in the *Malleus* that most of Satan’s recruiting is done through witches, and that they often cause things to go wrong in women’s lives to draw them into darkness. Is it wrong to say that I fear for my soul?

Watch over me and protect me, Lord. In Jesus’ name—

—I was sitting on the back porch when Joseph and Paul came running up, panic rubbed across their little faces. “What is it?” I asked, standing. The sun had sunk beneath the Flatirons, casting a large crooked shadow over the valley.

“We saw it, mama, we saw it!” Paul shouted, tugging at my blouse.

“Saw what?” I turned to Joseph, the eldest, hoping to get a straight answer.

“We saw the cougar,” he said, more subdued.

“The cougar?” I repeated. “Where?”
He pointed around the side of the house toward the thicket that borders Chautauqua.

“What did it look like?” I asked, testing him.

“It was huge—” Paul began, gesturing with his arms, but I cut him off.

“I’m asking Joseph,” I said, then turned to look him in the eye. “What did it look like?”

“It looked like a lion,” he said.

“But you did see it, right? It couldn’t have been anything else in the thicket?”

His look softened a little and his eyes turned down. “We saw something, and it did look like a lion, but it didn’t sound like one.”

“What do you mean?”

“It didn’t growl or roar or anything like that.”

“What did it do?”

He swallowed. “It laughed.”

For a moment I could only look at him. “It laughed?” I repeated. “You saw it laughing?”

“No,” he said. “By then it had already disappeared into the thicket. But we heard it coming from that same direction. It sounded like a woman laughing.”

Now I hurried the boys back inside. I locked the doors, closed the blinds. I was thankful that Peter was working the evening shift, otherwise he would have assumed I’d gone batty. I sent the boys to their room and told them to lock the door, unsure of what good it would do.
I thought of cemeteries, of sacred, hallowed places. Witches could not set foot there, I’d read, and if there had been a means to escape I would have taken them then to the graveyard behind the church where we would dwell among the stones, take shelter in one of the old family crypts. We would be safe. Even if the whole world fell away, there we would be safe.

Instead, once I had the children in their room I went to my own, took a seat on the bed next to the table and removed the burlap doll from the drawer. I stared at the expressionless black line sewn into its face, absolutely neutral, like a hammer, or any other object with a definite function. I closed my eyes, imagined Judith shrunken there in my hands, then read the words printed on the tag:

\[
\textit{With conscience pure I bind you here} \\
\textit{To follow and be subject to my will} \\
\textit{That whatever befalls this doll I hold} \\
\textit{With you shall also duly unfold.}
\]

I read the words and rattled through the drawer with my other hand until at last I found a sewing needle. I grasped it and closed my eyes, took several deep breathes until she appeared, naked and aflame, eyes boring into me. With a final cry I lifted my arm and brought the needle down hard. I felt a sharp jab in my thigh and the image of her disappeared. My bedroom returned, quiet and empty, except for me. The air conditioner kicked on and just then, that moment, was the most alone I’d ever felt. I’d pierced straight through the doll’s shoulder into my left leg, where a drop of blood bubbled to the surface, seeping into the fabric and forming a red dot on my jeans.
I felt silly and ashamed. I put the doll away and cleaned my leg, took off my jeans and rubbed the stain with a Tide pen. I turned to the doorway and saw Joseph and Paul standing there, staring at me in my underwear. I burst into tears.

What has happened to me, Lord? It was a trick. The whole time it was a trick to get me to forsake you, invoking the Devil against himself, as if that could have an effect. And now I can feel him inside of me, along with Judith and a host of others, tormenting me with hatred. I feel at times that I will consume myself; that the heat of my passion will burn me up with it.

This is what Hell feels like, I am sure.

And I know I have no right to ask, but I must pray to you for deliverance. If only to wreak your vengeance against them. I have sinned against thee, Lord, and I deserve to suffer! But if it be thy will, I pray that you will guide and direct me, fill me with your spirit and lead me to the Devil’s lair. I have no fear anymore. Only anger: righteous, desperate anger. Speak what you would have me do and I will do it. Whether it causes harm to myself or others, I will do what you ask of me. Because this is a war of attrition, Lord, and nobody said it would be easy. I only hope that Peter, Joseph, and Paul will forgive me, because I can’t afford to wait for them to understand. In your name I pray. Amen.
Regina

I lingered as long as I could, but knew that it would be no use. I’d made my case, listed my arguments as well as I could in the abstract, and she’d listened—anyone would give Judith that—and stared: eyes like pools of sea-green murk.

“What’s your objection?” I asked.

“That’s not the way they work,” she said, snubbing the candles with her fingers. The living room filled with sweet smoke. “Love is treacherous, and a familiar is too important to take those kinds of risks with.”

I glanced at one of the framed photographs on the table. “You’ve never thought… with Adam?”

She cut her eyes at me, then finished snubbing the candles, stood in the deepening gloom of the living room. “Tell me, Regina, why are you asking about this? It’s not all hypothetical, is it?” Her voice seemed to echo a little, and I was careful to avoid her eyes. It was forbidden to cast against one another, but Judith could put an idea in your head and no one would know the difference, including you.

“Just a thought I had,” I said. “If there’s a way to make love less treacherous, I would think that’d be it.”
She smiled and placed a hand on my shoulder. I shivered. “You’ve still got a lot to learn about how all of this works,” she said. To which I nodded, still not looking her in the face.

I walked home in the dark, just under a mile back to my house on North Folsom. Late summer is my favorite time in Colorado: warm enough during the day to feel the sun seeping into your skin, but cool enough at night to sleep with a blanket over you. It was a bit chilly and I had forgotten a sweater. I could feel my skin tingling beneath my dress and between my shoulder blades, my nipples standing on end.

There was an unofficial curfew now, with the lion on the loose. No one out of doors and barely any cars. The lion had targeted only children so far, to which I say good riddance. I only wished it would have picked up the neighbor children: Anthony and Jill. Mostly Anthony. How many times the little brat had egged my house, I’ll never know, and of course Derrick and Wanda wouldn’t believe it was their child. Did I see him do it? Did I have any reason to suspect?

When I reached my little house on Folsom I could see Derrick and Wanda sitting together in their living room, on the couch, watching *Shark Week* on National Geographic. Wanda often spoke of *Shark Week* as the only TV programming her and Derrick could agree upon. The children must have already gone to bed. I stood for a moment on the sidewalk, watching them. His arm was around her and she leaned against him with her legs pulled in close. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say they were a happily married couple.

I trudged up my front walkway and unlocked the door, stepped inside and turned on the lights to see all of my babies there waiting for me: dogs, cats, hummingbirds,
frogs, squirrels, and one baby pig—my secret favorite. “Hiiieee!” I squealed, stooping to greet and kiss each one of them. They proceeded toward me in an orderly fashion.

“What’s happened since I’ve been gone?”

Desdemona, a terrier mutt, told me Anthony had been by earlier: TP’d the elm in the backyard. My face darkened and I strode through the kitchen to the back window, where I could see pale streamers shifting in the moonlight, like the ghost of a willow haunting my backyard.

“Brat,” I muttered through gritted teeth. “Why can’t one of you be a mountain lion?” I returned to the living room and switched on Shark Week. It was a re-run: the guy who tries to put Great Whites to sleep holding them by the nose. I moved to turn it off, but on second thought left it on. I made myself a cup of tea in the kitchen and brought it to the couch, where I was immediately, though politely, swarmed. I tried to pet them all equally, but we understood how impossible that was. Jealousy was rarely an issue.

I thought about Wanda and Derrick, about how they had looked together curled up on the couch and I wondered how much of their ease and comfort was rehearsed. How many Shark Weeks had it taken for them to be able to relax just like a married couple?

I felt restless.

“Well, darlings, you all have been cooped up too long, I think.” Their ears perked up and they leapt from my lap, allowing me to stand. I went to the back door with the lot of them scraping at my head, peered in both directions before flinging the door open like Noah’s ark and watching them spill into the night. “Go, my darlings, and bring me news of what’s happening in the world.” I watched my little piggy bring up the rear, waddling
hurriedly after them, and smiled. I turned back inside and closed the door. Muted sounds of Shark Week echoed in the living room and I went back to watch it alone.

The following morning I waited for Derrick to leave for work, watching the driveway through my window until at last, coffee in one hand, manila folder in the other, he climbed into his car and was gone. Little piggy had told me how he’d groped her on the couch the night before. How the two of them had kissed and fondled one another before moving into their bedroom.

Did she look into it? I asked.

Familiars never lie. They will refuse to answer before they’ll lie.

Anthony shared a wall with them and little piggy told me how he’d lain awake listening to his parents fuck one another. No wonder he’s so deranged! He was afraid of the lion, piggy said, and that’s why he was awake. His gaze kept drifting toward the moon-lit window. Piggy worried that he might have mistaken her for the lion. I couldn’t help giggling when she told me this.

Derrick left for work, and shortly afterwards Wanda left to take the kids to school. Few parents let their children ride the bus anymore. I would see it coasting by its stops in the mornings and in the afternoons, empty but for one or two doomed little faces peering out.

Once she was gone I crossed the lawn to her back door. I’d picked the lock so many times she knew to leave it open for me. I looked at the dishes in the sink. I looked at the living room—immaculate. I looked in Anthony’s room. His favorite toy, a motorized race car, was on the floor beside his dresser. I sat it in the bathtub and turned
on the water. Then I looked at Derrick and Wanda’s room, examined the sheets for stains, found two.

When Wanda returned I was standing in the doorway between the living room and the kitchen dressed only in her open robe. A moment of surprise registered on her face, though quickly melted into a smile.

“I’m so tired,” she moaned.

“Yeah? Busy night?”

She looked at me. “Piggy?”

“Piggy.”

“What do you want me to say?” She shrugged off her purse and fell across the room onto her sofa. “He’s my husband.”

“Circumstantial,” I said, still propped inside the doorway, robe still open.

“Yes,” she murmured, eyes going a little hazy. “I suppose.” She stared at the wall on the other side of the room and seemed to forget I was there for a moment. When she spoke again she sounded upset: “You’re the other woman, you realize. You don’t get to be jealous of what me and my husband do.”

“You think I’m jealous? Of that?” I gestured toward the bedroom, the stains.

“You can keep it. I just thought you knew better, that’s all.”

“I do know better.” She sighed, relenting now and making room on the couch. I plopped down beside her, leaning in so that my nipples stood in the air beside her face. “How can I make it up to you?” she said, her mouth closing around one nipple. The warmth made me shudder.

“That’s a start,” I said.
Her lips trailed across my skin from one nipple to another. Each time was a shock.

“You know your son listens to you at night, don’t you? Having sex?”

She giggled. “The little pervert.”

We both laughed, the laughter giving way to sighs, the sighs to moans and staggered breathing.

Jealous, she says. She has no fucking idea.

A short while later we were laying together on the couch, our naked limbs dangling over its edge, when the sound of a sparrow barreling into the window above the sink startled us. Wanda’s head lifted a little.

“Mine,” I said. “Derrick’s on his way here.”

“Now?” she asked, alarm rising in her voice. “What’s he doing home now?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Want to stay like this, see what he says?”

Instead of answering she heaved herself up without asking me to move. I returned her robe to the bedroom and put on my slip. She ushered me to the back door and on my way out I asked if she wanted to get together later that evening.

“Can’t. Church,” she said quickly. I looked at her hard although she paid no attention, shut the door in my face.

As soon as I stepped out I could hear the car door closing on the other side of the house. I felt a little ridiculous then—very soap opera. I timed his path up the driveway with my own trek across the lawn, pausing to make sure he wasn’t at one of the windows to catch the final sprint to my back door.
Inside, I told Zadie, the cat, to go keep an eye on them, report back in an hour or so. I went over to the couch and sat down. Little piggy stood at my feet, looking up at me. I scooped her up and cradled her snout against one of my nipples. She took hold and began to suckle. I shuddered once more.

Of course it was as I had thought: Wanda was being unfaithful.

When Zadie returned she told me that Derrick had left work early, and that when he’d come in he’d had a very grave look on his face: eyes wide, cheeks flushed. He’d looked almost like he might cry. He sat Wanda down on the couch and moved beside her, held her hands while he spoke; said he didn’t know where things had gone wrong for them, where they’d come apart in their paths together. He said that for some time now he’d realized that he no longer loved her.

A pause while he waited for this to set in. Wanda remained stoic.

He wasn’t sure he loved her now either, although something strange and tender had begun to find its way back into his feeling toward her. Something that forced him to recall promises they’d made. He recalled them aloud, although they do not bear repeating.

Wanda all the time softening.

He’d been unfaithful to her, he admitted—in more ways than one and on more than one occasion. He was pretty sure she’d been unfaithful to him too. If she wanted to talk about it, then fine, but he didn’t want it to be like that anymore. For him it was in the past, and what he wanted to focus on was their future. Theirs was a relationship sanctified by God, and if they turned back to him it wouldn’t matter what they’d done; he would
heal them. Not that it would happen all at once. He imagined it would take some time, but if she was willing, that’s what he wanted to do. That’s what he wanted so, so much.

Now he paused and waited for her to respond. Wanda had not been looking him in the eyes. The floor, the ceiling, the table on the far side of the room with a bushel of parsley stuffed into a mason jar; the window with the black cat perched on the ledge, watching. She noticed the cat and frowned, turned back to Derrick and leaned in to embrace him.

Then the waterworks began.

He cried, she cried, their hands started fumbling with one another, squeezing, caressing, and that’s when I interrupted Zadie’s account. I knew how it ended.

Just like Derrick to go and have his fun, then, when he felt like being faithful, drag Wanda back into some kind of “renewed commitment.” And just like Wanda to let it happen. From the beginning I’d known she was weak. Her principles were flimsy, her emotions volatile. A poor candidate in general. But if not respectable, I’ll admit it made her very attractive.

I thought of the two of them clutching one another in the darkness, blinds drawn, his meaty body on top of hers, and felt very sad all of a sudden; like something I loved was being defiled, wanted to be defiled, and therefore could not be the thing that I loved. I petted Zadie on the head, behind the ears, lowered her to the prickly flesh of my thigh and she began to lick. I required affection. I called the others to me and allowed them to swarm my body, allowed myself to be lost in them, like a carcass subsumed by vultures. I closed my eyes and slept to the sound of beating wings.
“I’ve been thinking about our conversation the other night,” Judith said, taking a sip of espresso on the patio at Antica Roma. It was a quiet, late morning and we were the only ones seated on the patio. I shifted uncomfortably in the wicker chair. “I know you were asking hypothetically, but I sense there’s more to it than that.”

I swallowed. My heart raced, dreading what she would say next.

“I know you’ve been hoarding familiars,” she said, and my shoulders dropped. The tension inside me dissipated. It still was bad—to have more than one familiar was an issue of propriety—but not as bad as what I thought she was going to say.

“I know,” I said. “It’s wrong. I can’t help it though. They’re like children to me. I love them.”

She tried to restrain herself, I know, but couldn’t suppress a sneer. “They’re not there for you to love, Regina. They are servants, given to you to fulfill a purpose. If you don’t use them properly, you have no right to be surprised when they’re taken away.”

“I do use them,” I said, defensively. “I just use them in different ways. I use them for all they’re worth.”

“And you think you love them, do you?”

I just stared, didn’t like where this was going.

“Do you think they love you?” she continued.

“Of course they do.”

“Regina, you know as well as I do that they only do what you ask them to. If you want them to cuddle, they cuddle. If you want them to jump up and down every time you walk in the door, that’s what they do. Just because you want something to be real doesn’t make it so.”
“It’s real to me.”

“No, it obstructs reality. Because believe it or not, you don’t love them either. You control them. That’s not love, and if you confuse the two you’re living inside a prison. You don’t know what love is.”

“And you do?” I said, fuming and leaning forward in my seat. I knew that I was making a mistake, lashing out like this, but I couldn’t help myself—didn’t want to. Fortunately, the waitress reappeared and I was able to calm myself down while Judith ordered another espresso.

The girl turned to me, waiting for me to order as well, although I just smiled awkwardly until finally she asked, “Anything for you?”

I told her, “The same,” and she left us alone.

“I know you’re not going to want to hear this,” Judith began again. “I think you need to give up some of your familiars.”

“Judith—”

“Don’t worry,” she lifted her hand. “I’m not going to say anything to the rest of the coven, and I’m not going to bring it up again—for now. Just promise me you’ll think about what I said. That you’ll consider it.”

The sun was high in the sky now, and I had to lean uncomfortably to keep it out of my eyes. I used that as an excuse to cover my face, to not look at her straight on.

“I’m not trying to get onto you here,” she said. “I’m speaking as your friend. Promise me you’ll consider.”

“Of course, Judith,” I said, without dropping my hand. “Of course. I’ll give it some thought.”
At night I snuck out wearing nothing, just my pocked skin in moonlight, and sprinted silently across the lawn, an animal glee in my bare footsteps. I felt the moon like some people feel the sun, and danced happily beneath it, imagining myself invisible.

I crept over to Derrick and Wanda’s house, peered inside little Anthony’s window. I could see him there asleep, dissected by moonlight. Ducking beneath the window, I reached up and raked my fingernails across the glass. I could hear him come to, quaking beneath his covers. Little piggy waddled over to where I crouched and, in a moment of inspiration, I snatched her up and held her just above the ledge of the window so that all Anthony would see was this little pig looking in at him. Sure enough, I heard him cry out—his dirty little feet slapping through the house into his parents room. A light came on. Then several lights. I retreated, watched from a distance while their faces appeared in his window.

I saw him mouth the word ‘pig’ and Wanda’s face turned grave. She crouched in front of him, probably telling him that it was nothing, just a bad dream.

They talked there for a few more minutes before Anthony unhappily climbed back into bed and the light turned off. The lamp, however, was left on. Derrick and Wanda returned to their room, where their own bedside lamp remained burning for a long time. Praying, I imagined. I sent one of my babes to go listen in on them. Meanwhile, I returned to Anthony’s window.

The next day was Saturday, and they appeared on my doorstep together bright and early, his arm wrapped gently around her torso: a goddamn marital unit.
“Derrick,” I said first, then, “Wanda,” in a different tone. Her look was remote, as though straining at that very moment, practically dying of thirst. It _had_ been three days since we’d seen each other. Her choice.

Derrick spoke: “Good morning, Regina. Would you mind if we came in?”

“Sure,” I said, snapping my fingers behind the door. My darlings removed themselves to the bedroom, shut the door behind them. I ushered Derrick and Wanda into the living room. “Please, make yourselves comfortable,” I said. “Can I offer you anything? Coffee? Water?”

“Some coffee would be good,” Derrick said.

“Oops, fresh out.”

“Just water then is fine.”

I returned with two glasses of tap water. Wanda drained hers in one gulp and allowed the empty glass to balance on her knee, her eyes shifting from me to it. She was beginning to sweat. Derrick took a deep breath. “Smells kind of funny in here. Do you keep many pets?”

“A few,” I said. “They’re in the bedroom—shy critters.”

I studied Wanda and could see that desire had left her and what she felt now was need—need to be on the couch beside me, cradled in my arms, lips wrapped around me. She was resisting valiantly though.

“The reason we’re here is our son, Anthony, had some disturbing episodes last night. Sounds outside his window, scratching and some laughter—even claimed to see a small pig hovering outside of it at one point.”

I smiled. “Children and their imaginations.”
“Yes, well, that’s what we thought. Although it’s not like him to make this big a deal out of a bad dream.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. Have you heard about this lion roaming about, snatching kids up by the scruffs of their little necks? I’d be scared if I was a child.”

“Yes,” he said, observing me. I could see in his face a brief flutter of emotion and realized how hard he was working to remain composed, rational. “We also know that you and Anthony have had a few run-ins in the past. You claim he—”

“Claim,” I repeated.

“That he’s egged your house, strewn toilet paper in your backyard… and Wanda tells me you have a pet pig.”

“Does she,” I said, turning to Wanda.

“Now, we’re not here to make allegations,” Derrick continued, drawing my attention back to him. “But we were wondering if you happened to know anything about what may have happened last night?”

“Well, I do sometimes let my babes out to roam at night. Not sure how piggy could have appeared in your son’s window though. She’s just a little thing. Have you considered that maybe your son is in need of psychiatric care?”

“Bitch,” Wanda said in a low, gravelly voice. Derrick placed his hand like a gavel on her knee.

“We were thinking we’d try to handle it ourselves first,” he said. “Anyway, if you figure anything out, please let us know. We’ll be on the lookout too.” His eyes narrowed a little as he stood.

A threat?
I followed them to the front door and Derrick turned just as I was about to shut it. “One more thing,” he said. “Probably not such a good idea to let your pets go wandering off at night. You mentioned the lion earlier; wouldn’t want anything to happen while you’re not looking.”

“Thanks for your concern, Derrick. You worry about your children though, and I’ll worry about mine. Wanda,” I said, and allowed my eyes to narrow on hers for a moment before shutting the door in both of their faces. Once it was closed I turned and leaned back against it, sank a little, struggled to catch my breath. “Piggy!” I called, a needy strain in my voice. Immediately piggy’s little body appeared around the corner. “Oh, piggy,” I said, scooping her up into my arms, cradling her snout between my head and shoulder. “You love me, don’t you? You wouldn’t resist, even if you could.” Then: “The things I would do to any lion who hurt you. The things I would do.”

I was on my way out the door, leaving to go to Esbat, when I saw Anthony and Jill out playing in their front yard. He had a new remote-controlled car he was racing around the driveway. “Hey, look!” he shouted. “It’s that witch next door!”

Jill shushed him, but he continued, “She is a witch. Have you seen her with all of her pets? I’ll bet anything she cooks them up and eats them!”

Jill appeared quite anxious as I walked across the lawn separating our driveways. I addressed her: “It’s okay, darling. I am a witch. The good kind though—like in the *Wizard of Oz*. I’m the witch from the east. More of a fairy godmother, really. Would you like to see some magic?”
Her eyes were wide and she did not answer. Anthony stood behind her, grinning.

“Yeah, show us some magic!” he said.

I reached behind her ear and produced a piece of toffee, handed it to her. She smiled and her cheeks became all rosy. She really was a cute girl. Anthony leapt forward.

“Me next, me next,” he said, and closed his eyes as if that would help. I reached back and tickled his ear; when he opened his eyes though a large, warty bull frog sat in my hand. The thing croaked in his face and he screamed, fell backwards and scrambled up to his feet. I laughed and set the bullfrog on the ground, watched it hop in Anthony’s direction. Anthony leapt out of its way just in time for Derrick to appear on the front porch.

“What the hell is going on?” he yelled, glancing between his two children before glaring at me.

“Just showing them a bit of magic,” I cackled, then turned to the sidewalk and began walking in the direction of Judith’s house.

“Wait a second!” he called behind me, caught between his desire to pursue and to find out from his children exactly what happened. He must not have been too impressed because he made no attempt to catch up, though it would have been easy to do.

It was nearing twilight and the walk was pleasant. Whenever I came to an intersection and the trees cleared out, I could see a bloom of orange smearing the sky behind the Flatirons. It felt like Fall: my favorite season for more reasons than one.

It was dark when I arrived and Judith’s living room seemed to light up the entire block. It was empty though. They would all be in the casting room already.

I changed into my robe in the kitchen and grabbed a crystal wine glass from the cabinet. It had been a while since I’d attended one of these, and I worried what they
would think of my body, how it had changed. A hush fell over them as I entered, but passed almost instantly. The idle chatter resumed.

“Jesus, Regina,” Judith said, appearing at my elbow. “Do you know how this looks?”

My body tightened. The robe covered most of it, although there was still my chest and lower legs exposed. She grabbed me by the elbow and led me away from the others.

“Have you given any thought to what I said. It needs to happen, Regina.”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, I know it does. It will. I just…”

“What?” Her eyes were wide, sincere.

“There’s some magic I want to work tonight. If we have time. If no one else has anything.”

“Tonight is tribute,” she said. “Although we can work in something else in if you need it. What is it?”

“It’s Wanda,” I said, careful to avoid her reaction. “Her and Derrick are back together.”

“I didn’t know they’d separated.”

“Well, not technically.”

“And you want to cast a spell to make her love you again, is that it?”

“A renewal,” I said, looking at the ground.

“A renewal of what?”

I looked into her green eyes and could see the comprehension dawning there. She looked from my face to my body, connecting the dots, so to speak. “You didn’t…” she
began. The chatter around us had ceased and it was so quiet now I could almost hear the
candle flames dancing on their wicks.

“You’ve put us into a difficult position,” Judith said, this time in a voice more
even. “You know that what you’re doing is forbidden. You’ve known it for a while. If
you won’t put a stop to it yourself, it’s this coven’s duty to find a way to protect you.”

The others gathered around like a schoolyard mob around a fistfight. Although
solemn. Silent.

“No,” I said, trying to keep the panic from my voice. “I can stop it myself. I can.”

“I’m afraid we can’t trust you,” Judith said. “Believe me, Regina, this is for your
own good. These rules are in place for a reason. I know it doesn’t seem like it, but right
now you’re as much a slave as they are. As much as she is.”

“I won’t let you! You can’t do this. I’m… I’m one of the coven!” My heart was
racing, and I knew that, to them, I must look hysterical. Every emotion I betrayed only
confirmed what they believed to be true about me.

“It’s not a punishment, Regina. We want to help.”

Suddenly my fear was replaced by a rush of anger. I turned to Judith and frowned,
then spit into her very face. There was a stunned moment of silence. The air in the room
felt thin. I turned and shoved my way through the crowd. Someone tried to grab my
shoulder, but I broke free easily and burst through the door and into the brightness of the
living room, sweeping several candles off of the side table as I went by, hoping, for a
naive moment, that it would catch fire and burn the house, and all those inside, to the
ground.
Without waiting to see what happened, I ran out the front door and did not look back even at the end of the street. I continued to run even though I was barefoot and naked but for the silk robe coming undone around my waist. I slowed down only to tighten it so that I wouldn’t get picked up for indecency. Before long I was moving at a pace barely faster than a walk, although I continued to trot, afraid to lose whatever urgency was propelling me forward. Not that the distance made me any safer. Really I just wanted to get home to see my babies, to see that they were still there.

I thought of little piggy: her cute little face, her greedy little mouth.

When at last I reached my house I barely noticed that all of the lights were on at Wanda and Derrick’s, that there was a police cruiser parked in the driveway. I rushed in through the front door and sighed when I saw their faces all crowded together in the living room, looking up at me with big eyes and quiet wonder. I yanked off my robe and tossed it aside, collapsed on the couch in front of them with arms spread wide. “Come, my little darlings. Come love on mommy.”

I closed my eyes, didn’t even have to watch them obey. I felt them press in, their little mouths taking hold all over, my entire body pressing outward, bleeding into my surroundings, into my little darlings’ mouths. I barely noticed the knocking at my door, the deep, male voices asking me to open up—they had some questions for me. Barely noticed the key from above the ledge being slid into the lock, the door opening, feet pounding in the entryway, and Wanda’s blood-curdling scream when, from instinct, my babes pulled away and they could see my naked body distended against the couch cushions, covered with small red welts like a pin cushion, a euphoric smile frozen on my face.
I tried to imagine then that I was invisible, to remain in that moment with my
babes and to feel myself dispersed among them. But I knew that Judith had been right all
along. I was not invisible. I was naked, exposed. My body was closed. I laid there and
listened to Wanda sobbing, holding onto Derrick to prevent herself from kneeling down
beside me, and knew this was the beginning of something different. I did not move. Did
not speak. Waited until I felt the policemen’s hands searching gently for a place on my
body that love had not yet touched.
Peter

There’s really only one rule as a man, and I’ve broke it. I’ve been breaking the little ones all my life, but somewhere inside of me I always felt there was one principle, at least, that was unbending.

It happened after the candle light service, the prayer vigil they were hosting for those little kids that have been disappearing. I’d done well: kept quiet, no yawning, no fidgeting. When we got married my wife could have given a rat’s fuck about all that, although a lot can change in eighteen years of marriage. That Pastor John fellow went to talk to her every day while she was in the hospital. Don’t know what he said, but every year since she’s seemed just a little more nuts.

On the way home she was going off about her conspiracy theory, that a bunch of witches are the ones stealing the children. I explained how one winter when I was a boy, we had a mountain lion that had gotten a taste for some of my daddy’s alpacas. Damn things kept disappearing with no blood or bodies to show for it. It was my job to ride around on the horse and to mind when and where it got spooked. Horses evidently can sense these things. I was fifteen and scared shitless, especially when I felt that big body beneath me freeze up, refuse to walk any further. I didn’t weigh near as much as an alpaca. We finally found one of the missing ones. It had snowed the night before, and if it weren’t for the streaks of blood in the powder we never would have tracked it down.
Goddamn lion dragged the thing a mile and a half before ripping it open and burying it in the ground beneath the snow.

Joy didn’t care. The whole way home it was witch this and witch that, her trying to tell me how to spot a witch, how to deal with one. In the old days, she said, you had to burn them, otherwise the Devil would keep on using their bodies even after they were dead.

I said, “Baby, I got to be up at five o’clock for my route. I’d appreciate if you’d quiet down a little bit.”

But then it was Joseph and Paul, our two boys. Wasn’t I worried about them? Couldn’t I imagine them tied up on some altar somewhere, their little voices crying out for—

“Now wait just a goddamn minute,” I said. Taking the Lord’s name in vain was a good way to put a stop to any conversation. I didn’t even have to follow it up. She sat there quietly the rest of the way home, a little wounded-sparrow look on her face, but I was used to that.

I don’t remember much after we got home. Paid the babysitter, probably. Probably went about our nightlies separately, like normal. Hell, we might have gone to bed without a single thing out of place. I don’t know because I don’t remember.

What I do remember is waking up at 5 AM to my alarm clock and finding the bed beside me empty. Wasn’t like Joy to be up this early. I went out into the hallway and I remember that the heater was on, first time of the season. A soft glow from the kitchen slanted across the carpet at the end of the hall. Joy was sitting at the table with her head in her arms, looked to be asleep. An auto club coffee mug sat on the table in front of her
with a little tea tag dangling from a string. “Joy?” I said. No response, so I said it a little louder. “Joy!”

Her head jerked up and she gasped, and then I could see the deep purple slug beneath her left eye. For a moment I was struck dumb. I stuttered some gibberish before managing to ask, “What the hell happened?” I moved toward her and she stood up, keeping the table between us.

“Joy?”

It took some time and some delicacy, neither of which are my strong suit, but eventually I figured out it was me. I’d happened. “But why?” I asked. “Why on Earth would I hit you? What do I even have to be angry about?”

I don’t know why I was arguing; I could see her eye.

“And why in Christ’s name do I not remember it?”

She didn’t even react to my blasphemy, and that’s when I began to be afraid. She started to cry and I sat there like an asshole, staring at her across the table, afraid to reach out and touch her because these hands, my hands, were no longer things I could rely on. They were strangers, somebody else’s. I rubbed them together and picked at my nails, just to prove that I could. The sky outside the window was growing pale by the time her sobs began to die down. I knew the boys would be awake, listening from their bedrooms, couldn’t imagine what I would say when they finally did come out and saw their mother’s eye. My cell phone rattled with calls from RTD, wanting to know why I’d not come into work, wanting to know how the good people on Iris were supposed get to Broadway and back that morning. Later, I would call and blame it on food poisoning.
I grabbed some clothes and a toothbrush and told her I was going to give her some space. I was about to be thrown out anyway—I could feel it in the silence stretching out between sobs. I was halfway out the door before I thought to turn and say, “Uh, Joy?” She looked at me and I felt confused, like I’d forgotten what to say. “I’m sorry.”

But what the hell was I sorry for? What did I actually do, and why? I needed time to think about this, to sweat it out in my air-conditionless room at the youth hostel where they—thank God—had a computer available in the commons. There I could at least research some possibilities, conditions that could maybe account for all this confusion. Deep down, I hoped it was something bad.

Here are some possible causes I found for temporary insanity, mostly from looking at court cases and seeing the successful pleas:

1. Extreme Rage or Anger—Obviously an old case. Irrelevant.
2. Somnambulism—Maybe.
3. Schizophrenia—Not that I know of.
4. “Gay Panic” (caused by “undesired homosexual advances”)—?
5. Clinical Depression—Not that I know of, but who can say for sure?
6. Low Sodium—with my diet, doubtful, but maybe.
7. Folie à duex (shared psychosis: what they accused the Manson family of.
   Didn’t get them off, but seems legitimate)—Irrelevant.
8. Being in Love—Weird connection, but there’s some brain science to support it. Either way, possibly irrelevant.
9. Demonic Possession—?

This last cause, obviously, had been used by defendants in any number of cases for any number of crimes. When it was successful it was mostly because people heard it and attributed the claim to schizophrenia, which all sources agree is a legitimate cause of insanity. However, I looked into it and according to people who believe in that kind of thing, there are a lot of situations that get passed off as insanity which are really the result of demonic affliction. Like those people who are supposed to be insane but who cannot be diagnosed, who undergo psychiatric treatment and medical treatment, but who, at best, can only be drugged up and subdued. Some studies say that as many as seven out of ten people have or will suffer some kind of demonic affliction—if not full possession—at some point in their lives.

Now, I knew that I didn’t believe any of that shit, but Joy sure did. I hadn’t exactly made up my mind to deceive her, but this did give me an idea about how I might smooth this thing over, at least until I figured out what the real cause was. The situation with Joy aside: I needed to know why I’d done it, how it had happened. It bothered me to think that I was capable of something I felt so strongly about, something that I felt no inclination toward whatsoever. A man capable of beating on a woman must know that about himself; must at least feel that potential inside of him.

Out of all the causes I’d researched, the sleepwalking seemed most likely, although when I thought about it I couldn’t say it was any more comforting than the demons. I couldn’t control it, couldn’t remember it, couldn’t guarantee that it wouldn’t happen again. In a way, maybe it was worse than the demons; it suggested there was
some part of me I didn’t know about, someplace deep and dark that was as much a part of me as my blue eyes. Given the choice, I’m not sure, but maybe I take demons.

I spent the night in the hostel. Towards evening of that first night I started getting calls from Joy. I didn’t answer. I still was freaked out and needed to think. Didn’t want to see her yet anyway. The space, I thought, was good. By the time I got home we would be so relieved to see each other maybe we could just move on.

Several times I heard knocks at the door, but when I went to answer there was no one.

Fucking college kids.

The next day I went into work without going home first and got my ass chewed out for missing the day before. I blamed it again on the food poisoning and made several feints toward the restroom during the shift meeting just to lend myself some credit. The shift though was good. It’s times like these I’m glad I drive things for a living—same route, same stops, seven hours. Plenty of time to think. Doesn’t matter what state you’re in, if you think about what’s bugging you for long enough eventually you break through and enter a trance state, like meditation or something. Getting to see the sun rise over the eastern plains doesn’t hurt either.

After work I went back to the hostel and took a long, dreamless nap, and when I woke and saw I hadn’t broken any windows or punched any walls, I took it as a sign that things were looking up. When I arrived home Joy and the boys were all seated at the dinner table. Their heads all turned in unison as I entered although they didn’t say anything. The heat was still on, humming somewhere in the background, although it
made the place seem even more quiet. With the gravest expression I could muster, I sat down with them.

It was surprising how quickly the pretend emotion became real emotion. Maybe it was the bruise beneath Joy’s eye, which had begun to bloom a sickening shade of purple, black, and blue. But more likely it was my boys’ faces, sitting there, comprehending but not sure what to do. Should they be mad at me? Was this normal for parents?

My eyes began to fill up with tears, and with my hands planted on the table I explained to them that I didn’t know what had happened, explained that I had no memory of it and that I loved them all very much, would never do anything to hurt them as long as I was conscious of it. I said that even Jesus was tempted while he was walking through the desert, and that the Devil was one sneaky customer.

I watched Joy stiffen.

I said that I could spend my whole life apologizing for what I’d done, and that I planned to, but that the important thing right now was to do whatever was necessary to make sure it didn’t happen again. I wondered if they would all take a moment and pray with me?

Joseph and Paul both looked to their mother, and so did I. She was staring at me, examining my face. Prayer was her thing, not mine. But I think she could see that, even if I was playing to her sensitivities a little, I was freaked out and didn’t understand what was happening: was probably, at the very least, more open to the things I was saying than I ever had been. Without breaking my gaze she placed her hands palms-up on the table, and on either side of her Joseph and Paul took hold. I completed the circle and, bowing my head, tried to remember how this was done:
“Dear God, who art in Heaven, thank you for bringing us here. Thank you for allowing me to sit here with my family after what I’ve done, who I love more than my own life. I ask your forgiveness, Lord; I ask it of you and of them. I still don’t know what happened, but I suspect some evil working in me. With all that’s been happening around here lately I suspect evil is working in a lot of places, and I need your help, Lord, to put a stop to it. Please guide and protect me against the Devil, demons, witches—whatever it is that’s causing trouble around here and show me what I need to do to beat it. Joy’s been saying it for a while now, Lord, but I didn’t believe her. I guess I’m sorry for that too.”

Joy opened her eyes and looked at me across the table. My eyes had been open the whole time.

“In your son Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.”

I had underestimated the effect a little spiritual empathy could have. For the first time in a long time that night Joy came onto me. She cuddled right up next to me with her leg thrown over my body, slowly worked her way so that she was fully on top, straddling me, kissing me. It was like we were two different people. We fucked like champions and at the height of passion I did something strange: I asked her to hit me. First time I’d ever done that. And, to my surprise, she didn’t hesitate, smacking me on the bottom, the backs of my legs and, at my request, in the face. Maybe it was some kind of guilt wish on my part, but it thrilled me. I could feel myself sinking into a place that no longer felt like me, and that slippage was very erotic. I asked for other things too, things I won’t bother mentioning here, and afterwards we slept like the dead.
Joy was draped across me when I woke. It took some effort, but I managed to slip away without her waking. I watched her shift into my spot. The bruise on her face was mostly green now, barely visible in the early dark. I went into the kitchen and made myself some coffee and cereal.

Everything from the night before felt like a dream, although I knew it was real because my body was sore. We must have gone at it harder than I’d realized. I sat there at the kitchen table in a stupor, half-asleep in the quiet until I noticed the back door was ajar. Goddammit, I thought. Probably one of the boys had gone out and forgot to lock up. I got up and went to close it, but through the glass I noticed something in the yard—a dark spot probably fifty feet away and dead center. I stepped out onto the patio and took a step closer, then another, until I was standing directly in front of it. It was a hole, a big one. Probably eight by four feet, and deep. A mound of dirt was piled up on the opposite side, still moist and glistening in the starlight.

I stared like I was expecting it to perform tricks. Part of me thought I was dreaming, and waited for the dream to shift.

I looked down and noticed my feet were dirty, I wiped them off in the grass before heading back inside. No time to bother with this now. I had to get to work. I showered and dressed, left a note to Joy on the kitchen counter before I left:

_Hole?_

And as I was about to leave I could swear I heard a knock on the front door. I opened up quickly but there was no one. I peered around the corners of the house but it
was dark and I couldn’t see anything. Just the dim sound of wings beating in the darkness. A sparrow’s morning call.

Throughout my shift the image of the hole stuck in my mind. I imagined it in front of me, me looking down into it, trying to think of what it looked like. It seemed as if there were some memory, some old childhood thing it was connected to, something it reminded me of. And then it occurred to me: it looked just like a grave.

When I got home in the afternoon the house was empty and the hole was still there. I looked at my note on the kitchen table. Hole? it still read, and beneath that Joy had responded:

?

I went out back and looked at it again. In the daylight I could see that it was probably about six feet deep. The thought that it looked like a grave occurred to me again and I felt a shiver in my spine. I remembered standing graveside at my grandfather’s funeral when I was a kid, watching his coffin lower into the ground. It seemed a lot deeper than six feet then. In fact, I could have sworn it was fifteen or twenty. I remember wondering how far you could lower a thing before you punched through the Earth’s crust and Hell’s own flames started licking through.

I went back inside, took off my clothes and drew the bedroom blinds, climbed back into bed. Joy usually volunteered at the soup kitchen on Wednesday mornings, although where she was now, I had no idea. The kids were at school. Maybe she’d picked
up an extra shift in the Church office, assisting that Pastor John. I’d never forgiven him for filling my wife’s head with religion, and didn’t like the idea of them seeing each other. But I didn’t think about it for long. Soon my eyelids were fluttering and I was weaving in and out of conscious thought, mixing it with the dream. There was this woman—or at least, I think it was a woman—with a head of flame and tits you could stake your fortune on. There was something else though, something between her legs, I think, although I can’t remember for sure. The whole thing was hazy and there was this knocking, deafeningly loud. The woman didn’t say anything or do anything, but I could feel her as well as I could see her, watching me. And for a while that was all.

I woke up around four to the sound of Joy and the boys just getting home. I sat up but again I felt groggy, sore. The bedroom smelled like sleep. I threw on some shorts and a t-shirt and went to meet them in the kitchen.

“Hey guys,” I said.

“Hey daddy,” Paul trilled. Joseph, the eldest, said nothing. I watched them toss their backpacks into the corner and shuffle over to the couch to watch their afternoon television shows.

“How was school?”

“Good!”

I turned to Joy. “You got my note this morning,” I said, meaning it to be a question, but it wasn’t.

“Yes!” she said as if suddenly remembering. “What is that?”
“Dunno. I guess it could be someone working on the cable. Plumbing, maybe?
Did you call anyone while I was gone?”

“No.”

“No issues with the cable?”

“No.”

I frowned and tried to think. Sometimes they did work in the neighborhood
without telling anyone, but our backyard had recently been fenced in, ever since the lion
and all. They would have had to climb six feet to get over, and I doubted they would go
into someone’s yard anyway without permission or notice.

I wanted to ask Joy what it looked like to her, but restrained myself.

“Do you think it could be a prank?” she asked.

“A prank?” I repeated. “Aren’t pranks supposed to be funny? What punch line is
there to a big hole in the ground?”

“Maybe you could ask the kids?”

I asked the kids. They said they didn’t know anything about it. I doubted anyway
that someone their age had the muscle to dig a hole like that.

“Alright,” I said, ready to put the issue aside for now. “I’ll call the cable company
in the morning to see what they can tell me.”

Joy nodded.

The sound of Power Rangers spilled in from the living room and I peered around
the corner. The cable was fine.

I thought of that morning, my dirty feet, and turned suddenly to Joy.

“What’s for dinner?” I asked.
Joy’s shoulders slumped. “Um, soup?”

“What kind?”

“Minestrone?”

“Sounds good.” My answers were short and fast, seemed anxious for some reason. She looked at me and I looked back until finally she turned and set about getting stuff out for dinner. I turned and walked quickly down the hall to the laundry hamper and opened it up, afraid of what I would find. Sure enough, on top was soiled pair of boxers and an undershirt, both belonging to me.

I took them out of the hamper and threw them into the washer myself, thought better of it, and sorted out all of the whites. I started it, then returned to the kitchen. “Are you doing a load of laundry?” Joy asked.

“Just a small one,” I said. Her lower lip jutted a little. She was impressed. “Is there anything I can help with?” I asked, and again she turned to me.

“You want to help?”

“Can I?”

She asked if I could run to the store real quick and pick up some French bread. I did so without complaining. Not sure whether I just wanted to get my mind off it, or to build up some credit in case of what might happen in my sleep tonight. Either way, it didn’t work.

Took her a little longer to get in the mood that night. Could be that she was still thinking about the hole—I know I was—but two nights in a row was some kind of record for us and I could understand her being tired. I didn’t say anything but caressed her body
in the darkness. The heat continued to hum in the vents, seemed to have grown louder in the past days. “Peter,” she said finally, in a voice more even than I was expecting.

“Yes?” I replied.

“Did you mean what you said the other night, about believing in the witches?”

My hands stopped and I tried to look at her, could see only shadow. “I don’t really know what to believe. All I know is there are things happening that I can’t explain, and it’s time I started keeping an open mind about them.”

“Do you think I’m crazy?”

“No, babe. You’re not crazy.”

She rolled onto her back and looked at the ceiling. “I feel crazy sometimes.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I never told you all of what happened with that woman down at the bookstore. If I did, you’d know I was crazy.” She paused as if waiting for me to say something, to reassure her maybe, but I didn’t know what to say. “I have violent thoughts,” she continued. “Sometimes I lie awake thinking about them. Pastor John says it’s not good to hate evil the way that I do.”

At the sound of Pastor John’s name I tensed up a little. “Doesn’t it say somewhere in the Bible to hate whatever offends God?”

“Pastor John says no.” She turned to me again. “You know what it does say though?”

“What?”

“That shalt not suffer a witch to live.”
I smiled in the darkness. She must have seen me because suddenly I could see her teeth faintly white. “That’s good enough for me,” I said, and scooted in close, wrapped her in my arms, and this time I could tell by her breathing that she was into it. I waited until we were both hot before making my requests.


“Yes?”

“Will you get on top?”

“Yeah,” she breathed automatically, her eyes still closed.

I swallowed. “Of my face?”

At this her eyes jerked open and she looked startled, but only for a second. We changed positions awkwardly and she pulled herself up by the bed frame, making slight adjustments until she’d figured out how to do it. She ground against my face and it felt like I was in a different world. I could feel her trembling above me, while at the same time I could feel myself sinking into something cool and thick and dark. She came several times before I asked her to turn and sit on my face the other way, then brought herself off a couple more before lifting herself in a panic. “It’s too much,” she said.

“That’s fine,” I said. So far I hadn’t even touched myself.

“Did you enjoy that?” she asked uncertainly. And something about the question threw me off. I nodded, also uncertain. She climbed off of me and stood up, took a step toward the bathroom.

“Can I come?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”
I explained and this time she really did hesitate. She did not want to refuse me, I knew, but in her mind this fell under the category of ‘maybe sin.’ I didn’t feel particularly inclined to persuade her either. I wasn’t sure that I really wanted it, but I felt drawn to it in a way that was irresistible and scary. A moment later she’d agreed, so long as I promised to be the one to clean up when we were finished. I agreed and hustled into the bathroom ahead of her, lowered myself into the bathtub, wondering all the while what the fuck I was doing.

I woke in the night to a faint knocking that sounded like it was coming from the kitchen. I sat straight up. Joy was sleeping undisturbed, the bruise on her face glowed sickly in the moonlight. As quietly as I could, I crept out of bed, down the hallway and into the kitchen. As I entered, the knocking stopped. It had been coming from the patio door. Outside, the moon was bright, painting everything an eerie shade of blue except for the hole, which I could see through the doors had lost its dimensions, appeared now like a liquid blot, shifting and expanding as I looked at it. I opened the door and stepped outside. It felt like a dream. And as I came closer I could feel the black spilling over my feet like a tide of ink.

My mind was called to attention suddenly by the dog next door: Redbeard, the neighbors’ Shitzu, was pressed against the wood planks of the fence separating our two yards, peering at me through the cracks and barking. I moved to the fence and crouched in front of it. He shuffled backwards, began barking again.

“Shhh,” I said, holding my hand up for him to smell. Redbeard and I had always gotten along just fine. At the sight of my hand though he became vicious, leaping against
the fence and his barking turned to a snarl. He was foaming at the mouth. This made me angry. Something about the way the dog was acting struck me as a betrayal, an indecency. I turned toward the hole and could see that it had expanded to fill nearly the entire yard. I could feel it spreading under my feet, could feel myself sinking in, and I was aware of myself moving though I could not see where I was going, of acting, but I could not feel what I was doing. All I know is that when I was done the barking had stopped.

Here is a list of things to look out for if you ever think you are possessed:

1. Experiencing abrupt changes in temperature.
2. Increased sexual interest, often perverse.
3. Performing acts of humiliation in the company of others.
4. Outward physical changes, such as changes in eye or hair color, changes in voice, often moving from a high to low and guttural pitch.
5. Hearing strange noises such as knocking, banging, or pounding when you are alone.
6. Suddenly having the ability to understand languages you have never studied, or knowing things you could not know through ordinary means.
7. Having blackouts that cannot be explained by drugs, alcohol, or pre-existing health conditions.
8. Having visions or dreams of personalities who may be demons.
9. Having urges to hurt or kill animals or other people.
10. Hurting or killing other people.

No single one of these criteria is sufficient indication of anything sinister, although more than three is a bad sign, a sign that you should probably start seeking help. Where to go though is a tricky issue. I’ll admit, I’m probably not the best person to ask about that.

I didn’t know where Joy was when I got home for work, I just hoped to God she wasn’t anywhere near Pearl Street. I was exhausted from my shift—I hadn’t gotten very much sleep the night before—but I did not go back to bed like normal. Instead, I drove down to Pearl Street, parked in the garage on 15th so that no one would recognize my car, and moved as quickly as possible on foot, already deciding that if I saw anyone I knew I would just keep walking, maybe get a hot dog at the vender further down. I was vigilant though and saw nobody, and when I reached the bookstore I shuffled down the steps and ducked inside.

The store was empty except for a young couple in their twenties looking at a book together. They both wore baggy clothes and one of them had a shirt with a pentagram on it. The other’s just had “WILF” printed across its front in white letters. They did not look up when I entered and I felt an uncomfortable prickling between my shoulders.

A woman, responding to the bell, appeared from the back, looking vaguely familiar. Pretty. “Can I help you?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I hope so.”

“What can I do for you?”
I glanced at the couple on the other side of the store. They were giggling about something and still seemed oblivious of me. “Well, I don’t quite know how to begin—” She waited patiently. “I think I might be possessed by something.”

“Something?”

I explained the blackouts, the dreams, the hole; I even explained hitting my wife, although I did not tell her about Redbeard. I wasn’t sure what had happened to Redbeard. He was missing though.

“And you say you have no idea what it could be? Any spirits you may have angered in some way?”

“No.”

“Addictions?”

“I smoke.”

“Okay, well, that doesn’t tell us much. The first thing to do would be to ask the spirit to leave on its own. If it’s as ugly as you’re saying it is, that probably isn’t an option, but it’s always best to try. I can give you some herbs and oils to make a cleansing potion. Have you done much casting before?”

My gaze had been steadily drifting down toward her breasts, but this recalled me.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Any?”
I just looked at her. She sighed, walked around the register and over to where the couple was standing, grabbed a book and returned. “Pages forty through forty-five,” she said. “Before we can think about banishing this thing you have to make contact. Try to learn what its intentions are and, if possible, try to find out its name. If this is truly a malevolent spirit we’re dealing with it won’t be forthcoming with information but you need to try.” She took a business card and turned it over, scribbled down a number. “Once you’ve done this, give me a call. You’re not going to be powerful enough to banish it on your own; you’ll need a coven to do the work for you.”

I looked at her, wondered whether she knew she was talking about divorce. But I was the one who’d chosen to go there, instead of to a Church. Somehow I didn’t trust Pastor John with this.

“Okay,” I said, hesitating. “There’s just one thing I gotta know—I hope you don’t think I’m being rude—but—”

“Yes?” She was already smiling.

I leaned in to whisper. “You guys don’t worship the Devil, do you?”

Her smile broadened. “Mr.—?”

“Peter,” I said.

“Mr. Peter, as witches we don’t worship anything. We honor the Lord and Lady and we work with whatever deity best suits the magic we’re attempting. It’s about veneration and respect, not worship.”

I nodded my head, comforted, but not really.
“Here,” she said, handing me a bushel of sage and what looked to be a mixture of black pepper and salt. “Grind them together and follow the directions on page twelve whenever you attempt to make contact. That will be $22.32.”

I handed her the money, turned to go.

“And Mr. Peter—”

I turned back.

“As witches we have a large pantheon of deities; you’re going to want to choose one to call on whenever you cast. You’re Christian?”

“Yes.”

“Jesus might be a good one then. But keep an open mind—even Devils have their uses.”

I left and climbed up the stairs into daylight, still careful to make sure no one I knew was there to observe me. I briefly considered tossing the book and the herbs into the trash, but decided against it. As long as Jesus could be a part of it, I figured it was worth a try. And besides, I was really interested in this whole idea of “making contact.” If only I could know that it was a demon and not some personal psychosis it would be a huge load off. A demon is a scary thing, but one’s own self—much scarier. I just hoped I could do all of this without Joy knowing.

“Peter?”

“Yes?”

“Can you hit me?

“I don’t know.”
“It’s okay, I want you to.”

“Yeah, but, with everything—”

“It doesn’t have to be hard. On the bottom’s fine.”

“Okay.”

...

“Joy?”

“Yes?”

“Will you hit me?”

“Yes.”

I waited for a day I knew I would be alone to try the invocation. It was an early afternoon after work. The boys both had soccer practice until five, and Joy was meeting with Pastor John until then; something to do with the Church.

The bathroom was the only place I could think of to do it. Besides the kitchen, the rest of the house was all carpeted, and I needed to cast a magic circle on the ground. Previously, it was a sign I’d associated only with Satan worship, but the book assured me that only if it was inverted did it signify “Black Magic.” The top of the pentagram represented spirit, and so long as I used it right it was a symbol of power, not of evil.

This all from a pagan workbook though.

Most importantly it would protect me from the spirit I was invoking, keep us separate enough to see one another, and that was all I wanted.

I lit candles and placed them at each corner of the pentagram, scrawled the symbol of the cross on the linoleum with a dry erase marker. Directly in front of the
circle I also drew a triangle, which was where I’d command the demon to stay while I interrogated it. The book had shown me how to roll the mixture of herbs and oils into a stick of incense. It was sloppy, but I lit that too, then settled into the center of the circle—cross-legged and naked—and began with the invocations.

I did not like being naked, but according to the book it was essential.

I cleared my throat, read from a sheet of paper:

“O Spirit, I do invoke and conjure thee, and being armed with power from the Supreme Majesty, I do strongly command thee…. By him who spake and it was done, and unto whom all creatures be obedient…. And I do powerfully command thee, O Spirit, that thou dost forthwith appear unto me here before this Circle in fair human shape, without any deformity or tortuosity, and without delay, for thou art conjured by the name of the living and true God, wherefore fulfill thou my commands.”

The full invocation took several minutes to speak, and as I went on my voice began to shake. I thought I could feel a draft in the room; the candles flickering in my periphery. And when I was finished I laid the paper aside, but did not look up, was afraid to. I became intensely aware of my own skin, the air pressing against it, and then of another, complicated sort of presence in front of me, in the triangle.

“Please, dear God…” I prayed to myself, but I did not know how to finish it. Which would be worse: to see an evil spirit there leering at me, or nothing at all?

Eventually I did look up, and I will not tell you what I saw, but suffice it to say it was terrible. I’d always known it would be.

*
When Joy returned home with the boys the circle and the candles were long gone, although the scent of sage still hung dimly in the air. “Have you been cooking?” she asked, lifting her nose and taking a whiff.

The kids sprinted around the table toward the living room. I scooted back and intercepted them both for a hug, smelled their childish sweat in their scalps before releasing them.

“Joy,” I said in a low voice so they wouldn’t be able to hear me over the TV. She circled behind me and placed her hands on my shoulders, leaned down so that her ear was close to my mouth. “I believe you about the witches.”

The caresses on my shoulders stopped, she moved and sat down beside me. Her look was intense.

“I think they’ve put a hex on me. The other night,” I said, gesturing toward her face. “The hole. And there was also something with the neighbors’ dog—”

Her hand covered her mouth. “Redbeard?”

I nodded regretfully and explained that there were also these dreams, ones I could only vaguely recollect, but in which there was a figure.

“A woman?” she asked. “Red hair?”

I told her that I could not remember the details, but I thought it was a woman, yes, and a name too, I thought. “Om… Oma… Omaros?”

She nodded and covered my hands in hers, took hold and began to pray. Beneath the sound of the TV roaring in the living room we prayed for protection against the evil powers at work around us, we prayed for my liberation from the malevolent thing that was afflicting my soul, we prayed for strength and guidance to crush those who worked
against us, and against God, and as she said this I could feel her hands tremble, surprised by the strength of her grip.

Joy was much better at praying than I was. When she spoke, even though it was in a low voice, I could feel real power in her words; I knew that together, and with God’s support, no witches or demons stood a chance.

That night we had sex missionary style, until the very end when I choked her. She’d asked me to and I’d obliged—nothing strange about that. We slept in a muggy haze, but remained wrapped in each others’ arms, and when I woke up she was already gone and so were the boys. It was my day off and I’d slept in. I ambled into the kitchen and one of the first things I noticed was that in the back yard the hole had been filled in. I went outside and poked it with my toe—packed tight. I examined my feet but except for the one toe there was no dirt on them.


I smiled to myself and made a cup of coffee, not even bothering to wonder just who or what might be buried beneath it.
Thirty-two days into my master cleanse I have never felt better. There was a time when I longed for the comforts of food, for certain tastes at certain times, but that time has passed. I’ve always had a tendency to eat my feelings, and after Wayne I had no shortage of those. I experience both longings now as a rumble in my stomach, something to observe rather than respond to.

When I wake, however, the thought of breakfast will sometimes streak across my mind like a phantom limb. I’ll make a meal of salt water, study my stool to see what else I am rid of. My mind has never been more clear. I can see now that what I felt towards Wayne was not love, but a kind of dependence, like nicotine, which I have also given up. He has dependences too—I’m sure he prayed vigorously about the decision beforehand.

I feel no ill will, although I do not wish to speak to him either. Words, like sustenance, are an addiction, and like sustenance they require a tremendous amount of energy to generate and break down. Wayne is a perfect example of this. I can’t imagine the energy it must take to insulate one’s self with beliefs the way he does, to alter one’s lifestyle, and to stall one’s own critical thought processes. All I know is it’s energy I don’t have. I’m done. I renounce all habits, gastronomical and ideological. I am a clean slate; we’ll see how long I can stay that way.
I am aware that I will have to stop eventually, although the longest master cleanse on record is 376 days, and there are monks who have gone their entire lives without speaking, so for now, I think, I can afford not to be pragmatic about it.

For work I walk dogs for wealthy families in South Boulder. I often take my three favorites to walk in Chautauqua—an English sheepdog named Buster, and two pugs: Curly and Moe. One of the benefits of not speaking is that I do not have to call them by these names. I enjoy walking there, especially now that there are fewer people around. Lions aren’t known to make appearances during the daylight, although this lion’s habits are anything but typical. Many have sworn off the park altogether.

Not me though.

Since I’ve begun cleansing I find it difficult to believe an animal thing would harm me. I take nothing from nature (except for lemons and syrup), so why should it take anything from me? I have nothing scientific to support this, but I believe animals are able to sense that relationship and will not bother someone who has exempted herself from the food chain. It is naïve, but I feel it to be true. In any case, it helps me enjoy my walks.

One day I am walking Buster, Curly, and Moe, wandering up the bald hillside and into the trees. The dogs are well-behaved and do not pull against their leashes, which is good because I like to walk very slowly, almost as if I’m being carried. I enjoy the feeling of frailty I’ve come to have ever since the third week or so. Marijuana enhances this feeling. It causes my stomach to grumble, which makes me more aware of it, that separation between body and mind.

We are wandering the trails of Chautauqua when we come to what appears to be a fork. I’m quite high at the moment and not sure whether they are both trails, or if one is
just a peculiar clearing of trees that looks like a trail. Furthermore, if this is the case, I’m not sure which one is which. I’ve built it up to be quite a complicated matter in my mind before finally, adopting the I’m-in-harmony-with-nature-so-what-could-go-wrong mentality, I choose the path to the right, which is less steep and therefore easier, in its way, to traverse.

We’ve not been walking more than five minutes when I realize this is not a trail, but a path worn down by, I don’t know, animal passage? I try not to worry myself with thoughts about the lion, that maybe this is where it takes its afternoon strolls. The marijuana doesn’t help. I am exempt, I remind myself, from the food chain. I do not bother trying to find my way back, but instead keep walking, hoping that I’ll intersect with another of the densely organized trails in Chautauqua. And after several more minutes I succeed—or think I do, at first. What I’ve reached is a circular clearing, obviously man-made. The floor is cleared of brush and loose soil. What remains is packed tight and smooth like clay.

I almost ask, What is this place? but catch my mouth opening. Instead, I observe. I look at the ground and notice a set of faded lines, large designs I would have to be suspended from the trees to make out. I look up, and spot what appear to be weather vanes hanging from the branches, but which are actually sagging constellations of bone strung together by wire.

“What is this place?” I say, this time aloud, and the sound of my voice sticks in my throat. I feel for a moment that I might choke on it. The bones are too high up for me to tell what species they are, not that I’m some kind of bone expert. They look large though, larger than most of the creatures one would expect to find here. Coyote, maybe?
Not big enough to be a bear, and besides, I’ve never heard of anyone coming across bear bones in Chautauqua.

I’m still craning my neck to look at them when the dogs by my knees start to growl. The hair along their spines is sticking straight up, their heads are lowered, their eyes shift back and forth. I crouch beside them and hold my finger in front of their faces, stroking their heads to calm them. A breeze floats through the trees, rustling first one side, then the other, like liquid settling into one spot. The dogs start growling again, padding around on their feet and I feel uneasy, like we’re in a place we’re not supposed to be and that something is watching us. I shuffle backwards and have to tug several times to get the dogs to follow. Just as I’m preparing to leave I cast one more look over my shoulder and remember Wayne’s theory: that it’s not a lion at all, but witches responsible for the missing children. I can recall his stern face as he says it, like an executioner, or a confessor. A violence deep down, smoldering.

As I look at the clearing—the bones and the washed out designs on the ground—I realize it can be nothing else.

I’m anxious now. My marijuana-induced logic will not allow me to believe I can see what I’ve seen and still leave this place alive. I pause and take a mental stock of the situation, convinced I can already feel malignant spells at work in my body. I drag Buster, Curly, and Moe up the hillside, back in the direction I came. By now they have calmed and are moving much too slow for my liking. I cannot find the trail. I shift one direction, then another, and have just about decided to start screaming when I practically trip over it and follow it the half-mile back to the parking lot.
The buzz has worn off by now and I feel giddy with excitement, silly for how afraid I was. Wait until I tell Wayne about this, I think.

Then: *Oh. That’s right.*

Rather than tell someone about it, I decide to return with a camera, maybe send some photos in to the paper, to that woman who’s been covering the disappearances. Maybe there will even be a finder’s fee, or something like that. I’ve never liked the way cameras mediate one’s experience, but at least I haven’t taken any vows against them.

I drop Buster, Curly, and Moe off at their homes and collect a palm full of cash because it’s Friday. The dogs disappear inside without looking back, without exchanging even a conspiratorial glance, seeming to have completely forgotten about what we’ve just witnessed. I return to my apartment on 30th and there is a message from Wayne on the answering machine. He’s worried about me, he says. Wishes I’d call him back, or answer at least once so that he’ll know I’m alright. He feels guilty, wants is to make sure I haven’t killed myself or anything on his account: a very Wayne-way of thinking about things. Severe. Everything short of death is just “part of the process.” Well, the same goes both ways, buddy.

I search through my closet for the camera, the expensive one we bought when we thought we were engaged and that we used precisely one time. I check the desk, under the bed. Is it possible Wayne took it with him? Snuck it out without me knowing? I wonder what he’s taking pictures of these days.

But no, it’s stashed inside my hiking pack. Our one photo session was at Royal Arch, I remember. Seems like a lifetime ago. I sling the back pack over my shoulder and make myself a double portion of lemonade, pour it into the pack’s bladder and sip it
while I ride my bike back to Chautauqua. I have to be quick if I want to return before
dusk, although I’m pretty sure I remember right where it is, how to get there. Shouldn’t
take more than a half hour to get there and back, tops.

The parking lot is empty. Even skeptics aren’t willing to risk the park at this hour. *The Witching Hour*, I think to myself. The phrase reminds me lions aren’t the only dark
thing to come out at night.

Without the dogs or the drugs my progress is much faster. I haven’t been walking
long when I spot the “fork” I’d noticed earlier. It makes me feel better to realize that,
even sober, it really is quite confusing. I take the path to the right and in another three
minutes I’ve reached the clearing. Inside the trees it is dark and I immediately begin to
take pictures, turning on the flash to capture the bone constellations hanging there, the
smooth forest floor. After several pictures I notice a pyramid of small twigs and branches
that wasn’t there before, enclosing a sheet of folded newspaper. It is the base of a fire.

I take a picture of it and decide now would be a good time to scram. No sooner
have I left the clearing and begun to hike back up to the trail than I hear voices coming
from that same direction: women’s voices, just over the hill. I scramble off the path and
hide behind a few boulders set into the hillside. The laughter pauses and I know they can
hear me shuffling through the leaves and branches, are probably wondering what kind of
clumsy animal I could be. I crouch down, willing myself to be invisible in the twilight,
and watch them come into view—a procession of about five women wearing black capes.

They are scanning the clearing and the surrounding trees, looking for the source
of the sound. Looking for me.
Their laughter resumes and they appear to have given up the search. They descend into the clearing, chatting while one sets up a folding table and the others repaint the faded designs on the ground. With the fresh paint down I see that one of them is a pentagram.

When they’re finished, one kneels and starts the fire. I can hear over my shoulder another five or six women approaching from the trail, each bearing an arm load of firewood, except for the one in the rear who carries only a large, leather-bound book. Her hair is red and appears to smolder in the flickering light.

I remain still, already having reconciled myself to spending the night here and wishing only that I’d made more lemonade. I suck at the bladder and draw out the last drops, although my stomach is starting to grumble. The sound worries me more than the hunger.

The witches mingle for a while in the clearing, talking and laughing and drinking together. Eventually the noise dies and is replaced by the sound of crickets, an owl hooting somewhere distant, and the crackle of the fire at the center of the clearing.

One of them—the one with the book and the red hair—moves about the pentagram, scattering something from a satchel with one hand and holding the book open with the other, murmuring words that I cannot hear from this distance. When she’s finished, she moves outside of the pentagram with the others and, in one motion, they all drop their capes to reveal eleven naked, female bodies. What surrounds is pitch black by now, and I’m able to watch without fear of being seen. The women move toward the fire without speaking to one another, each reaching in and removing a torch before assembling themselves in a circle just inside the edge of the pentagram. The red haired
one, whom I can see now is very beautiful, holds a knife along with the book and begins to trace the pentagram’s shape in the dust.

I watch in helpless fascination, unable to tear my eyes away, yet somehow terribly frightened by what’s going on. All of the ritual and ceremony—speech I cannot hear, symbols I cannot understand. There is a word they seem to be repeating over and over, a name maybe, although from up here it sounds just like a slur of syllables. I think I can see something in the fire, a shape. I study it, stare intently until I cannot be sure whether it’s the fire or my eyes bending, but yes, there is a shape there, definitely. A figure: male, I think, but on second thought I cannot tell. It is little more than a shadow in the flames, although if I look closely I swear I can see its features, the awful contours of a face.

I taste the smoke when I inhale and it tastes rotten. I fight a sudden impulse to scream.

Behind me, a sudden screech causes me to jump and to almost fall forward into full view. I turn and see it is an owl perched on a branch not five feet away, staring at me, its eyes catching the light from the fire. I glance back and am relieved the witches have not noticed. “Shew,” I rasp, waving my hand at the owl, although it remains there, perched and staring at me.

“Shew,” I say again, feeling trapped between its eerie glare and the ceremony taking place in the clearing. I glance back toward the fire and their hands are all raised now, their voices sounding in unison although I still can’t hear the name they’re saying. Oderos? Odysseus?

I remember the camera still hung around my neck and lift the viewfinder to my eye, zoom in on the bodies surrounding the fire. The women are all different types and
ages, with little in common other than the look of blank focus on each of their upturned faces, eyes closed.

Without thinking about it, my finger moves to take a picture, slips over the button just in time for me to remember that I never took the flash off, and there is a moment of blinding light that feels just like death. When my vision returns, I can see the women in the clearing all glaring up at me. I cannot tell for sure whether they see me, although it’s not worth risking to find out. I turn and scuttle on all fours up the hillside, moving for speed, not for stealth. The fact that they’re naked, I figure, buys me at least a few extra moments, and I’ve always been quick on my feet.

As I hurry past the owl I can see from the corner of my eye its head rotating on its axis, its gaze following me, as well as another awful screech that makes me wonder if it’s somehow communicating with the witches.

I sprint blindly through the trees with my hand raised, protecting my face from branches, until at last I make out a channel of moonlight where the trail is and chase it down into Chautauqua. I emerge from the tree line and sprint to where my bike is chained up in the parking lot. So far I have not bothered looking back, and do not until I reach my bike.

Fumbling for my keys, I peer up the hillside toward the trees and the empty trailhead, all bathed a dark shade of blue, and there is nothing. No torches, no figures. Nothing pursuing me, although this fact doesn’t slow me down. I peddle as fast as I can the whole way home and by the time I get there I am ready to collapse from exhaustion. I have not strained myself this way in quite some time, and though the cleanse leaves me plenty of energy for normal activities, I do not handle exercise well. With trembling
hands I prepare myself a cocktail, drain it all at once, then collapse on my bed with the lights on. My heart continues to race and I think manically about what I’ve seen, what it could mean. Could these women really be responsible for the missing children? What would Wayne think? What would Wayne do?

I try to think back but cannot remember anything obviously wrong with the scene, nothing I could point to and identify as explicitly evil, but there was an aura, a feeling in the air of awfulness too strong to be subjective. I remind myself that I don’t know what I saw, really. And that if I take this moment to rush off and start putting it into words—especially Wayne’s words—I’ll never know. That’s the problem with language: it’s too convincing. Talk about your fears and they start to appear everywhere. Demons, I’m told, can only possess those who are afraid of them.

I breathe my way into a troubled sleep, full of dreams I cannot remember, and when I wake in the morning I could swear I woke at least once to the sound of an owl screeching outside my window.

There is another voicemail from Wayne on my answering machine. He is worried. He needs to hear my voice. He does not know about the cleanse, the silence, and he shall not. How would I tell him?

I read my stool like scattered bones. It’s been a long while since I’ve eliminated anything but a faint discoloration. I have no more waste to expel, and I try to feel that cleanness, that purity inside of myself—organs like a newborn babe—but I cannot. I am polluted still. With what, I am not sure.
I go to walk my morning charges, although we steer clear of Chautauqua. Already the events last night feel like a dream, already they are slipping from memory. I strain myself, trying to recall the particulars, trying to hold on to enough to identify it as reality. Because of the flash, the picture I took is difficult to decipher. You can make out the fire in the middle, but that is all—the figures are all washed out at the edges.

Between my morning and afternoon set of K-9s I go to Pearl Street and walk through the mall, past the pagan bookstore. I stand at the top of the stairs looking down at its storefront, and contemplate going inside. Just to see. Just to gage the woman behind the front desk’s reaction, whether there is any recognition there. But I do not.

My stomach is grumbling, and close by I can smell hot dogs, gyros, coffee. There are people sitting on patios in the sun drinking glasses of white wine, eating pastries, talking. I think of how long it’s been since I’ve had intercourse of any kind with another human, how often these things are paired: food and discourse. And for a moment the frailty I’ve cultivated seems sinister to me. It feels like I am withering somewhere in the shadows, out of sight for anyone to notice. Except for Wayne, maybe. Perhaps I should give him a call, tell him about what is happening to me, the cleanse, the silence. Tell him about what I saw in the woods last night…

No.

I return home and attempt to sit in meditation, but the way my heart races is unbearable. I try yoga, although I cannot seem to settle inside any of the poses. I rush through the sequence, not knowing why, or what there is for me to do once I’m finished.

The phone rings.

I do not answer.
Before I know it, it’s late afternoon and I’m on my bike pedaling back to Chautauqua, the camera and a Swiss army knife stuffed into my backpack. By the time the sun rises, I decide, I will know for certain what I am dealing with. Either the women I encountered last night are harmless, just dried out old crones celebrating nature, or the Church is right and there actually is something dark going on in Boulder. In which case, I don’t know. I suppose I’ll owe Wayne an apology. Out loud.

By the time I get there the parking lot is jammed with people trying to get out, like a theme park at closing time. I coast between the cars and lock my bike against a tow-away sign. A part of me feels like a martyr, trudging up the bare hillside in view of all the fleeing mothers and fathers. I sip at my camelback full of lemonade. This time I will stay all night if I have to. I hike the familiar trail to the familiar fork, settle behind a different set of boulders in case the witches are on to the others. I sit and I wait, watching the clearing, the ridge; listening for the familiar sound of cackling to herald their arrival. There is no fire structure tonight, and the designs in the ground have already been cleared. The bones are still there though. If anything, there seem to be more of them.

It’s starting to get dark. I look at my watch and see that it is nearly eight o’clock and still no sign. Perhaps they do not come every night, I tell myself, half-hopeful. Or perhaps I’ve busted their hideout and they’ve moved on. I’m still considering the possibilities when a sudden screech over my left shoulder makes me jump. I turn and there is a large, gray owl sitting on a low branch behind me. The same one from last night? I pick up a rock and toss it at it. The owl lifts out of range and settles again a little farther back, hoots at me for good measure. I wave it away, but it just stares, its eyes glowing more as the daylight disappears. Listening once more for the witches’ approach,
I stand and am about to chase it off when another shriek, this time from the other direction, makes me turn back. There is another, identical owl perched on a branch just overhead, not ten feet away.

I am feeling unsettled. It hoots at me and there is a beat of silence before the other picks up the call, creating an alternate rhythm: *hoot-HOOT, hoot-HOOT*. I decide to move to the other side of the clearing, but I have not taken two steps when I see, twenty meters off, another owl situated right in my path, also hooting.

I must go.

But now the sound is coming from everywhere, every direction. I look up and can see them congregating on the hanging bones, in the tree branches above. More owls than I’ve ever seen. Some even are standing flat on the ground. All hooting, their eyes shining green in my direction, filled with an infernal light of which I cannot trace the source.

That’s it, I decide.

I sprint through the trees, up the hillside, back toward the trail. I cover my eyes against the branches, but also because I know something of an owl’s anatomy, know how sharp their talons are. But none attack me. I can hear the shudder of wings as they clear the path in front of me, but that dreadful hooting continues, pursuing me the entire way to the parking lot, even once I’ve scrambled clear of the tree line. I imagine them hovering in the air above me, but do not look up to see. I pedal as fast as I can home, still hear it ringing in my ears and believe it is probably my imagination, but who can tell these things for sure? Who knows what is real and what is not without anyone else to verify the distinction?
When I reach my apartment I lock myself in the bedroom but can hear them in the trees outside. Can see the faint glimmer of their eyes—so many—before cinching the blinds. The sound persists until it’s all I can hear, and I’m desperate to drown it out. I finally pick up the phone, dial Wayne’s number and when his voice appears on the other end of the line, breathless—“Hello?” he asks—the only response I can manage is to start sobbing and repeating his name.

“Rigpa?” he asks.

“Yes,” I sob. “Yes, it’s Rigpa. I need to talk,” I say. “There’s something I need to tell you—I think I’ve been cursed.”

Already, I notice, I’m feeling a little bit better.
Margaret

I ought to mention now, up front, before my damn sister-in-law gets involved, that I cannot be sure exactly what I saw. The two could have been related—a mother and daughter, an aunt and niece. Neighbors even. There are a thousand and two innocuous explanations for what happened, but because of what followed I have reason to believe none of those apply.

It began with a feeling. As I get older, more and more of my feelings, I find, are inexplicable.

A young girl getting off the bus outside my window. An older woman dressed in a long black coat, too warm for the weather. There is a tentative air between them. A hesitation as the girl comes to a stop in front of her. The woman faces away from me, although when the girl shifts her weight to the left I can see her upturned face. The older woman is saying something to her and she is listening. Several moments pass and the woman extends her hand. The child reluctantly takes hold, they turn and walk away from where I am watching. I still have not seen the woman’s face, although I have seen the girl many times getting off the bus. I know her home is in the opposite direction.

I called Alice immediately and told her about it, taking several inopportune breaks to catch my breath.
“Are you sure, Margaret? Are you sure it wasn’t a relative? An older sister? A neighbor, for Christ’s sake, picking her up until her mother gets off work?”

I explained the feeling of dread and listened to her sigh on the other end of the line.

“Margaret, this has got to stop.”

Whether or not you end up believing me, reader, let the record show I’ve offered at least this much disclaimer.

Alice doesn’t believe a word I say about anything. I would have stopped telling her things long ago if there were anyone else for me to talk to. Not that I blame her. She’s got a full life to attend to. Her children (my two nephews) go to college at CU, having decided to stay close to home when their father (her husband, my brother) kicked the bucket two years ago. She makes dinner for them twice a week, does their laundry at least once, and even cleans their dorm rooms every now and then. She has them to fuss over. Me, I’ve got this beautiful bay window.

The day after Alice hung up on me, I bathed myself, got dressed, and went searching for the young girl’s house. It was a slow, exhausting affair. I said before that I knew which direction she lived in, but not where exactly. And furthermore, by the time I knocked on the first door I realized I had no idea what to say. “Um, hello, miss. I was wondering if you happened to have any children, or whether you might be missing one.”

No one wants to slam the door in an old woman’s face, especially one as sweet and as friendly as I admit to being, although it would have helped to think about how I wanted to present the matter in advance.
All children were accounted for in the first couple of homes, then I came to the apartment complex at the end of the street. I sighed. The first several doors belonged to college students. They were polite, but I could see them restraining laughter while I told them what I’d seen. Still, they promised to keep a lookout.

I had a strange experience at one woman’s apartment. She answered the door in a silk robe, although her hair and makeup were both done up. Her name was Zoe, I think.

“Yes, ma’am? How can I help you?”

I hesitated. Something about her seemed off, although, per usual, I could not say what it was.

“Well, I’m just walking around because I saw something strange yesterday. A child getting off the bus… Anyway, I just want to make sure everyone’s children—if they have any—are, you know, well and accounted for.”

She did not mention whether she had any children, instead repositioned herself against the doorframe. “Really?” she said. “What happened? What did you see?”

Again, something about her tone, her posture. I tried to be vague, but didn’t know how to dance around the fact that I’d seen the girl go away with someone I was pretty sure was a stranger.

“How do you know she was a stranger?” the woman asked. “Couldn’t it have been a friend or family member?”

I nodded, said that yes, that was probably it. There was a moment of silence and I hoped she would wish me luck and send me on my way.

“Still,” she said. “That is concerning. Would you like to come in and tell me more about it? Maybe I could help steer you in the right direction.”
“That’s alright, thank you. I should probably continue on. I’m sure it’s nothing, but it will make me feel better to check.”

“Are you sure? I’ve got some tea I could make. Some cookies. No children here, but I know most of the families in the complex and could make some phone calls, save you the effort.”

“That’s okay, really,” I said. The feeling was urgent now. I didn’t know why, but somehow I needed to get out of there. “Thank you though.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Suit yourself. Will you let me know what you find out though, so that I can relax?” She smiled. “Now you’ve got me all worked up.”

I said that I would.

“Maybe I’ll stop by sometime this week and get the gossip. You live in the cute, little house at the end of the street, don’t you? Across from the bus stop?”

I didn’t respond and she stared, misinterpreting my silence.

“Oh dear, I didn’t mean ‘little’ in a bad way. I mean, well, you see where I live.”

I explained that I wasn’t offended.

“Excellent,” she said. “Well, good luck, and it was nice to finally meet you. I’m sure I’ll be seeing you again soon.”

With that I turned and could feel her watching me for several moments before I finally heard her door close. I knocked on a few more doors but I was rattled and that deepened my exhaustion. Afterwards I went home and locked the door behind me. I called Alice, even though I knew what she was going to say. I explained what I’d encountered.
“Really, Margaret,” she said. “You’ve been watching too many movies. Real witches worship the Earth; they don’t abduct children.”

But what she said made no difference. I’d seen what I’d seen and felt what I’d felt, and Alice knew goddamn well I didn’t even own a TV.

I thought about Zoe as I went to sleep; pictured her there propped inside of her doorframe, staring, not saying anything. Why did I think she was a witch? Something about her. Something about her interest in the situation seemed contrived. Something about her eyes, her gaze, felt coercive; made me forget what I’d set out to do.

When I finally fell asleep I dreamed of giving birth. No, not giving birth; the baby appeared rather inside my arms, smooth and smiling, immaculate, like someone had given it to me. So smooth I could not even tell its sex. It suckled calmly at my breast, patiently, holding my gaze the entire time.

“What’s your name?” I cooed. Although it did not stop suckling. Instead, its grip on my breast tightened, so strong it was obscene, and I could see its little face grinning around my nipple. A part of me felt like screaming, but for reasons I cannot explain, I smiled too, kept on dreaming.

Several days passed before I got a knock on my door. When I opened it though nobody was there. I looked briefly in both directions then went back inside. It wouldn’t have been the first time I imagined hearing something. Then I heard it again, again went to the door, and again there was nobody. Now I decided someone must be playing a prank on me—a little pre-Halloween fun with the old lady on the block—and I waited by
the door to catch them. Within five minutes there was another knock and I did not even
look through the peep hole before flinging the door open and finding Zoe there, hands
surprised to see you.”

“Really? Surprised?” she asked, and took a step forward even though I hadn’t
invited her in. By instinct, I moved to one side and allowed her to stroll right by me. It
seemed ages since I’d had a guest.


“Some tea would be great,” she said, taking a seat on the settee across from the
coffee table. “Really I just wanted to pick your brain.”

“What do you mean?” I called from the kitchen, placing the kettle on the stove
and teabags in two separate mugs.

“The child, silly.”

I took a seat at the far end of the couch perpendicular to where she sat.

“Did you ever find out who she was? Any parents missing anyone?”

“Not yet,” I said. “I haven’t made it around to everybody though.”

“You know what’s been bothering me about this whole thing?” she asked. “You
said it was a middle-aged woman, right? And that you didn’t see her face?”

I nodded.

“Well, what would a middle-aged woman want with a child, anyway? I mean, if it
were a man we could assume some kind of perverse sexual thing, probably, right? But
what could the woman want?”

She looked at me, indicating that it was not a rhetorical question.
“I don’t know,” I said. “I thought though that it might be a witch.”

“A witch?” she repeated, arching her eyebrows.

Why had I told her that?

“I thought those kind of witches only existed in movies.”

“You’re probably right,” I said quickly. “Just a stupid idea I had.”

“Now just wait a second,” she said, silencing me with her hand. “On the other hand it makes a lot of sense, what with all the other children missing. I mean, did you ever really believe that nonsense about a lion?”

I shook my head.

“But still, what would a witch do with a child? Chop her up? Put her in a cauldron?”

I shrugged. “Aren’t there spells or sacrifices a witch could do?”

“I don’t know. Why do you ask me that, honey?” She grinned.

“Sorry. I just… I…” I tried to recover but couldn’t.

“Relax, dear. I’m only kidding.” She sat there a moment in silence before rising to her feet. “Well, I’d better be going.” Just then the kettle began to whistle in the kitchen.

“But there’s our tea!” she said. I started to rise but she shuffled behind me and placed a hand on my shoulder, gently holding me in place. “Please,” she said. “Don’t worry yourself. I’ll take care of it.”

She disappeared into the kitchen and the whistling stopped. I could hear cabinets opening and closing and—did I imagine it?—whispering. She returned with a platter bearing two cups of tea, cream, and sugar, and placed it on the coffee table between us. I
looked at her, trying to read her expression, but she only stared back sweetly, inscrutable.

“Do you take cream?” she asked.

I nodded and watched while she prepared our two cups, both with cream, hers with sugar. She held the cup and saucer out to me and I took it from her, watched her take a sip of her own before, very slowly, raising mine to my lips. I knew that I shouldn’t, that I should invent an excuse of some kind, and quick. But I couldn’t think of anything, and somehow could not justify being rude to this woman, regardless of what was at stake.

Or what I imagined was at stake, I was quick to remind myself, invoking Alice.

And I don’t know whether it was my sudden skepticism or the hot tea radiating inside my chest, but I did feel much better. I looked at Zoe and smiled, thanked her for the tea. She smiled back, and we did not speak again about the child.

That night I dreamed lucidly, and my child returned to me, grown now into a toddler, although there was something foggy and indistinct about it. It seemed to lack any individual characteristics, anything even to identify its gender. I called it to me. “Come, dear. Come to mommy!” It waddled over and reached for me. I scooped it into my arms and held it against my chest, realizing suddenly that I did not know its name and wondering how a mother should go about asking for it. “Shhh,” I said, although it was not making a sound. “There, there.” I felt its little tongue moving against my neck. “That’s alright now. Shhh.” I thought for a moment I could hear it whispering, but it could have been just the rustle of my blouse.
Alice brought me dinner. Somehow, over the last few days she’d gotten it into her head that something was wrong. It was true, I had been feeling tired lately, and I was aware, over the phone, of having more trouble expressing myself than usual. She brought roasted chicken, green beans, and mashed potatoes—old people food—and the entire time watched me pick at it, wouldn’t accept that I could simply not be hungry.

“What’s going on, Margaret? What’s wrong with you?”

I shrugged. “Haven’t been sleeping so well,” I said. “Dreams. I think the witches are getting to me. My child…” I trailed off and it was almost comic, the way her jaw dropped. Granny’s got dementia, I could hear her thinking. And of course I was aware that what I said didn’t make any sense. I was just so tired, couldn’t put it together, didn’t care enough to go back and make myself clear. “Just don’t try putting me into a home,” I said at last. “It’s not that.”

She put what I didn’t eat into Tupperware and left it in the fridge for me. Then she helped me to the bedroom, undressed me, and put me to bed. “Is there anything I can do?” she asked once she’d gotten me tucked in. The light was off and the only thing illuminating her was the light from the hallway. I looked into her face, as if my eyes could speak, trying to tell her something, to explain… I don’t know. “No,” I said, dejected. “No help.”

It’s tough to know whether I actually experienced things as a blur, or just remember them that way. The time between moments seemed to collapse; voices fading in and out. Faces hovering over my bed.
Zoe came to visit me. I remember that much; remember her smiling face, her gentle voice. “How are you doing, dear?” she said, laying her hand on my forehead. “No need to say anything. I know it’s probably difficult.”

She disappeared—how long, I’m not certain—but then was back again. “Don’t be scared,” she said. “Nothing’s permanent. Just a vacation, is all. You and your child, think.”

And then she was gone, subsumed by a grainy, abstract kind of darkness. Strange, but I found her words oddly comforting.

More than one doctor came to see me, brought by Alice. More than one nurse. After a while though I became aware that it was the same face appearing over and over again, and gathered that she must be with some kind of hospice service. Her look was severe, and I would catch her standing over me, saying things, severe things, things that I thought, at first, were spells.

Not that I had the energy to resist, or to care, even.

After a while though I realized I knew the words, knew the form. She was not casting, she was praying. Asking the Lord to watch over and to protect me; to deliver me from evil.

My child did not like that.

“Shhh,” I whispered to it. “She doesn’t mean us any harm.”

But the child would not listen. It raged and it clawed. It said terrible, awful things. I still did not know its name, but I seemed to have heard it spoken somewhere, whether in dream or waking I did not know, but it echoed in my head.
“Orobus.

“I’m going to bring someone,” the woman said to me. “Someone who can help you.”

I wanted to tell her no, to warn her. The child. I did not know what it was capable of. It was not real in the sense that I was, I knew, but still: I was afraid of it. Its dark little eyes, its smooth, awful little head. It looked probably teenaged now, although I could tell no more about it than before. Its breasts were beginning to form, but I could also see at times a male organ between its legs. At times its anger struck me as that of a boy. At other times a girl. The only thing I could be sure of was its name, repeated over and over until it was just a sound, an echo, a breath.

“Orobusssss.

The man the woman who cared for me brought was every bit as severe as she. He did not wear a religious garb, although I knew immediately he was a religious figure of some kind. My child stirred.

“Margaret,” he said, kneeling beside my bed. His plaid shirt was rolled up past his elbows and he carried a book in his hand with gold lettering. “I don’t want you to worry about a thing. I’m going to pray over you, and then I’m going to lay my hands on you. I don’t want you to be alarmed. That son of a bitch inside you has got to come out. Afterwards you can tell me what you saw, what got you into this mess.”

He stood and rubbed something on my forehead, something that burned, then he opened his book and began to speak. I tried to listen but could make no sense of what he was saying. I was distracted by my child’s laughter, a deep, brooding sort of mirth. The man looked down at me. I realized the laughter was coming from my mouth.
“In the name of Christ Almighty I command that you leave this woman. Christ commands you.”

I could not see my child any longer, but could still hear its laughter; could feel it crouching in me, curled up like a snake.

“You have no power here. Just as Christ gave his disciples power over demons, so do I command you to exit this woman. Crawl back to your den of serpents, or be trampled underfoot.”

The man continued to speak: different versions of the same thing, and the child continued to laugh. I could see sweat beading on his face. His skin was red. His eyes shifted from left to right, then settled on a spot beneath my periphery. “What is that?” he asked the woman.

She looked at where he pointed, somewhere beneath me, and the two of them dropped to their knees to investigate.

“God,” I heard him exclaim.

“This wasn’t here before,” she said. “Someone put it there.”

“The sister-in-law?”

“I don’t think so. She was the one who contacted us.”

“Someone else then. We’ll figure it out later. We’ve got to move her.”

They stood again and I could feel a deep, nasty laughter coming from me. They paid no attention.

Hands beneath my arms, my feet. The woman helped lift me out of bed and placed my feet on the ground. I could feel the man beneath my arms, dragging me from the room. In front of me I could see her at one end of the bed, pulling on the frame,
moving it to one side, and beneath it, in chalk scrawled onto the hardwood floor, a pentagram enclosed by a circle, pointing to where my feet would be. Inside of it was another symbol, one I didn’t recognize: two circles with letters scrawled around its outer edge, and inside that a design I cannot describe except to say it looked to me vaguely like a jester.

He dragged me into the living room and propped me on the couch. Already I could feel my child grown distant. I clutched at it, extended my hands for it, although it was like reaching into a dark room. All I could hear was a dim laughter, far off, and a distant hiss that sounded like *Orobus*.

“Are you there, Margaret?” The man asked, crouching in front of me. I looked at him, could see now that he wore a deacon’s name tag. West Pine Baptist Church. It read, Pastor John.

“Yes,” I said, my voice sounding choked and scratchy to my ears.

“Take a minute,” he said. “Joy, will you get this woman a glass of water?”

The woman glided from my bedroom into the kitchen and returned a moment later with a glass of water from the sink. I drank it.

“There, dear. That’s better. Now, as soon as you feel up to it, it’s real important that you tell us everything that happened to you. Every last detail.”

I handed my glass back to Joy and she turned to go refill it. I looked into Pastor John’s eyes; they were sharp and patient. I stared at his face, contorted with concern and intensity. I thought back to the child I’d seen, moving from door to door. It seemed like a distant memory, something that had happened years, not weeks ago. But whether or not I
remembered it perfectly made no difference, I knew. This wasn’t Alice I was dealing with. It was Pastor John. I knew by looking at him that he’d believe every word I said.
John

Good morning. Good morning. It’s good to see you all. Christ has risen! And today we continue our eight part series on warfare.

Notice I don’t say *spiritual* warfare. That’s because too often we emphasize the *spiritual*, which is a half-step away from *the metaphorical*. We think of mission work, our struggles against temptation, or our politics. We think of our belt of truth, our breastplate of righteousness, our shield of faith, our sword of spirit. But what do we do with them? When Christ says, “I came not to bring you peace, but a sword,” is it a sword of spirit he’s talking about? Is he just speaking parables, like he often does?

I call bullshit.

“I came not to bring you peace…” is the most under-read passage in scripture. If you want proof, just look at Christ himself. It’s true that often Christ’s words were his weapons. When the Devil came to tempt him in the desert, he didn’t pull out any sword of spirit and stick him with it. No, he used scripture, he used words. The Devil was trying to mind fuck him and he mind fucked him right back:

“The devil taketh him up into the holy city and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall
bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.”

Back and forth they go: “It is written” and “It is written again.” The Devil attempting to use words and scripture to get the best of him, and Christ using the same words, the same scripture to parry right back. And let me ask you this: What is Christ doing here if not pointing out just how limited words are? Even holy words. Scripture. The Devil can quote scripture, but it doesn’t do him any good. Whatever you can say using scripture can be unsaid, contradicted using the same text.

Don’t look so surprised; I know you’ve encountered the same thing witnessing to others. When you come into contact with people who know the Bible every bit as well as you do but, for whatever reason, don’t believe. It’s frustrating, I know, but only natural. When words are your only weapon, the “battles” aren’t always easy to win.

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities,” he was telling the truth, but only part of the truth. The truth is that flesh and blood and principalities aren’t always so different. Remember those old moneylenders in the temple? It wasn’t any biceps of salvation Christ used to flip those tables, to drive the bastards out. He didn’t just stand there quoting scripture at them. And when the centurions came to take him in Gethsemane, a lot of people misread the scene where Peter pulls out his sword and lops off the soldier’s ear. When Christ takes the ear and puts it back on, that’s not Christ being a pacifist, that’s just Peter misunderstanding where the real battle was. Christ needed to be taken, needed to suffer, needed to die under Pontius Pilot in order to get to where he had to be in order to fight the real fight. Where
do you think he was, friends, during those fateful hours following his death, following the scourge, the crown of thorns, the nails in his hands, the spear in his side?

In Hell, kicking ass and taking names.

No war of words this time. No struggle against temptation or quoting of scripture. No sword of spirit. This time he bore the sword of “give-me-those-keys-of-death-or-imma-use-this-to-tickle-your-prostate.” Sure, it’s Christ’s blood that saves us, but only indirectly. Don’t go taking that at face value. Christ’s primary offering is not sacrificial or metaphorical. It is his strength that really saves us, not his blood. It’s an important distinction, especially when we start to consider which example of his we’re supposed to follow.

But right now I want to back up a little and tell you folks a story. When I first enrolled in seminary, I was excited. I was expecting a place in which everyone took their faith seriously. Where we looked to scripture and didn’t just a see source material, some open text it was our jobs to interpret and to make say whatever we wanted. No, I looked forward to being among believers, true disciples of the LIVING word of God, who took that word and used it in our lives.

Boy, was I mistaken.

Would you believe there were people there who didn’t even believe in God? Who didn’t believe in Christ? Didn’t believe the Bible was the infallible word of God? People who’s sole interest in scripture was interpreting it, placing it inside of some socio-historical context, and playing it like a game? It’s true. Nearly broke my heart and almost made me renounce the Church altogether. I’d always believed that religion was for people who desired transcendence, who were not satisfied with the parade of masks and
costumes that dress this life and obscure it. Who wanted to strike through those masks and glimpse the true face of God, the one Moses had to hide himself from in the stone, that which no man can look upon and live! I felt that desire all throughout childhood and adolescence, went searching for it in every vice you can imagine: drugs, sex, violence… Finally I found it in religion. But I’m here to warn you, friends: religion can be just as bad as any of these. These people I went to seminary with, whose delight was in interpretive strategies and metaphors and whatnot, they were just as enslaved as any crack-addict, any womanizer. They were enslaved to the word. Made me sick, imagining myself up here in the pulpit spitting out insights and interpretations like some goddamn English major. But you know what got me through that time in my life, kept me on the path, allowed me to be the man standing before you today? Christ. Because Christ is not the word. He is the word made flesh!

“In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God…” So begins the Old Testament. But then something else happened, something important that is the very foundation of our entire faith. That word was made flesh! Why? Why did God have to become a man? It’s because there are battles that need fighting. Not spiritual battles—scripture tells us those have already been won—but battles of the flesh. If Jesus weren’t a man he would not have been able to go to Hell for us, would not have been able to enter into that place and to wrestle those keys of death away from Satan. And if he were not more than a man, he would not have been able to return. The unification of these principles is the real meaning of Christ. The word made flesh. And it will help us to understand spiritual and physical warfare the same way.
Which brings me to the real topic of discussion today: this witch issue we seem now to be facing.

I know that many of you are skeptical. Many of you don’t believe that evil exists that way in today’s world; that giants and demons and sorceresses are a thing of the old world. The Old Testament. But I’m here to tell you that anyone who doesn’t believe demons are present and active in this world hasn’t read God’s scripture. Or in any case, hasn’t understood it. “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,” saith the Lord. Now, why would he go and say a thing like that? Is it a metaphor? One of those parts of the Bible not meant to be taken literally?

Of course not!

Believe me when I say that I have witnessed the Devil’s work. I have watched demons, personally, tear a human soul in half. I have encountered witches, right here in our community; the same who are responsible for the recent missing children. And I’m not the only one. If you get a chance, have a word with Ms. Margaret here in the front row. She’ll be at the meeting later in the Deacon’s Lounge. She’ll tell you about having witnessed a child being abducted, later encountering the very same witch and afterwards being afflicted by a demon, a demon named Orobus. It will be your choice whether or not to believe her, but ask yourselves this: what reason does she have to lie to you? What reason do I? What reason do any of the thousands of people who share similar accounts? And most importantly, what reason do you have to believe whole-heartedly in ninety percent of scripture but not this other critical ten percent?

It’s a matter of faith, people. You cannot claim to believe in God and think the Devil’s a superstition. You cannot live in the light without battling the darkness, and that
ain’t no metaphor, friends! It’s not just some game we play with words, which is what most congregations seem to think. The pinnacle of devotion, for most, is Bible study, prayer. Their salvation, literally, is a verbal contract: “I accept Christ’s sacrifice and welcome him into my heart…” Et Cetera.

That’s how the Devil wants it. He wants more than anything to see our faith confined by words, by language, because so long as it is, he and his legions are free to run amuck. So long as you think witches and demons are myths, or metaphors from a forgotten age, they have nothing to fear from you. I’m not saying that Bible study isn’t important, or that prayer isn’t important, or that one shouldn’t commit one’s self to Christ in words. But if you think your responsibility as a Christian ends there, you’re just making the Devil’s work easy for him. There comes a time when, as Christians, we’ve got to put our bodies where our mouths are, otherwise what’s the point? I do not worship a symbol or a word. I worship the LIVING God, the word made flesh. Christ our savior, who is himself the exact embodiment of our faith.

His body, pierced by steel, whose blood redeems, is the clearest indictment I know against our fetishization of the word. Do not build your houses up on the sand, my friends, or believe me, they will crumble around you. Build them on the rock. “Pick up your cross and follow me,” Christ says. Because if he had to bleed, why shouldn’t you? Why shouldn’t they?

After the service today I will be leading a meeting in the Deacon’s Lounge, joined by Ms. Margaret, Joy, Peter, and Wayne, who have all recently formed an anti-necromancy coalition. There we will discuss courses of action. There will be free donuts and coffee. I know we’ve all got a lot on our plates now with the missing children and all,
but this is important. As for the meeting today, I hope that if you will not join us out of concern for the missing children, you will join us for yourselves, as an expression of your own faith. It’s time to put your money where your mouths are, which reminds me, the tithe basket should be coming around. Now Pastor Rich will play some songs on his guitar, and we will close with a prayer.
Hanna

I’d seen him everyday for a week at The Laughing Goat, hunkered into a corner, face faintly illuminated by his laptop, his almond eyes flashing at me over a stack of books on witchcraft. I was a starer, I knew. Couldn’t help it. My mind always seemed to wander the more I focused on someone’s face, and somehow they could sense this. It’s possible I willed them to, silently commanding them to look up at exactly the right moment and to notice me. I really must be more careful.

The café was dim with a small seating area in the front and more in the back: small round tables with wooden benches lining the stucco walls. There was a terrible series of paintings up illuminating the chakras in bright neon colors. And nestled into one corner was a small stage that, when there weren’t any performances, also served as seating. His table was directly beside this, laptop charger tautly connecting him to the wall.

I was seated in the corner opposite, sipping my Bhakti Chai out of a large, round mug. I was making him nervous, I could tell. His shifty glances were becoming more frequent, so instead I trained my glare on the couple at the table next to his. Within minutes they’d finished their drinks and gathered their things to go. I lifted my mug on its saucer and navigated the maze of tables into their place.
“I’m Hanna,” I said, sitting down, and I could see him choke down a sigh. Not fond of being interrupted.

“Hello,” he said, a bit stiff.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt: I just noticed your collection of books and couldn’t restrain myself. So you’re interested in witchcraft. Tough thing to be discreet about at a time like this.”

He glanced at the stack at his elbow, then looked me in the eyes for the first time. His were dark brown and almond-shaped. “I’d leave them at home,” he said, “but I needed to get some more work done.”

“What are you working on?”

“A novel.”

“Really?” My voice trilled a little as I said this. “I figured about as much.”

“Why is that?”

I leaned over and carefully withdrew a volume from the middle of the stack.

“Journalists and academics don’t use *Witchcraft for Dummies* as research.”

He smiled sheepishly and I felt that now we were friends. He leaned back in his chair and closed his laptop, and in the conversation that followed explained that he was a graduate student at CU. Creative writing. His thesis was a novel dealing with the disappearances.

“So you’re one of the ones who think witches are responsible? For the missing children?”

“No,” he said. “Not really. Something about the situation has just activated a part of my imagination I can’t shut off. That’s what I want the book to be about—Ambiguity.
The swarm of frightening possibilities that rushes to fill in the void when you don’t know something. I’m worried it’s becoming too much of a metaphor though.”

“For what?”

“For writing. The act of conjuring. Language as ritual.”

“I see. So you’re not interested in speculating about the missing children?”

He blinked and stared at me for a moment, although I could tell he was looking inward. “I should be,” he said finally. “But you’re right. I guess I’m not.”

I smiled. “Well, I look forward to reading it once it comes out.”

Changing the subject, he asked what I do.

“I’m a witch,” I said, and he laughed loudly, drawing attention from the other tables.

“You’re fucking kidding.”

“No,” I said.

He leaned forward onto his elbow, cupping his chin in his hand so that his wedding band shined against his cheek. “I’ve been wanting to talk to a witch so badly, but I’ve restrained myself.”

“Why is that?”

“The book works better, I think, with me on the outside.”

“I’m not sure Fortune agrees with you.”

“I’m not sure she does either.”

We talked for a few more minutes, mostly about witchcraft and Wicca, and a few of the ceremonial details he’d been trying to get through research, but still lacked confidence about, until finally I said that I had to go. “The cauldron won’t stir itself,” I
said. He said that it was nice meeting me, and that he hoped to see me again. We didn’t exchange any contact information, but I could tell by his face that he would be there at this exact time tomorrow. And as I left I tried to persuade myself that I’d had nothing to do with it.

I found him just as I’d expected, plugging away in the same corner with the stack of books piled more discreetly this time between his feet and the wall. Early sunlight streamed in through the glass, but faded into the more artificial light in the back of the café. I ordered and paid for my Bhakti Chai and joined him. The café was less crowded this morning and I moved easily past the empty chairs and tables. He saw me coming and closed his laptop, smiled, and rose to greet me. “Hanna,” he said, and we shook hands. His grasp was a little awkward. I knew he’d considered hugging me.

“Do you mind if I join you? Am I interrupting?”

“Not at all. I’ll call it ‘research’.”

“Really?”

“No, but this way I don’t feel guilty.”

As if to prove his amiable intentions, he began with the pleasantries we’d skipped over yesterday: What did I do besides steal infants and perform Black Masses? I explained that I was a hairstylist, that I saw people out of my home.

“Really?” he said. “Anything you could do about this?” He grasped a bunch of thick, overgrown hair above his ear.

“Of course,” I said, and shivered slightly, thinking of all that I could do with just a little bit of hair.
I grew up in Boulder?

No, Salt Lake.

Had I lived there long?

About four years.

Was I married?

Instead of answering my eyes shifted toward his ring. He didn’t follow my gaze, but instinctively tightened his hand into a fist, hiding it against the table.

“No, not married,” I said. “Boulder’s great for a lot of things, but not for singles who aren’t in college.”

He nodded, as if sympathizing with my predicament. “Well, if a witch can’t manage it, that’s not exactly hopeful. There’s not some kind of root or tonic you could cook up?”

I smiled, quoted: “‘An it harms none, do what ye will.’”

“Right. ‘Harm’ is open to interpretation though?”

“The rule is not to do anything that interferes with anyone else’s will. That’s what separates black and white magic.”

He nodded, acknowledging that I was correct. I’d forgotten he’d read *Witchcraft for Dummies* already. “Is it ever tempting?” he asked. “To meddle?”

I tried not to glance at his hand again. “Sometimes.”

“What keeps you from doing it?”

A pair of college students sat down at the table next to ours, each with thick, dark-rimmed glasses and too-tight pants, and suddenly I felt self-conscious. “Nothing, sometimes.” He grinned and leaned forward more to listen. I continued: “In my
experience though the things you take by force tend not to last as long. If you break them
even enough, you realize the rules are there for a reason.”

He seemed disappointed by this.

“What about you,” I said, changing the subject. “You seem to have done alright
without any magic.” I gestured at his left hand, which, in response, uncurled, revealing
his ring. He lifted it in front of his face and examined at it as if for the first time.

“Yes, her name’s Shannon. We got married just this summer, actually. In May.”

“Newly weds!” I said with unfelt enthusiasm.

“It’s a strange feeling,” he said, “being committed to someone like that. On the
surface there’s no change, but it does something to you deep down. Makes you more
conservative, like running a marathon.”

“Sounds exhausting.”

“Bad metaphor.”

“You work with what you’ve got, I suppose.”

“True.” There was a moment of silence then and I could see he was thinking hard
about something. “It’s not so different though, is it? What we’ve got?”

I waited for him to elaborate.

“I mean, what’s the point of a wedding? It’s not an expression of something that’s
there already. Not love, but commitment. It’s a performance. Something you try to
prepare yourself for by preserving in language.”

“Like a spell, you mean.”

“Isn’t it?”

“So, given the chance, you’re saying you wouldn’t mind meddling?”
“What I’m saying is I may have done it already.”

He told me then about his wedding, about an ancient blessing his officiant had sung in Sanskrit; how powerful it had felt. And the whole time I looked at him, at the ring glimmering on his finger and at his eyes. I tried to imagine what they must look like when he sees his wife, tried to imagine them from her perspective, gazing deeply. And I wondered what she’d do to preserve that.

“Well, if you’d like to see how similar they are, I’d be happy to show you. There’s a Sabbat coming up. I could check with the others and get you permission to attend. Might be helpful for your novel.”

“I would love that,” he said. “You mean I could watch the ceremony?”

I nodded. “Some participation, of course, would be necessary. We can’t just have some spectator there throwing off our mojo. And we do perform skyclad, so you’d have to be okay with nudity.”

“I can handle nudity,” he said, although already he was blushing. His ring was hidden again against the table.

“Alright then. I’ll make inquiries. Until then, I think we need to schedule some time to get this taken care of.” I reached out and took hold of the hair just above his temple. He flinched, shocked by my sudden touch, and I admit I felt it too: a slight current passing between us. I’ll show him to meddle, I said to myself. He wasn’t looking at my face anymore, but at the table, eyes glazed and abstract. I still held his hair in my hand.

“Just remember, you asked.”
When he arrived I did not invite him in, but led him around the side of the house to the basement where I saw clients.

“Nice set up you got here,” he said, inanely.

“Thank you.” The basement had a low ceiling and was dark and unfinished except for the far corner where there was a hardwood platform, a shampoo bowl, and a large oval mirror in front of a chair. On a tray beside it were a host of sheers and heat tools with cords left dangling beside the outlet. A set of lights overhead illuminated the small space and made the darkness around it that much more profound. Mine was not a big house, and nor was the basement, but the darkness seemed to radiate out on either side a great ways.

“Alright, you can have a seat,” I said, twisting the chair for him and then spinning him back toward the mirror. “So what are we doing today?”

I was surprised by how quickly his reticence and tact faded once he faced the mirror. I’d seen it before, of course. Countless times. Something about mirrors, the way they divided personality and image, like an astral projection hovering over its sleeping body.

He explained what he wanted using terms like ‘weight’ and ‘body’; made reference to recent celebrity photos which he pulled up on his phone (i.e. Channing Tatum), provided unsolicited details about his shampooing habits and showering preferences. He would have told me anything then, with the same honesty and candor as if he was speaking to an open room, bewitched by his own image.

As he spoke I rubbed oil onto my fingers and dug them into his hair, massaging his scalp: ten points of contact radiating in circles, causing the capillaries to open and
blood to rush to his head. Gradually, his eyes closed and his voice became silent. I had to nudge him to get him to stand and follow me to the shampoo bowl, where I sprayed his head with warm water, rubbed a special tonic over my hand and held it in front of his face.

“Inhale,” I said, and he did.

“Mmm. What is that, peppermint?”

“It’s got some peppermint.”

I massaged the shampoo into his scalp, behind his ears, and then rinsed it, all the while looking down his body. It’s a strange kind of voyeurism, being someone’s stylist. A part of you feels that, when you talk, you’re speaking as their conscience rather than as another person. I focused on where the buttons of his shirt splayed apart and the wiry hairs of his chest curled out, wondered whether the bulges in his jeans were contours or merely folds in the fabric. All without any fear of being noticed.

“So tell me about your wife,” I said.

Despite all of this, he hesitated a moment, deciding, I guessed, which clichés to use. “It’s weird to talk about her,” he said. “I haven’t figured out how to do it as my wife.”

“What’s her name?”

“Shannon.”

“Then just tell me about Shannon. How’d you guys meet?”

“In college. The rest of my friends loved her too, so it was awkward when we finally got together. From the beginning it’s been just the two of us.”

“Must be some lady.”
“It’s her smile,” he said. “It’s more than that, but somehow I’ve learned to see it all in her smile. She’s a painter. Her art was one of the things that made me want to become a writer. I would read awful love poems to her late at night while she waited for layers to dry.”

“And how’s being married?” I wrapped his head in a towel and helped him sit up, then led him back to the chair and the mirror. I dried his hair a little bit, then took out my sheers, began trimming the hair around his temples.

“It’s good. Strange,” he said. “Marriage seems different to me. It’s not about love, like I thought. We broke up once. Back in college. For more than a year. Taught me that just loving someone won’t keep bad stuff from happening.”

“So what does marriage do, then?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I guess it gives you a reason to work through stuff. Forces you to communicate and to compromise, because the escape hatch isn’t there. Also, it’s easier to let someone in, I think, when you know they can’t just cash in the moment they see something they don’t like.”

“They can though, can’t they? It’s called divorce. Not as easy as breaking up with someone, but the escape hatch is still there.”

“I suppose so.” He zoned out for a moment. Clippings of hair gathered on the floor and formed a circle around the chair. “I just keep telling myself that it’s not.”

“Is there something you don’t want her to see? Some deep, dark secret?” My tone was light but the question serious. He didn’t answer for a moment, just stared at himself in the mirror. Didn’t answer after that, either.
“There are other things you can do, you know,” I said. “To remove the escape hatch.”

His eyes lifted in the mirror, focused on where I stood behind him instead of his own transforming reflection.

“You would help me, you mean? Using magic?”

I waited, allowing just the suggestion to linger there for a moment before I said yes. Why though? I asked myself. Why would I help him rig his current relationship? That didn’t help me at all.

“I spoke with the coven,” I said. “They agreed it would be alright if you attended the Sabbat coming up in a couple of weeks. We’ll have to talk it over, but there’s a ceremony we could perform, one that would help you a lot, I think.”

“That sounds terrific,” he said. “Really great.”

“And then perhaps you can put the whole thing in your book.”

He smiled then—sneered, rather. “Don’t worry,” he said. “It’s all going in.”

“This too?”

He smirked without answering and I tried to gage his face, to tell if he was serious. I felt strange, suddenly. Anxious. “Well, just remember how witty I am in real life,” I said. “Don’t make me say anything stupid, and don’t have me do anything I wouldn’t do.”

He laughed at this, but it wasn’t pleasant, this laughter. “Until I write it down,” he said, “you won’t even know what you’re capable of.”

“Interesting,” I said. “You sound so sinister when you talk about writing.”

“Not so different, is it?”
I smiled. “Maybe not.”

A short while later I finished his haircut, and when I removed his cape and he stood up from the chair, I was amazed by how much better he looked.
Wayne

Rigpa led us to where they gathered, early one morning so that we’d be sure to not meet anyone. You could call us a mob, although we weren’t stupid. We weren’t going to fight them hand to hand, not in these numbers. She led us to the clearing. The moon overhead cast a circle of light in the center, eerily symmetrical, and ornamental bones clung against one another in the breeze. We had no doubt they once belonged to children. First, we remade the bonfire in the center and warmed ourselves for several minutes before each taking a log and withdrawing to the tree line, shoving it into the brush and running like hell back to the parking lot.

We weren’t even sure it would catch—arson was not a thing we were familiar with—but at the very least the witches would see the blasted perimeter and know that they’d been checked.

By the time we made it to our cars, dawn was beginning to break on the horizon; a thin orange haze showed above the trees. I went home with Rigpa and did not listen to the forestry reports until late in the morning. By that point the blaze covered about two hundred acres.

It was nice to go home with Rigpa again. I actually felt like I belonged there now. The rest of the congregation knew where I was and did not seem to be bothered by it. There was a legitimacy this time that we could both feel, a sanctity that comes from
mutual purpose. She’d also gotten rid of the dreadlocks finally, wore her hair short and no longer savored drugs or bluegrass.

We had premarital sex on the mattress on the floor—the room felt bare without the tie-dyed poster and prayer flags strung around the ceiling—but that too felt sanctified in a way that it hadn’t previously, an error of timing rather than of judgment. I brought myself to the verge before pulling out, felt the sexual fluids reverse back into me, filling me with a light so intense it felt almost black.

“Did you know this would happen?” she asked me afterwards. “Would you ever have guessed?”

“Define ‘this’.”

“That we’d be back together, working for the church. That we’d be… fighting together.”

“No,” I said. “I’m glad though.”

She buried her head beneath my arm and I could feel her smile tickling my armpit.

“Everything feels more clear, more meaningful. It helps, I think, having a battle to fight.”

“Do you think it will stay that way once it’s over?” she asked.

“What? The fight?”

She nodded.

“I’m not sure this is the kind of fight that ends.”

She did not ask what I meant.
We turned on the news and saw immediately footage of the blaze, began singing Hosanna in the highest before I had to leave to catch an appointment with Pastor John. We met in his office at the church. The air smelled like smoke when I got there. “How do you feel, Wayne?” he asked. I sat on the couch across from him in his wicker chair. Dull light shown in from the window which opened into the church garden.

“I feel good,” I said, and thought about adding something about God’s blessing, but that was the Pastor’s job so I left it at that.

“You helped accomplish a great thing this morning, you know. A miraculous thing. And I have a feeling that before the day’s out we’ll start witnessing its effect.”

I didn’t respond.

“I’m sure you know though, that there’s more needs doing.”

I nodded. “Just tell me what it is and I’ll do it.”

“Do you mean that?” he asked. “Truly?”

“Just name it,” I said. He nodded.

“The witch, Zoe: the one we know about.”

Now I nodded.

“She needs to be punished. Let her know there is redemption if she’ll agree to tell us about the others, lead us against them.”

My stomach turned to gnats. I’d been expecting a directive like this, but hearing it out loud now felt like vertigo—unreal. “Yes, sir,” I said. “Is there anything you… er… want to happen specifically?”

“No,” he said. “Let prayer guide you. And in fact, it’s probably best that whatever does happen stays between you and God.”
I smiled weakly, attempting above all to appear humble—just an empty vessel. Although I still smiled and nodded again.

I spent the day watching the news with Rigpa and laying with her on the couch. I told her that night I had an errand to run for Pastor John, one I couldn’t talk about.

“Wayne,” she said.

“Yes, babe?”

“Are you starting to feel like maybe this is getting out of hand?” Flames from the TV flickered against her face.

“No.”

“What if we’re wrong?”

I raised myself onto my elbow and looked her in the face. “You saw them, Rigpa. Remember?”

“Yes, but I was scared. What if I misinterpreted what was going on. What if they’re the harmless, one-with-nature kind.”

I sighed. “There is no harmless, one-with-nature kind. Listen to me, Rigpa: you’re going to have doubts—that’s how the Devil works. But if you listen to them nothing happens. He’s free to go on until the whole city is ruined. The whole world! You have to push through that, don’t listen to it. Just remember that you were sure at one point and try to live in that certainty.”

“I guess you’re right,” she said, although she still sounded uncertain.

“Don’t worry about your feelings,” I said. “Whatever you feel is meaningless. It’s what you know that counts. Have faith in yourself. Have faith in God’s guidance.”
“I know, I do,” she said. “I’m just worried that it’s going to get worse. What if he asks us to do other things, things that cross the line.”

“What line?”

“Of what’s right and wrong.”

“This is wartime, baby. It’s not what you do that’s right and wrong, it’s who you’re doing it for, and we’re doing it for God. What more do you need to know?”

To me this was a beautiful thought, although she didn’t get it, I could tell. She always was a bleeding heart, and that was fine. One of the things I admired about her, in fact. Opposites attract, or so they say. I had no heart—just a will—and I thanked God for using that.

That night I followed the directions Pastor John gave me to the place where Zoe lived. The blinds were drawn but glowed from within. I knocked and, as soon as I heard footsteps, pulled the white mask down over my face. I did not know whether the door would be chained so as soon as it opened I kicked with all of my strength, felt it crack hard against her skull and send her reeling into the room. I followed and shut the door. She was unconscious.

She woke a short while later to find herself slumped against the couch, her arms bound behind her at the wrists and elbows, her legs at the ankles and knees. A piece of tape covered her mouth. I turned off the lights in the living room so that the only illumination came from above the stove in the kitchen. The room smelled like incense, and little bits of pagan trash littered the shelves. In one corner of the room there was an altar with a picture on it, which I promptly faced down.
I allowed her to squirm for several moments, listened to her muffled indignation before telling her to shut the hell up.

“Do you know why I’m here?” I asked.

She just looked at me.

“I’m here for the child.”

More muffled shouting.

“Listen,” I said. “I’m going to remove your gag, although if you’re not quiet and if you do not tell me what I want to know, you’ll be sorry. Okay?”

She struggled and I knew what was coming, although I removed the piece of tape anyway. As soon as I saw her draw in a breath to scream I punched her hard in the throat, watched her cough and wretch for a minute and afterwards she was quiet.

“Now, tell me where the girl is.”

She took a moment to respond, opening her mouth but finding it difficult to force any sound out. When she spoke, finally, it was in a strained whisper: “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I think you do,” I said. “I’m talking about the little girl you took from that bus stop just the other day, the one Ms. Margaret saw you take. You, or one of your friends. Either way, the question’s the same.”

“Margaret? That woman is ill!” She began to cough.

“I suppose she is,” I said. “You would be too if you had a bunch of witches putting hexes on you and tormenting you with demons.”

She shook her head. “You’re talking about the circle under her bed? People have been doing that for centuries. It’s a sign of protect—”
“I’m not here to argue,” I said. “Now are you going to tell me where the little girl is or not?”

She didn’t respond, only stared indignantly at the other side of the room.

“Alright,” I said, and produced a metal clamp from my bag. “This isn’t like what they used to use, although I think it’ll do the trick.” As soon as she saw the clamp her eyes went wide and she tried to scream, although her throat was still too damaged. All that came out was a hoarse stream of air. I sat down on the couch beside her and dragged her over my lap on her stomach, fastened the clamp over her two thumbs. “Last chance,” I said.

“Please,” she said. “I swear I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

I twisted the key, squeezing her two thumbs together until I felt her body stiffen. Another hoarse scream and her feet started kicking. I watched them churn in mid air, her skirt riding up her thighs, and felt myself becoming aroused. She must have felt it on her stomach because her head turned she looked at me with wide eyes. I blushed and pretended not to notice. “Where’s the girl?” I asked.

“There is no girl!”

I tightened it again. Another scream and rigid squirming made me even more aroused. “This doesn’t stop until you tell me something I can use,” I said. “It makes no difference to me whether you leave here with thumbs or not.” She started to whisper something and I leaned close, although I couldn’t understand the words. She was trying to cast, I realized. To hex me, probably. I tightened the screw and watched her convulse, this time didn’t even attempt to hide my pleasure. I lifted my hips and pushed against her while she writhed, and when she stopped, I did it again, and again. By the time I finished
her fingers were bloody and not something I wanted to look at. She was woozy and nearly unconscious from the pain. I stood and turned her over onto her back. She looked at my pants, where a wet stain had begun to seep through.

“You’re sick,” she said with effort.

“You’re right,” I said. “And just think how many digits you have left. Next we’ll do your big toes, I think. Unless you want to tell me something.”

Her eyes closed and she seemed like she was about to cry.

“How about this,” I said. “You don’t have to tell me about the girl. Just tell me about the others. Give me names, addresses. Just one name, one address. I don’t want to hurt you anymore.”

“I can’t. Can’t let you hurt them…”

“Oh, come on. I’m sure there’s at least one you don’t like. And believe me, things can get much, much worse for you here real quick.”

I bent forward and stuck my nose in her hair, inhaled deeply, and she started to cry. Finally, she gave me a name: Helen Burkits, the newest member of the coven.

“There, that wasn’t so difficult, was it?” I put the clamp back in my bag and produced a pocket knife. Her eyes went wide until she saw me cutting the tape away from her hands and feet. “Now you don’t ever have to see me again, unless you try any funny business. Anymore children go missing, or if I start to have dreams about scary babies I’ll know just who to see. You got me?”

She nodded and I rose, was about to walk out the door when I heard her start to laugh softly. “What is it?” I asked.
“Nothing,” she said, and coughed before laughing some more. “You just have no idea what you’re into. I couldn’t help you if I wanted to. Has nothing to do with me.”

“Really?” I said. “Well, good luck convincing me of that when the time comes.” I sat my bag back down and crawled onto the couch on top of her, she tried to push me away but I grabbed her hands and posted them above her head. I buried my face in her neck. “Like I said, things can get much, much worse.”

Rigpa woke me up in the middle of the night. “What was that?” she asked, sounding alarmed.

“Nothing,” I said. I didn’t have any idea what she was talking about.

“It sounded like an owl.”

I rolled toward her and wrapped my arms around her, stroked the side of her head and kissed her ear. “It’s nothing, babe. Just your imagination. Don’t worry about it, I’ve got you.”

“But…”

“Shhh. It’s alright. Say a prayer. The Lord’s watching out.”

I could feel her still and tense inside my arms, like if I let her go she might bound away. “Relax, babe. Here: breathe with me.” I took several deep breaths, held my hand on her chest while she followed along. “Into your stomach,” I said. “Your diaphragm.”

“I know how to do it,” she said.

Several minutes passed and she seemed to have calmed down. “Wayne?” she asked.

“Yes?”
“What happened tonight?”

“It’s between me and God.”

“Was it bad?”

“Very.”

“I don’t want to know, do I?”

“Probably not.”

She paused. “Is it over?”

I faced her in the darkness. “Babe, it hasn’t really even started yet.”

The following day in church Pastor John spoke on Sodom and Gomorrah, the great flood, and the necessity of periodic cleansing. He did not mention the Flagstaff fire because he didn’t have to. Even inside we could smell the smoke.

Beside me Rigpa sat fidgeting the whole time. She had not slept well, nor bothered showering when she’d gotten up. To be frank, she looked rough, and periodically I would try to calm her down by placing my hand on her knee, which, for a moment, would stop it rocking up and down until she found somewhere else to channel her nervous energy. As soon as Pastor John had finished his message and the music was about to start, she leaned over to me and whispered, “I need to get out of here.”

“In ten minutes the service will be over,” I said.

“I know, I know,” she said. “It can’t wait though. I need to go.”

Pastor Rich finished tuning his guitar: “Alright, brothers and sisters, let’s stand together and lift our voices…”
Rigpa stood and I followed her, head down, out of the pew and down the aisle, out the back door. “What the hell was that about?” I asked her, squinting through the sunshine as we made our way across the street to the car. The smoke was making my eyes water, although I could tell already she was embarrassed.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’ve never felt anything like it before. Something in my chest. Everything just felt bad. The sermon irritated me, the music sounded awful, and I just kept looking around and thinking terrible things about everyone sitting there, smiling, as though nothing was wrong. I swear, it felt just like it used to be.”

“Sounds like something you should have sat there and dealt with. Say a prayer, for God’s sake. I don’t appreciate being rushed out just because you’re feeling bratty.”

“It wasn’t me being bratty!” she said. “It felt like… like someone else. Not me. Wayne?”

“What?”

“You don’t think I might be possessed do you? Like that lady, Margaret?”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“Why? If it’s possible for her it’s possible for me, isn’t it?”

“Why would anyone go to the trouble of trying to possess you?”

She shrugged. We’d reached the car by now and were standing by the driver’s side door. “What if it’s because I led you to them? To their casting place? Or what if it’s because of what you did, last night?”

I shook my head, knew that what she was saying was ridiculous, but I couldn’t articulate why. A rock and a hard place, it felt like. I couldn’t call her out without undermining our purpose, which hinged on the fact that it was possible. That that shit
actually happened. “You’re not possessed,” I said. “Trust me, I would notice if you were.”

“Think so?” she said, arching her eyebrows. “Think you’re smart enough to outfox the Prince of Lies?”

“Not me,” I said. “Christ.”

She turned and opened the door, slid into the driver’s seat. “Wish he talked to me the way he talks to you. Seems like I can never be sure of a thing.”

I circled around to the passenger side and got in, pretended not to hear.

That night I went to visit Helen. She was older, and not nearly as stoic as Zoe had been. She screamed and wept and was so frantic I doubt whether she heard a single thing I said. When her husband came home she was dangling from the fixture in the middle of the living room, arms tied and hoisted behind her back, naked except for her panties caught around her ankles, covered in tiny welts. I thought that he would make a run at me and clutched the knife cautiously behind my back, but instead he just collapsed, lifted his hands as though praying to her for something, and wept. I walked over and shoved him to the ground with my foot, kicked him several times in the head until he was still, then I let Helen down.

“Remember, no more missing children,” I said. She nodded wearily. “And I don’t want to have any scary dreams about demons either.” Her head tilted to one side, and she looked like she was about to pass out. “One more thing,” I said. “This one requires a yes or no answer.” I hesitated, felt ridiculous suddenly. “Any one of you witches send a
demon to afflict my girl? You know the one. She hasn’t been possessed by anything, has she?”

Her head turned back to me and she smiled a little, her eyelids fluttering open and closed. “Don’t give me that shit. You grin at me again I’ll cut your fucking lips off. And if you can’t keep your eyes open I’ll take your eyelids too. Now, yes or no?”

Her mouth opened and at first there was no sound. Her throat convulsed like she was gagging on something, then came the word, “No.”

I studied her for a moment, deciding whether or not I believed her. “Didn’t think so,” I said at last. “Now you be good, otherwise I’ll be back and we do this again.”

The whole way home I thought about Rigpa, how full of shit she was. I’d put that Helen woman through it; she couldn’t have lied to me if she’d wanted to by the end. Nothing supernatural wrong with her, just an ex-druggy’s anxiety. I thought about what I’d done, about all of the ways I’d hurt Helen that evening and felt myself becoming aroused again. I would need to shower before I got into bed with Rigpa, I thought. Otherwise she would know.

I pulled into her apartment complex and could smell pot in the stairwell. Nothing strange about that. This was Boulder, after all. But as soon as I stepped into her apartment she met me at the door, her eyes wide. “Owls,” she said, clutching at my shirt. “Outside my bedroom. They’re watching.”

I inhaled and knew in a moment that she’d been smoking. Probably been doing it for weeks and hiding it from me. The whole apartment reeked like skunk, even though she’d clearly tried to hide it by opening the window. “You druggy cunt,” I said, and
slapped her. She dropped to the floor and looked up at me with wide eyes. A red mark on the side of her face was already taking the shape of my hand. I stood over her, could feel my crotch stirring. Terrible thoughts scrolled through my mind, terrible images of the things I wanted to do.

And just like that, the anger left me.

“Oh God,” I said, and knelt down beside her, held her at the wrist and elbow and helped her back to her feet. She pulled away, shuffled backwards several steps and looked at me, attempting to extract from my face what was going through my head. “I’m sorry,” I said, still trying to figure it out myself. “I… I don’t know what’s come over me.” I thought back to my encounters with Zoe, with Helen, and whatever arousal I’d felt at the time wilted and all I felt now was disgust. With myself. But I knew with sudden certainty that it was not me who had committed those crimes, those awful acts, but something else. Some spirit had taken possession of me and forced me to do it. What other explanation could there be? It wasn’t Rigpa they were after—why on Earth would they bother attacking her? It was me.

There was still the question of why the spirit would direct me against its own servants, but then it wasn’t so far-fetched. Not difficult to imagine a spirit, or even the witches themselves viewing their own suffering as collateral damage, the price they pay for the greater victory over a victim’s soul.

I contemplated my revenge.

But as I stood there, staring at Rigpa cowering on the other side of the room, afraid of me, I realized I no longer had any weapon to attack them with. The Devil’s tools cannot harm him, only poison those who use them.
“Rigpa,” I said. “You have to believe me. I didn’t do that. It wasn’t me. I believe you, about the demon. It’s got me too. We’ve got to go see Pastor John right away.”

She did not approach, but kept watching me, contemplating, I imagined, how close she wanted to be to a person claiming to be possessed, what with owls already haunting her outside her window. My mind was occupied by other things though, namely the fact that Pastor John had already told me, explicitly, that whatever it was he didn’t want to know.
We woke like we often do the week before Sabbat: to find that mother had disappeared. I was the first one up and it barely phased me to wander down stairs and to find the place deserted. Alex though would be distraught when he woke. He hated when mother left. He was her favorite, and was likewise totally dependent on her. Although these times, when she was gone, I got him all to myself.

To help ease the pain, I decided to make us some breakfast: sausage links wrapped in pancakes, his favorite.

Our father had also disappeared one morning long ago, although unlike mother, he never came back. Alex was too young to remember, but I have a clear recollection of the way they fought leading up to it. Dad had known all about mother—that she was a witch—and at first it hadn’t been a problem. I think he enjoyed it, actually. He would make little jokes about mother casting a spell on him, bewitching him, enchanting him. Then they stopped being jokes. The last I saw him was the morning he left. It was the same morning mother had disappeared prior to Sabbat. She’d left something in bed with him, he said. A demon. Said he’d woken up with the thing grinning and groping at him. Dad was still in a state when Alex and I left for school that morning, and when we came home in the afternoon he was gone. Just like that.
Alex came into the kitchen and saw me standing in front of the stove instead of mother. Immediately he stopped rubbing his eyes and turned and went down to the basement.

“Alex!” I called. “Alex, come back. I’m making breakfast. It’s too soon anyway. You’re just going to make her upset!”

I moved to follow him but the sausage links were sizzling at my elbow, a pancake rising on the griddle opposite. Oh, hell, I thought. Let him check.

Once I’d finished and our breakfasts were sitting there on the empty kitchen table, I went down and found him crouched in the far corner between the shelves. He had it cradled against his chest, ear bent as though he was listening to the sea.

I skirted around the pentagram in the center of the floor, careful not to bump into any of the shelves stacked high with mason jars: pickled things and exotic herbs, live and dead insects, a vast array of organic and inorganic materials we’d not yet learned to identify. I knelt down beside him.

“She’s not saying anything, is she?” I said.

He looked up at me and frowned.

“I told you, Alex, it’s too soon.”

He started to cry and I put my arms around him. “Shhh,” I said, trying to mimic mother’s soothing tone. “We’ve been through this before. You know she’ll be back in a week.” He sniffled, trying to control his weeping. “And besides,” I said. “The Shadow Man will be here soon. It’s been a while since we’ve seen him.”

Alex stopped crying, although he still grasped the mother tongue tightly in his hand. If he wasn’t careful, it would crumble.
“There,” I said. “Why don’t you put it back in its box now, come upstairs. I made sausage links and pancakes for breakfast.” He sniffled again and we both edged back around the circle toward the stairs.

“When do you think we’ll hear from her?” he asked, craning back at me.

“Whenever she’s got something to say,” I said. “She’s busy making plans for the ceremony. I’m sure she’ll have something for us to do sooner or later.” Really I did not know though. The mother tongue did not speak to me. For some reason it only spoke to Alex.

When we got home from school in the afternoon the first thing Alex did was to go downstairs. I let him go. He knew better than I what the thing’s habits were. Mother had given us the tongue after dad left, after she’d returned that first time and discovered we’d been left alone for an entire week. She said we were to spend time with it every day while she was gone. That’s also when the Shadow Man started to appear.

While Alex was down in the basement there was a knock at our door. I answered it—with mother gone it was usually the post man or somebody delivering something. Today though it was not the post man. It was a man probably in his late fifties, a touch overweight but wide across the shoulders like an ex-linebacker. He wore round glasses with thin rims and had brassy white hair combed to one side.

“I answered and he looked back at a sheet of paper he held clutched in his hand. “Francine at home?” he asked by way of introduction.

“She can’t talk right now,” I said, and he stared at me, stroking idly the edges of his crumpled paper.
“I can wait,” he said in a more amenable tone.

“It’ll probably be a while,” I replied. “She’s in the bathtub with a migraine.”

“I see. Any notion of when she’ll be better?”

“No, sir,” I said.

“Sir,” he repeated. “That’s nice manners for a girl your age. Do you know who I am…?”

He gestured for me to fill in the blank. “Sarena,” I said.

“Sarena. Do you know who I am?”

“No.”

“I’m the pastor down at West Pine Church, off Pine Street. My name’s John.”

I nodded, unsure what else to do.

“Do you know why I’m here, Sarena?”

I shook my head.

“Well, it’s very important that I talk to your mother about some things. Although if she’s not here or…ahem…in the bathtub, there are some things I need to say to you too.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But I should probably go check on her.”

“Just one more minute,” he said, and held up his hands. “I won’t bite. Promise.

Have you noticed anything weird been happening lately? Like, around the house, with your mother? Anything scary?”

I moved to close the door but he pressed his hand against it, not aggressively, but enough to set off my alarms. “Mom!” I shouted, and he withdrew, smiling slightly out of the corner of his mouth as I slammed the door and locked it.
I turned in time to see Alex scramble up into the hallway. “Mom? Where?” He still had the mother tongue grasped in his hand.

I shook my head at him and pointed upstairs. We went together without a sound to his room where we locked the door and sat on the carpet with the mother tongue lifted between us, each leaning in and listening. I looked at Alex, trying to read in his face whether or not he heard anything. All I saw was a strained look like constipation; I didn’t know it was possible to listen for something that hard.

“Who was that at the door,” he asked me a short while later, after we’d given up.

“A preacher,” I said.

“What did he want?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But I think it was something bad.”

That night I lay in my own bed down the hall from Alex. The worst part about mother being away, I think, is trying to go to sleep at night. You can feel the house around you, so large and empty, and there’s something about that space, all that darkness, that makes you feel vulnerable. When one of us has a bad dream sometimes, we’ll go to the other’s bedroom and the two of us will sleep together.

I was laying awake at night when suddenly behind me, on the side facing the wall, I felt a pair of arms encircle me, hold me tight. A pair of breasts pressed against my back. Its crotch poked my leg. The Shadow Man was here, finally. Now I knew everything would be alright.
The preacher came to the house several more times over the weekend. “Is it the same one?” Alex asked.

“Same,” I said. “Now listen to me: I don’t want you to answer the door for him. In fact, don’t answer the door for anyone, unless it’s me.” I knocked three times on the coffee table, with several beats of silence between the second and the third. “That’ll be our knock, okay?”

The preacher knocked, three loud thumps. We stayed hidden in the living room, behind the couch, watching his reflection in the face of the grandfather clock in the foyer. “Sarena? You in there? I know you are. Come on, sweetie, I need to talk to you. It’s important. Aren’t you afraid being alone in there? I could take you to the church. We could keep you safe. You gotta open up though. Let Christ into your heart. I can help. We can pray.”

He jabbered several minutes more before leaving. “I’ll be back,” he said, departing. “Christ wants you children, and believe me, Christ gets what he wants.”

On Sunday, we were raking leaves, per the mother tongue’s instructions. It was nearing dusk and we were just about to go fetch our coats from inside when I saw him out of the corner of my eye, walking up in a windbreaker jacket, hands shoved into his pockets. “Afternoon, children,” he said.

“Go in the house,” I said to Alex. And he did. At once. He was going to get help, I knew. I only wondered how long it would take.

I faced the preacher.

“Where’s he going?” he asked.
“You need to leave,” I said. “Mother will be home any minute, and if she finds you here she’s going to call the police.”

“Your mother ain’t coming home anytime soon,” he said. “You and I both know that.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I said. “There are people checking in on us though. You won’t want to be around when they show up.”

“Who’s that, more witches? Darling, you know I ain’t scared of them. You know why?” He lifted a small Gideon’s Bible from his pocket. “Because I answer to a higher power.”

“What do you want?”

He returned the book to his pocket. “Honestly, I just want to help you. It’s not right, subjecting children to that kind of thing. Witchcraft isn’t right anyway, but involving children, seems, is especially bad. Let me ask you something, has anyone ever told you about Christ?”

I stared at him, threateningly, I thought, although he didn’t seem worried. He knelt several yards in front of me. “Yes.”

“I figured they did. But tell me this: Do you know that he loves you?”

“Do you know that he loves you?”

“Sure do. Says so right here.” Again he lifted the book. “He also speaks to me. All the time. I’ve seen the work he’s done in other people’s lives. He loves all of us, except when we turn our backs on him.”
“What does he say to you?” I asked. I’d heard people making claims like that before, but had never had the opportunity to interrogate them about it. I wondered if it was anything like the mother tongue, or the Shadow Man, maybe.

“Let’s me know no matter how bad it gets here, there’s a place for me up in heaven. A good place among my true family. Sometimes he asks me to do things. Asked me to come see you today.”

“What does it sound like, his voice?”

He smiled. “Like honey. Like a warm blanket. You can hear it too, if you want. If you’ll just ask him into your heart, he’ll live there. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will be with you always, and protect you. Christ loves you and wants you beside him at the table of the righteous. I wouldn’t be here if he didn’t.”

I opened my mouth without knowing just how I was going to respond, although before I could say anything a gust of wind exploded the pile of leaves I’d just raked and sent them twirling around us. It seemed like they should settle, but they did not, just spun around and around like a cyclone. “You should go,” I shouted above the wind.

“You and your brother come with me,” he shouted back, removing his glasses and shielding his eyes. The leaves, I noticed, seemed to be forming a barrier between he and I.

I shook my head. “It’s not safe for you now. He wants you to leave.”

“What?” he yelled.

“The Shadow Man!” But I know he didn’t hear me. The wind was raging by that point, although when I turned and walked back toward the house I realized it was just in
that one spot. Pastor John tried to follow, although the leaves and the wind blocked his path.

“In the name of the Father and the Son,” he was blubbering. “I command you!” Then to me: “Sarena! God loves you, Sarena. There is a place for you in heaven!”

I went back inside and watched from the window Pastor John being repelled. He backed up into the cul-de-sac and as soon as his feet left our lawn, it seemed, the wind and the leaves died down. He noticed this and took one tentative step back toward the house, although a cautionary gust of air made him pause. He turned and walked away, stealing glances back over his shoulder at the house until finally he was out of sight.

“Thanks,” I said to Alex, when the Pastor was gone. He stood beside me, watching. “I’m glad he didn’t get hurt.”

Alex nodded. “He’d better not come around again,” he said.

I turned and thought about saying something, didn’t. Instead watched the leaves begin to settle, scattered across the yard. I would have to rake the whole thing over again.

We didn’t see Pastor John again for several days, and during that time I thought a lot about what he’d said: about God sending him for me—how, if I accepted him into my heart, he would talk to me too. That night, while Alex was brushing his teeth, I went down into the basement and navigated the shadows to where the mother tongue rested in its box on the shelf. “What do you want me to do?” I asked, grasping it lightly to my ear. There was no draft, but still I could hear its pores whistling. “Just tell me and I’ll do anything.” The light above me flickered. “I’m your daughter too, you know.”
I could feel the shadows gathering behind me, blocking out the light, making it so I couldn’t see the shelves right in front of me. I felt its hands on my shoulders, gentle, but firm. The Shadow Man turned me and helped guide me toward the steps. He followed me to bed, got in with me and held me tight: a consolation, I suppose. Although still, I can’t say I wasn’t grateful.

Alex and I rode the bus to school every morning. We were among the few who still chose to do so. Most of the children’s parents made them, and you could see the relief on their faces as the bus coasted to a stop each morning. *One more down,* they seemed to be thinking.

The children behind us whispered to one another about the lion. “I wish it would take an adult one time,” the boy said. “Then they wouldn’t make us ride the bus.”

I turned in my seat and looked down at the two behind me. They were younger boys, probably second grade. “It’s not a lion taking the children,” I said. Alex looked up at me, a look of panic on his face. “It’s witches.”

The two boys laughed uneasily. “Witches don’t exist,” they said, although it sounded more like a question.

“Tell that to my mother,” I said. “She’s a witch.”

Alex was pulling on my shirt, trying to get me to sit down. I slapped at his hand.

“What would a witch want with so many children?” the one on the left asked.

“There are tons of things you can do with children,” I replied. “They’re witches’ favorite thing. You can make yourself younger, use them as sacrifices, use their skin to help other spells. Most children are virgins, see. That’s important.”
They were silent a moment, then the other one spoke: “Your mom’s a witch?” he asked.

“You bet she is.”

“She never tried to… hurt you?”

“She’s our mother, silly. She loves us. What I’m trying to tell you though is that you don’t need to be afraid of the bus stop in the morning. A real witch can grab you from your beds just as easily.”

I turned and plopped back into my seat, listened to their dumb silence give way to more whispers. Later, one of them would pull my hair and I would pretend to put a hex on him, watch while he ran around howling, trying to wipe it off with his hands.

“That wasn’t nice,” Alex said as I sat down. “Mother wouldn’t like that you did that.”

“Oh yeah?” I said. “Did she tell you that? You have some kind of direct access to her thoughts, then?”

He didn’t answer and I saw his jaw tighten. He turned and faced the front, and I could see his eyes begin to glisten. I waited several moments before taking his hand in mine. “I’m sorry,” I said. “You’re right. It’s not your fault it won’t talk to me.”

When we got off of the bus there was a dead thing on the ground, very near to the door. It had recently been a rabbit, now crawled with ants and pulsed with maggots beneath its fur. The week before Sabbat was filled with little signs such as this one. The bus driver saw it and hurried past, inserting himself between it and us and motioning for one of the maintenance guys to come clean it up. Several of the girls squealed and two
boys laughed, tried poking it with a stick and were delighted when its skin split and the wriggling things came spilling out. The sight made me nauseous.

Pastor John came to visit at lunch. When he entered the cafeteria all of the children who went to his church swarmed him, hugged him, begged him to sit down at their tables. I faced my food and tried not to look up as I heard him politely trying to disengage himself, then felt him approaching. He sat down beside me.

“How are you doing today, Sarena?” he asked. A laminated ‘Visitor’ badge dangled from a lanyard around his neck.

I didn’t answer.

“You know,” he said, “I’ve been thinking a lot about our last visit together. That wind thing that got me. What was that? Some kind of magic or was it something else?”

I looked at him and smiled weakly.

“I just ask because, well, if it were me I think I might have some trouble with a spirit like that being around, in the house with me.”

“Not if it’s the Holy Spirit.”

He nodded. “That’s right. The Holy Spirit doesn’t blow leaves around and try to hurt people. He lives inside of you, gives you strength, tells you what is right and what is wrong.” He noticed my ears perk up. “Can I ask you something, Sarena? Do you love your mother?”

I looked at him, startled by the change of subject. He squinted into my face. “How about your brother?”

I looked back at my food. “That’s alright, I know you love one of them. Well, imagine that that’s the love God has for you, only God’s love is actually much stronger
than either of those loves, because those loves come from him. He loves us with a love we cannot imagine, cannot even make sense of, because he is the source of all love. That’s the difference between God and the Devil, Sarena. God is love. The Devil is only capable of using people for his own ends.”

We sat in silence for a minute, me playing with my limp French fries and him praying, I imagined.

“Listen,” he said at last. “I don’t want to keep bothering you like this.” He set a card with a phone number down on the table and slid it toward me. “If you change your mind and you want help, give me a call. Anytime, day or night. I promise, once you take the trouble to ask Jesus into your heart you’ll feel the difference, like a little hole inside of you being filled in with concrete. And we can protect you too. God created the Devil, and because of that he’ll always be more powerful. Bye, Sarena.”

He stood and looked down at me for one long moment before moving on to the other tables with the other boys and girls who actually wanted to see him.

A love I can’t even imagine. That was his first problem, I thought: it’s difficult to sell something I can’t imagine. The Devil I could imagine only all too well.

I told Alex about the encounter on the bus ride home. I handed him the card with the phone number on it and he stroked it with his little fingers. “We’ve got to show it to her,” he said. “See what she says.”

I nodded.

When we got home I watched Alex converse with the mother tongue. He sat there quietly, mostly, the thing lifted to his ear and his eyes bleary, nodding his head. When he
finished he returned it to its box, set it back on the shelf. He fished Pastor John’s card out of his pocket, the one with his phone number, and held it out for me.

“Call him,” he said. And I did.

It was dark by the time Pastor John arrived. He rang the door bell and I answered. “Sarena,” he said, smiling down at me from the front porch. The jack-o-lanterns there caused his face to flicker. “Are you ready to go?”

“Almost,” I said. “I need to show you something first. It’s important, might help you. A thing the witches use to communicate with each other.”

His eyebrows arched and he stepped inside, glanced around. “Where’s your brother?”

“He’s not coming with us,” I said. “I didn’t tell him. Believe me, he would never turn against the coven.”

The Pastor looked at me and nodded. “So where’s this thing I need to see?”

I gestured toward the door at the top of the steps leading down into the basement. “Down there,” I said. He took a step past me and I trailed behind. “Does the Holy Spirit really speak to you?” I asked nervously, trying to make conversation and hoping nothing showed in my voice. “Like, in a voice you can hear, with words and stuff?”

He smiled. “Sometimes. Christ used to say, ‘Him who has ears, let him hear.’ I like to think that when we’re reborn in Christ, we get a new set of ears, spiritual ears, and those are the ones that hear the Holy Spirit.”

“I see.”
He responded, “Not yet, but you will very soon.” He opened the door and looked down the stairs. At the bottom you could see a pool of candle light lapping against the floor and wall, its source hidden around the corner, unseen. “Something going on down there?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No electricity,” I said.

He looked at me for a long second. I continued: “It’s just around the corner, on the shelf. I’ll show you. We can take it with us, if you want. I don’t know what kind of effect it will have, but I’m sure they won’t like it being gone.”

He nodded and began, very slowly, down the steps. I listened to his feet clop against the wood, one beat, then another. He proceeded very slowly, as if there was something hidden beneath them, or the stairs might be booby trapped. He didn’t look back to see if I was following, and I watched him descend from the top of the steps, until at last he reached the bottom and poked his head around the corner, turned sharply and saw me at the top of the steps. “Goddamnit, Sarena!” he said, and made several quick strides up toward me before a shadow passed over the light and swallowed the staircase in black.

Now it was a tunnel, a cave, filled with the sound of one man screaming and the distant cackle of women’s laughter. Or at least, I thought they were women.

Alex appeared beside me at the top of the stairs, holding the mother tongue like a pet hamster in his hand. “You did good,” he said. “Very good,” and held the mother tongue toward me. “Here,” he said. “She wants to talk to you. We’ve got things to do. Lots of things. And we’re going to need gasoline.”
I smiled, and bent my ear to hear it speak, marveling at the gargled sounds and my sudden comprehension of them. I’d received my new ears at last, it seemed, while in the basement I could still hear Pastor John wailing something. Although I could not understand a word.
Elizabeth

I’m not saying I want the disappearances to continue, or the lost children to stay lost. I just appreciate the not knowing, is all. The mystery. I don’t want to wake up one morning and see some cougar hung up beside a grinning hunter. I’ve been covering the disappearances for two months now, and can’t say any of the other theories would be more satisfying. Doesn’t matter whether it’s alien abductions or the occult—once the story breaks it all becomes just a conglomeration of video clips and sound bites, interviews with anyone even peripherally connected to the events. Exposure, exposure, exposure—and let’s not forget paychecks—but also this lingering sense that we haven’t solved anything. That nothing as real or as disturbing as this could possibly fit into the evening news. Perhaps I’ve just been doing this too long, but everything I encounter that way trips my bullshit-o-meter. The only thing that feels right is the suspense of not knowing. The story before it breaks. The story when it is still just a story.

In his sour moods, my editor tells me I am not much of a journalist. I’m inclined to agree with him. I would like to be a novelist, but I’m not very good at that either. Too much of both to do either, it seems, although I haven’t struggled to find work.

There are several ways to go about investigating a story like this. You can start by choosing a theory and testing it. Say, learning everything there is to know about mountain lions: their anatomy, their habits, records of previous incidents involving humans—not
just attacks but disappearances. I’m sure there are a few on record. Starting with a cause and seeing if you can push it toward the appropriate conclusion. Trickle-down investigative journalism. Even if you’re successful though and the theory fits, you’ve still only investigated a theory. It doesn’t matter how many people you convince, you’re no more equipped to call it the Truth than you were to begin with.

The best method I’ve found—and it’s still not a particularly good one—is to start with interviews, with people’s perception of the situation, and then to work backwards toward that nameless thing. The odds of getting a complete picture using this method are slight, but if nothing else you at least have a variety of voices describing the same thing. Though none may be accurate in themselves, through accumulation a picture may yet form. But again, this method is imperfect.

I do not live in Boulder. I live about ten minutes south off Highway 36, in Louisville. Every day, driving in, I reach the crest of the hill and observe the way the town nestles against the Flatirons, the huge Rockies distending beyond for several moments before I lose the elevation. At times like this I feel not so much that I am entering a place, but a story; one created by the people of Boulder and one they are desperate to believe. There are ninety-five thousand people living in the Boulder area, and ninety-five percent of them are white. The median income per household is ninety-five thousand, and their politics are predominantly—no, overwhelmingly—liberal. COEXIST stickers are as common as license plates and, to be fair, there are a healthy number of religious communities represented: Buddhists, Hindus, Hare Kishnas, Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Pagans. More, I am sure. Spiritualities I’ve not even heard of
set up off Pearl Street in the center of downtown. A vast array of religions celebrated by a small array of people.

I could not live in Boulder, I don’t think. I was raised in California, and am not used to seeing one kind of face for such prolonged periods of time. Not that Louisville is any better. There are fewer faces though, so maybe that counts for something. But even though it’s easy to be ironic about Boulder, one cannot deny that it is beautiful. There’s not a place you can go where the mountains aren’t clearly visible. The weather is sunny. Crime is negligible. And compared to other small towns in this country, the food is excellent; fresh, because Boulderites are avid about the farm-to-table thing and can afford to see it done properly.

And that’s also why, if I’m honest, it pleases me to see this happening. Again, I hope that the children are discovered and that they are returned to their homes safely. I want the disappearances to stop. But as a story I appreciate the shadow it casts. So much of the time Boulder feels just like a setting, a false picture of harmony waiting to be disrupted. And that’s why I’m reluctant to see the thing resolved; shadows are almost always more interesting than the objects that cast them.

Case and point: this Judith I’ve heard so much about. When I interviewed that pair of Christians last weekend they made her sound like the Devil incarnate, but I spoke with her today and to me she seemed perfectly pleasant. Which is a shame, really. I wanted this witch-thing to be more credible. I had an appointment to meet her at her bookstore on Pearl Street. The place was stuffy and smelled like patchouli, and I was relieved when, circling the register to shake my hand, she suggested we take a walk
instead. There were several people milling about the shelves, but this didn’t seem to bother her. Perhaps she had an assistant somewhere. I don’t know.

She seemed happy to be out of doors, breathing in the crisp fall air like a bouquet of something pressed against her face. The temperature had dropped and the light slanted, and I had to admit it did feel nice. We walked aimlessly side by side, and I opened the discussion by mentioning that I’d heard she’d had some trouble at the store a few weeks ago: some Christian folks with signs claiming that she was responsible for the disappearances.

“I don’t think they were accusing me specifically,” she said. “More witches in general. Which doesn’t make it any better, I suppose. In fact, I think it’s much, much worse.”

I didn’t want to tell her I’d spoken with the couple, Joy and Peter, and that, to me, their targeting of her seemed very much specific. Instead, I asked whether she’d experienced any more problems with that kind of behavior, from them or from anybody else. She laughed and said that she hadn’t.

“I’ve seen the woman, Joy, a few times since then,” she said. “Without the sign. And each time she’s avoided me, almost like she was hiding. I think they’re keeping tabs, maybe planning something, but I’m not worried about it.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“I put a hex on her the last time I saw her, bound her from harming me.” She laughed, and I laughed too. I didn’t know why, but I found that very, very funny. I asked what she thought the couple might be planning, although she didn’t know. There was a Sabbat coming up, she mentioned, but she didn’t think they’d care to mess with that.
We sat down on a bench and I asked whether she’d mind if I smoked. “Not at all,” she said, and waved the cigarette toward my mouth. Because we’d been walking side by side I hadn’t really gotten a good look at her until now. She was beautiful, I saw. I tried to take notes, but kept feeling myself drawn toward her eyes, which were a bright green color. Every time I looked up she was staring at me, not blinking. I thought what I felt might be the sudden rush of nicotine.

“Have you been able to talk to other Wiccans about the allegations? See how they feel about it?”

“Not Wiccans,” she said, correcting me. “There are lots of neo-pagan traditions; some don’t even have names. Witches is fine.”

“Excuse me,” I said. “Witches. You’ll have to excuse me. Somehow I thought that might be offensive.”

“Not at all. Doesn’t have the same connotation for me that it does for you.”

I blushed.

“But to answer your question, their reactions run the gamut from amusement to anger. Depends on who you’re talking to. Not all are in a position to be amused.”

“Have any witches, as far as you know, discussed ways of resisting the claim, or stereotype, or whatever this would be called?”

“I know some have tried to organize panels. To help educate people and address questions and so forth.”

“Any success?”

She shrugged. “Not sure. They’re not people I’m particularly close with.”

“Have you felt any motivation to act personally, to help clear up the rumors?”
“I’m talking to you, aren’t I?”

She smiled, and those green eyes... I didn’t know what was the matter with me—I felt _giddy_ for Christ’s sake. By this point I’d all but forgotten the rest of my questions, and perceiving my difficulty, Judith asked me about myself: what I liked doing besides working for the paper. I told her I was a part-time novelist.

“Are you?” she asked, sounding pleasantly surprised. “Anything I’d heard of?”

“Not likely,” I said. “Unless you’ve encountered it somewhere in the spirit realm. I’ve had some trouble finishing things.”

She didn’t blink at my attempt at humor, instead asked what I thought the difference was between writing novels and writing journalism. I said that, for me, there wasn’t much difference. That’s why I’m not very good at either of them.

“That’s not true,” she said. “I’ve enjoyed your coverage of the disappearances.”

“You’ve read it?” I asked, feeling an almost child-like gratitude. I realized I was also suddenly very sleepy.

“Of course I’ve read them. If not for you I would be totally out of the loop about the missing children. Scary stuff. I don’t blame people for wanting someone to blame.”

“I hope they never find what’s causing it,” I said, and Judith turned to me, surprised. I was surprised too. It was not something I’d meant to share. “What I mean,” I backtracked, “is that I think it’s more interesting not to know. This town is so boring usually. It’s refreshing to have something to be afraid of.”

“There’s always something to be afraid of,” she said. “If there’s not, you’re not looking hard enough.”

We both were silent for several moments. My vision felt hazy, like I was drunk.
“Are you okay?” Judith asked. Her voice sounded far away. I nodded.

“Yes, just… strange. I don’t know what’s the matter.”

“Are you planning on writing a novel about the disappearances?” she asked.

I told her that I’d started to several times, but that I didn’t know how to begin, how to structure it. Somehow I could not seem to find a perspective adequate to express the kind of dim, mystic horror I felt.

“Finding the right language is always a problem,” she said. “Tell me: what are you planning to write about our interview, about the witches’ role in all of this?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but it’s strange—I can’t remember saying anything. It’s like that moment never existed. All I remember is feeling better, alert, and a strange affection for Judith. I looked up at her and she was smiling, as though waiting for me to speak.

“I, um, I don’t feel too well,” I said. “I think I’d better go.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “I could give you something. Drag out the old cauldron and whip something up in a second.”

I laughed uneasily. “That’s alright,” I said. We stood and shook hands, I thanked her for her time, and we walked together back to her store where we said our goodbyes. Without knowing why I hugged her, awkwardly, the kind of hug you give someone when you just don’t know what else to say. She received it with a smile, not acknowledging any awkwardness. And afterwards I headed back to the garage on 15th, where I was parked.

“Strange,” I thought again, climbing into my car. I hadn’t taken a single note throughout the entire interview. When I got home I would have to hash out as much as I
could from memory. I cursed myself, and the whole way home tried to remember bits and
pieces of what we’d said. Not that it matters, I thought. I was pretty sure there wasn’t
anything I could use, except for a few lines about how witches’ attitudes ranged between
amused and angry. Pity. I really wanted them to be a credible threat. As far as I could tell
though, Judith, at least, was positively delightful.

The Flagstaff Fire started, we think, when a lightening storm passed briefly
overhead, igniting a small patch of woodland off Lower Bison Road just southwest of
Boulder. It also struck several places in North Boulder, causing small grass fires, all of
which were stomped out immediately. This other fire though escalated quickly, spreading
from six to two hundred and fifty acres in just under an hour.

We’d been waiting all summer for this. The snow pack had been light, and there
hadn’t been much rain. The result was a lot of very dry forestry just waiting for an excuse
to burn.

I listened to news of the fire from my home in Louisville, and that evening drove
into Boulder for a briefing at the Camera. By this time the wind was pushing it toward the
city of Boulder and there was exactly zero containment. Pre-evacuation notices had been
issued to over fifteen hundred homes, and authorities were encouraging those who faced
open space to actually turn their sprinklers on!

As I crested the hill on the way in I could see the flames on top of Bear Peak
casting the entire valley, including the City of Boulder, a faint orange color that flickered
and looked positively sinister. Just what this community needs, I thought, although
behind that was a chill of excitement. For once, I could not wait to get to work.
We all sat around the long conference table spinning from side to side in our chairs and waiting for the Editor, Max Hamilton, to come in, begin dishing out assignments. He wasted no time once he did.

“Frank, I want you to start interviewing the folks on notice, particularly the wealthy ones. See how they’re coping with the possibility of lost possessions.

“Gordon, check in with the fire department. Find out what they’re doing to contain it, and how this fire compares to ones they’ve seen in the past.

“Kyle, talk to some a… some a…” He snapped his fingers, waiting for the word. “Climate experts. And see if you can connect it to global warming somehow.

“And Elizabeth, do you think you could find a way of working this in with the disappearances?”

“The disappearances? How?”

He blinked. “I don’t know, weren’t you exploring alternative theories or something? I don’t care what the angle is. It’s weird that all of these things are happening at the same time. To Boulder. Find us something to say about it. Someone who has some ideas.”

When he said that, I knew just where to go.

The following morning I waited for Joy and Peter outside of West Pine Baptist Church where they went to worship. It was Sunday and the air tasted like a campfire. The Flatirons were barely visible through the thick haze of smoke.

I was seated on a bench wearing a surgical mask when church let out. I saw them appear at the top of the stone steps and when they noticed me they paused, looked
straight at me and exchanged a few words before Peter went back inside. Joy descended and came right to me.

“Bless you,” she said.

“Good morning,” I said.

“You should have come earlier. You missed the service.”

“I was hoping I could talk to you and Peter some more. About the disappearances.”

“Peter had to go help do some things. I’m free to talk though. What’s on your mind?”

I tried to phrase it in a way so that she’d bite. Told her how strange it was, all of these disappearances, and now this fire. There wasn’t any evidence to suggest this, but part of me couldn’t help thinking that somehow, in some way—

“Of course they’re related,” she said. “Wherever Satan dwells, Hell is sure to follow.”

I swallowed, hadn’t expected her to be so blunt. “So who started the fire then? Was it God? The Devil? One of their followers?”

She looked sharply at me. “The witches are responsible for this,” she said. “The Devil is a practicer of illusions. His kingdom is air. He doesn’t have the power to act physically in this realm. That’s why he requires human followers.”

I nodded, trying to look sincere. “Do you have any idea what their motive could be? Why start a fire? Is it somehow connected to the disappearances, you think?”
She shrugged and looked around, seemed to be searching for Peter. “A witch’s reasoning is beyond me,” she said. “Although there is another option. It’s written that when the Son returns, his coming will be heralded by fire. Birth pains, it calls them.”

I frowned. “I’m sorry, Joy, but I’m confused. Are you suggesting then that these are the end times? What do you call it—the rapture?”

“No one knows the day or the hour, and I wouldn’t presume to tell you. It’s the end time for some though, I’ll warrant.”

Not liking the sound of that, I asked if she’d had anymore contact with Judith, the witch who owned the bookstore on Pearl Street. She snorted.

“Contact? No, not yet.”

I told her that I’d been to interview Judith recently, and that she’d said something about Joy and Peter watching her. Joy’s face went slack. “She said what?”

I explained how Judith had told me she’d spotted the two of them spying on her, keeping tabs, and that she thought they might be planning something. Joy looked white as a sheet, and for some reason this delighted me. I thought with affection of Judith, imagined her outsmarting these two religious nitwits, and it filled me with joy. I cannot explain why.

Joy swallowed. “You went to see her then?” she began.

I nodded.

“And you’ve been… sleeping fine?”

I said that I had been. Like a stone, in fact.

“No dreams? No visitors?”

“Nope.”
She nodded. “You’re an adult, Elizabeth, and I wouldn’t tell you what to do. If you value your safety though—of your soul as well as your person—you won’t go there again. Put her from your mind. That’s the best thing you can do.”

“Do you think I’m in some kind of danger?” Again, I tried to look worried. I noticed Peter at the top of the stairs, watching us. He remained there for a moment before descending and walking toward us. Joy noticed him too. “Yes, I think you’re in danger. I don’t know what kind yet. What I do know is that you’d better not going talking about us to her again, you understand me?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but I had no words. I just looked at her.

“You tell her anything I’ve said and I’ll see that the witches aren’t the only ones cast into the fire.”

“Are you threatening me?” I asked, more amused than concerned, but she just stared, her eyes boring into me until Peter appeared and took gently by the arm, led her back toward the church. “Don’t mind her,” he said looking back. “She’s not well right now. I think the smoke’s getting to our brains.” He laughed.

“Do you have a moment to talk, Peter?”

“Afraid not. You run along though. I’m sure we’ll be seeing one another again shortly.”

I stared after them, watched them ascend the steps of the church. Joy turned and cast me one final glance beneath Peter’s arm before stepping inside. He held the door and followed after her. Both disappeared inside.

I don’t know why the thought of being threatened excited me so. Somehow I felt involved now. Part of the drama. It was a gossiper’s thrill. West Pine Church was only a
short walk from the Pearl Street Mall, and I practically skipped there now. The Mall was crowded with families carrying ice cream cones, shopping bags. Middle-aged women with sun visors and fanny packs coughing from the smoke. I went to the bookstore, shuffled down the steps. Judith did not look surprised to see me.

“Darling! What brings you here on this beautiful Sabbath?”

I told her I’d just come from the Baptist Church on Pine, that I’d been talking with the woman, Joy.

“Oh?” she said.

I nodded.

“I nodded.

“Would you like to come in the back and tell me about it?”

I nodded again. I felt like a puppy, desperate for some kind of recognition, some mundane reward. I followed her into the back, scraping at her heels, and thinking back on it is like entering into a blind spot. The darkness of the doorway the last I remember, except for when I left: some sweet, frothy taste on my lips.
Adam

I waited in the pit among the heavy bags for Hugo to finish sparring with one of the other guys. The gym was an old airplane hanger in West Boulder, off Pearl and Foothills, that had been outfitted with two rings, free weights, and a collection of heavy bags. Hugo was the only pro fighter who trained there. He was a heavyweight; an agile one.

I wanted a drink of water, but my gloves were taped up already. I wanted to use the bathroom.

The thirty-second buzzer sounded and I watched Hugo shift into high gear, leaping around on the balls of his feet, shifting his weight from one side to the other and moving his head so that it was impossible to hit. One-two, one-one-two-one, one-two-three-five-three. Two. Two. Two. The bell sounded, and the two fighters returned to their corners. “Great job, man!” Hugo said as they broke, patting Kevin on the head with his glove. Kevin stumbled to his corner and I watched while Frank removed his headgear and consoled him in hushed tones.

I was up next, I knew. Frank liked to let the more experienced guys spare first so that they would be plenty warmed up and loose and wouldn’t kill me. Hugo turned to where I was standing outside the ring. “You feel like going a few rounds?” he asked,

I liked Hugo. His head was as hard as a stone and there was little chance of me hurting him, so we were able to work smooth, mostly. Intelligently. It was great practice for me—I’d only been boxing about six months and wasn’t as quick picking things up as I’d once been. Hugo’s patience helped a lot, although it fucked with me to know that nothing I could possibly throw would hurt him. I knew when I scored, but had no idea how hard my punches landed, or how effective they would be against someone my own size (about 175 lbs.). When I made stupid errors—like dropping my hands—as a teaching point Hugo would let one fly that would leave my head ringing the rest of the round. Anytime he felt I needed a little respect I knew this was a possibility, and that fact made me timid, less forthcoming than I should be, which is a problem. Because I was afraid of being hit I took a lot more punches than I probably needed to: a vicious circle, one that’s difficult to think your way out of.

“Alright, Adam,” Frank called. “You ready?”

“Yesh, shir,” I said, struggling with my double mouthpiece. I climbed into the ring and being beneath the light made my chest flutter.

“Kevin, would you mind resetting the timer?” Frank asked. Kevin did so. “Alright guys, nice and easy. Just have fun.”

I stood facing Hugo, shifting my weight back and forth. He leaned against his corner until the buzzer sounded and we both touched gloves. I fired off immediately, trying to capitalize while the things I needed to do were still fresh in my mind. I jabbed repeatedly, although Hugo avoided these easily by bobbing his head from side to side. He
didn’t even have to think to know they were missing. I mixed it up with a few straight right hands and in my frustration I must have forgotten to protect myself because that’s when the first reminder came zinging through my hands—just a stiff jab to the face, but my mind cleared and I had no idea what I was doing anymore.

Hugo waited for me to recover and helped by charging straight in with his hands in front of his face. This was something he had shown me last week: a teaching moment. I did as he’d taught me, threw a left hook and used the momentum to pivot on my left foot, moved out of his way, then threw a glancing straight right.

“Good!” he said. We reset and he came at me again, barreling straight into me with his hands protecting his face and again I pivoted out of his way, used it to set up my right hand. This time I caught the side of his head and took the opportunity to let loose a little, following it with a left uppercut, another straight, and ending with two left jabs. None but the last jab landed. “Nice combo, Adam! Nice!”

The problem with doing something good is that it excites Hugo. The thirty-second buzzer sounded and I knew that I was in for it. He cut off the ring and before I knew it I was in the corner taking a smattering of jabs, rights, and uppercuts, none of them particularly hard—he was still taking it easy—but they were constant enough that I couldn’t think. My mind drew a blank and I didn’t know what to do, which was the point, I realized. I was supposed to fight my way out of the corner. I dropped my head, more in resignation than anything, but somehow caught myself and weaved instead. Hugo saw this and timed a hard left hook so that it went straight over my head and I spun out, back into the center of the ring just as the bell signaled the end of the round.

“Beautiful!” Hugo said and Frank said the same thing. I fell back into my corner.
We boxed three rounds total. The second started off well—I was still riding high because of the way the first round ended—although in the final seconds I caught a hard uppercut in the solar plexus that nearly had me crawling back to my corner. Frank asked whether I was finished, but I knew I couldn’t stop on that note, so I asked for another round, spent it dancing around, mostly, just trying to stay loose. Hugo played along, only throwing a few light one two combos until the thirty second buzzer sounded and that was my cue to turn it on. I stepped into the pocket and began firing with everything I had: One-one-two-one-two-three-six-three-four-one-one. I could see Hugo smiling as he warded off the blows, then he began to fire back: One-two-one, just to make sure I was keeping my guard up. This time, I was. I rattled out another combo, all of which glanced off of his gloves, then defended another one-two-one from Hugo. The round ended with Hugo taking a straight right hand to the jaw. “Oh, yeah!” he said. “Nice punch.”

Frank helped us off with our gear, and kept saying over and over again how much I’d improved. Hugo too called from across the ring that I’d hit him with some good shots. I thanked them both breathlessly. I was tired enough to worry about my bowels releasing. Once my gloves were off I climbed out of the ring and collapsed on the bench next to my gym bag, began removing my hand wraps. Hugo and Frank spoke to one another while Frank untied his gloves, then Hugo joined me on the bench. He also removed his wraps. “Yeah, man,” he said, as if continuing a conversation from earlier. “You’re doing a lot better. You’re taking shots better, moving. And you know what I like about you? Whenever you get hit you fire straight back. Tough fighter.” This wasn’t exactly true, I knew, but it made me feel good anyway.

“Thanks, man,” I said. “Thanks for taking it easy on me.”
“You’re scoring on your own. I’m not punching as much as I normally would, but my goal is to make you miss. Whenever you score it’s all you.”

I put my hand wraps away and removed my boxing shoes. I checked the time on my phone: 8:09 PM. My wife would still be “entertaining” now, which meant I needed to find something to do for another hour or so.

“Hey, Hugo,” I said, trying to think of the best way to ask him. “Are you taking a shower or headed out?”

“I’ll probably shower first. Why?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Do you feel like getting a beer or something after?” He looked at me for a second and I worried what he was thinking. “My wife just has this kind of gathering at the house on Thursdays and I’d rather not walk in on them. Girl night, kind of.”

He checked his watch, studied the time. “Okay, sure. Yeah, I can do that. Just let me get cleaned up first.”

“No problem, I was going to take a quick shower too.”

A film of moisture clung to the white tiles from a day’s worth of use, and a thin cloud of steam filled the showers. We rinsed off facing opposite walls. Behind me I could hear Hugo humming as he bathed, but didn’t recognize the tune.

We decided to get drinks at Harpo’s, a sports bar on East Arapahoe that often screened fights. There weren’t any events going on so the place was fairly empty. The air outside still smelled like smoke and I tried to keep from breathing too deeply. Walking across the parking lot I glanced toward the mountains and could see a faint aura of flame still hanging around the peaks.
We sat in the middle of the main floor surrounded by neon signs and muted flat screen televisions, all tuned to different sport shows. The Rolling Stones were playing on the juke. I ordered a pitcher of Coors Light and we sat facing one another across the table, unsure of what we had to talk about outside of the gym.

“So what do you do for work?” Hugo asked, again breaking the ice.

“I’ve got a business—Eden Ski Supply down on Arapahoe.”

“Oh!” his eyes got wide. “Is that the one in that shopping center? The a… the a…” He snapped his fingers trying to remember.

“The one by Larkburger?”

“Yeah!”

I nodded. “Do you ski much?” I asked, thinking I could offer him a sweet discount and seal this friendship right then.

“No,” he said, and looked at his hands. “Too easy to get injured.”

“Do you realize how ironic that sounds?” I was smiling, but he just looked at me. “Being a boxer, I mean, and worrying about getting hurt.”

He continued to stare and I realized that what I’d said didn’t make any sense. The waitress returned with our pitcher and glasses and I changed the subject: “Are you married, Hugo?”

He shook his head, filling up his glass. “No. I’ve got a little boy though. Lives with his mother.”

“How old?”

“He’s eight.”

“Teaching him to box yet?”
“I’ve shown him a couple of things. He’s not into practicing them yet.”

“Probably good for him to just have fun with it for now, right?”

“I think so. Do you have any children?”

“No,” I said. “We’ve talked about it. Not yet, though.”

“What’s this thing your wife does on Thursdays?”

I drained half my beer trying to think of how to describe it. “Kind of a book club, I guess you could say.”

He nodded, uninterested. It was funny to see how reticent he was in public. In the gym he was so loud and friendly. “What’s she do?” he asked.

“She runs a bookstore down on Pearl Street,” I said.

“In the mall?”

I nodded.

“Which one?”

I described it to him and he said, “Is that that new age store? Is she into that kind of stuff?”

“Some of it,” I said.

“Does that make her some kind of—”

I nodded and signaled with my eyes for him to keep it down. Not that Boulder had much of a stigma against witches, but with the disappearances and now the fire, best to err on the side of caution. “What’s that like?” Hugo asked.

“Oh, pretty much just like a normal marriage,” I lied.

“Any weird sex stuff?”
I felt like changing the subject although it occurred to me that sex was a bonding topic for men, so I made something up. Something about candle wax and tantra. He looked impressed.

“Is that something you also do?” he asked.

“What?”

“Magic.”

I shook my head, explained that it was my wife’s thing and that I honestly didn’t know too much about it. Finally sensing that I was uncomfortable, Hugo changed the subject, asked me why I’d gotten into boxing.

“Always wanted to,” I said. “Ever since I watched *Rocky* as a child.”

He laughed. “I think about fifty percent of boxers would tell you the same thing.”

“You?”

“No,” he said. “I had some anger issues when I was younger. Came from kind of a broken home and it was one of those things where the coach would go down to the delinquent center and recruit. Probably the other fifty percent of boxers right there.”

“Did it help?”

“Yeah, man. Once I started boxing I never got in trouble again. Whenever I would get angry I’d feel it in my fists and would just want to go beat on the bag for a while. Shit’s addicting.”

I nodded, knowing what he meant. “Do you still get angry?” I asked. “I mean, is that part of what boxing is for you?”
He thought about it. “Yeah,” he said, rolling his eyes and taking a sip of beer. “It’s productive though. I’m able to turn it on and off. I only allow myself to get angry when I’m working on the bag or in a fight—like, competitive ones.”

Meaning: not me.

“I appreciate you keeping that in reserve when we spar.”

He laughed a little and shook his head, asked what I thought about when I boxed. I said just about trying my hardest. No really, he said. I hesitated, and said that for me it was about a kind of intimacy that exists between people when they fight. It takes a certain kind of person to be willing to step into the ring and to get hit over and over again. It’s not an intuitive or a pleasant thing to do. And at first, when you’re still getting used to it, the way your mind clears and empties of language can be downright frightening. You can’t help but panic. Although over time, that starts to concern you less and less; you become attuned to the silent, physical relationship that exists two people. The more evenly matched you are, the stronger, I think, that connection is, to the point of self-annihilation. Neither person is able to act autonomously in the ring. They exist in a kind of dance; what one does is determined by the actions of his partner and vice versa, and for me, there’s something beautiful and heroic about that. I think I know why even bitter rivals hug and kiss one another following a good fight.

Hugo watched me speak, nodding slightly the entire time. “Yeah, yeah,” he said, downing his beer. “I think that’s true.”

I blushed. It was a weird thing to confess, and a topic I normally avoided around fighters because it would be very easy to misunderstand. I watched Hugo, looking for signs of discomfort, but I couldn’t find any. His eyes were big and dark, almost black-
seeming, and his features were all puffy and swollen from years of boxing. He looked at
his hands resting on the table, and I thought that, perhaps, he wasn’t thinking about
anything at all. He looked back and forth between our empty glasses, the empty pitcher
beside us. “You want another round?” he asked.

I checked my phone: 10:21 PM. Their gathering would definitely be over by now.
Judith would be alone. “Sure,” I said, motioning to the waitress propped against the bar.
“This one’s on me.”

Judith was seated on the couch when I got home, reading. The only light a dull
lamp beside her and the smell of candles still hung in the air. “You’re home late,” she
said.

“Finished early and went to grab a drink with Hugo. Ended up having more than
one.”

“Is Hugo the man you’ve been sparring with?”

“Oh huh.”

Her eyebrows lifted but she kept reading. I looked at the book, which was big and
thick and leather bound. “Devil give you that?” I asked. She looked up at me, unamused.

“It’s the coven’s.”

“What are you reading it for now?”

“Magic is communal,” she said. “The better you understand your community, the
better a magician you’ll be.”

“Alright.”

“What about you? How was sparring? Your nose looks a little swollen.”
“It was good. I’m getting better.”

“Hugo do that to you?”

I nodded.

“Funny how you can go out and have drinks with a guy who does that to you.”

“Guess it’s a guy thing.”

“Guess so.”

She stood and took the book to the cabinet where she kept all of her ritual stuff locked (I wasn’t allowed to touch it, she said; profane use would compromise its power). She put it away. Afterward, she came over to me and, as she embraced me, smelled beneath my arms. “Did you shower already?” she asked. I told her I had. “With Hugo?”

I flushed a little. Her face was even—I couldn’t tell whether she was trying to upset me. “Are you ready for bed?” I asked, and her arms slipped around my torso, her face pressed against my chest.

“I’m ready,” she said.

The lights were out in our room and I went straight to the bathroom to brush my teeth, to remove my contacts, while Judith lay stretched out across the bed. I turned and could see her against the white covers, framed by a panel of light from the bathroom. She was looking at me, and I wondered whether she wanted sex. She looked very attractive. Vulnerable.

I finished brushing my teeth and removed my shirt, remained in the doorway while I took off my pants then turned off the light. I could hear her breathing and followed the sound until I was beside her, laid diagonal across the bed. I propped myself on my elbow and she pressed her hand against my chest. I felt her legs, which were
smooth. Somehow her legs were always smooth. I went further up her thigh, under her slip, feeling her response to make sure I wasn’t moving too fast. I kissed her shoulder and her neck, and knew by her shudder that everything was alright. Everything was perfect.

“Adam,” she said.

“Yes?” I mouthed into her collar.

“Do you enjoy being hit?”

“What do you mean?”

“The fighting. Does it please you to be hurt? Do you get a thrill out of it?”

I pulled back. “Sexual, you mean? No.”

“Describe it to me.”

“You wouldn’t understand,” I said, laying on my back and sighing. She climbed on top of me, her face above mine so that I could feel her breath on the tip of my nose.

“But I want to. I want to understand your appetites.”

“It’s not an appetite; it’s a way of testing myself.”

She studied me. “But there’s something else, something you’re not telling me.”

I thought of Hugo—of his blank, puffy face; his dark, shiny eyes—remained convinced that Judith wouldn’t understand.

“You know,” she whispered in my ear, “if you let me I can make it all happen for you. Anything you want. I’ve grown powerful like that. If you want to feel weak you can be weak, if you want it anonymous I can wipe your mind clean. If you want to know what a woman feels like…”

I flipped her onto her back and forced my mouth against hers, my hand between her legs, partly so she would stop talking but also because I was immensely turned on.
We removed what remained of our clothes and in those brief moments our lips were apart she said, “Tell me, tell me what I can do for you and I will. Anything you want.”

I was on top of her again, kissing her nose, her cheeks, her mouth, but she was not kissing back. She was waiting for me to respond. “Be quiet,” I breathed between kisses, my hand still searching her body for shudder. Her muscles tensed suddenly, although she didn’t speak. Her offer was good, it turned out, and she was quiet. It’s difficult to say though whether I was relieved or disappointed.

Sparring took place on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday evenings, although I tried to go to the gym in between to work on skills, to punch the bags. Sometimes Hugo was there, but he usually wasn’t. I tried to talk to the other men who came to the gym, although it’s difficult because each person has his own workout to follow. Still though: “Do you mind if I reset the buzzer?” “Are you using this bag?” “Do you need a spot?”

There’s a quiet sort of intimacy even in these exchanges, a kind of mutuality. We understand one another in the gym. Our purposes are clear, and we are sympathetic to one another.

I haven’t done a good job explaining so far the whole intimacy thing, and I don’t know that I will.

When it comes to training, I like the heavy bag. The feeling of my fists stretching as they come into contact with it, but also the awareness it gives me of my body, the sense of how everything flows into everything else: a jab into a straight right hand, a straight right hand into a left hook, a left hook into an uppercut, and on and on and on. Working on the heavy bag you can feel the subtle way that energy moves and changes
direction in your body, in your arms, in your torso and legs, and in the earth itself. It’s a surprisingly sensual experience. I see the bag responding to my punches and I am amazed sometimes by the power I have.

The side of our house facing the Flatirons is all glass, floor to ceiling, and the view is excellent; it’s why we chose this house. One night Judith and I sat on the couch with a bottle of Cotês du Rhone and watched the tops of them flickering, bleeding orange, so terrifying and beautiful. “Did you hear about the mountain lion?” she asked me.

“What about it?”

“They found it.”

“They did?”

My voice cracked a little. This was good news. “Where? How? What else do you know?” I asked.

“One of the fire fighters found a cave in the hills just north of Chautauqua, not far from one of the trails. They say it was filled with smoke and when he went inside he found her there, nearly four feet tall and over ten feet long from nose to tail.”

“Jesus, that’s the size of an African lion!”

“They said she was lying on her side, dead from smoke inhalation. Had cubs too, three of them, also dead and curled against her.”

“My God.”

“Littered around the sides of the cave they found bones—children’s bones—stacked in piles. They’re taking them to the lab for DNA testing, but so far investigators
are saying there are more bones than there are children missing. Not sure how to account for it.”

I couldn’t believe it; in fact, part of me didn’t.

“Well, that’s a relief, isn’t it?”

“You mean that now people can get over the idea witches are somehow responsible? Yes. Yes, I’d say it is.”

“Still though, I just can’t imagine how a lion could be capable of that. How far up did you say they found the cave?”

“Couple miles west of the park.”

“Jesus. So it would have had to drag the children nearly three miles, uphill, through neighborhoods and a densely populated park? Does that add up to you?”

“No. What do you want me to say though, Adam? Weird things happen. Evil things. Did you ever hear about the Tsavo lions? In Kenya they were building a railroad when people started to disappear, only there wasn’t any mystery about it. It was a pair of maneless man-eating lions. Everyone saw them. Sometimes they would grab people from inside their tents at night and drag them just outside of camp, so the others could hear them feeding but could not see them. They tried to capture and kill the pair, but it went on for nine months before they finally succeeded. Over one hundred and thirty railway workers were killed and eaten during that time.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because lions don’t do that, and if they did they wouldn’t be that hard to capture.”

I stared at her.
“In Tsavo, people started to form superstitions about them, thought they were the ghosts of medicine men come to punish the railroad. Others thought they were devils.”

“Is that what you think then? The cougar is really the Devil come to punish Boulder for…what? Being too happy? Too beautiful? Too sunny three-hundred and fifty days per year?”

She shrugged. “doesn’t have to be punishment. Could just be a reminder that awful things happen: that wealth and race and liberal sensibilities don’t exempt you from that.”

I’d never heard Judith talk this way before: about evil and fate. As far as I knew these were words she sneered at.

“That’s not the only thing either. You know that Church on Pine Street, the one that’s been picketing the bookstore the past couple of weeks?”

I looked at her.

“Burned to the ground last night.”

“What?” My first thought was that it had to do with the Flagstaff Fire. That somehow it had breached the city, but to get to the church it would have had to burn through nearly half the city. Judith explained that they suspected arson.

“Probably some kids or something,” she said.

I paused, then repeated my line from earlier: “Well, that’s a relief, isn’t it?” Joking, really, although she didn’t laugh. Just took another sip of her wine and smiled, staring up into the flames. I felt Judith’s hand in my lap, on my thigh. I turned and she was smiling.
“Kind of romantic, isn’t it?” she said, talking about the fire. “Like candlelight with no candles.”

I could not share the sentiment. I felt anxious for some reason, exposed; like the flames weren’t ambient light at all but a great burning eye with a perfect vantage point. I covered her hand with my own and squeezed it affectionately, halting its progress.

“No?” she asked, in a voice a few decibels louder than it should have been.

I shook my head and her hand withdrew. We sat there separately watching the fire burn until our wine was gone and we were tired and we went to bed. My dreams also were vaguely unsettling.

One-one, one-two, one-two-three-four. Two, two, three-two-one-one.

I was boxing well tonight.

Last night the wind had been less than expected and some light showers had helped the fire fighters gain ground on the fire. The blaze had reduced from three hundred acres to approximately two hundred, and they estimated that it was probably thirty percent contained. The pre-evacuation notices had all been lifted early that morning. The City of Boulder was no longer threatened.

I’d known it immediately when I’d gone out that morning by the fresh taste of the air, unflavored by smoke, and imagined my performance tonight had something to do with it. I felt strong, uncontaminated. Hugo was loving it.

“Uhnn,” he said, taking a straight right hand to the gut. “Good one!”
My timing was great, my head movement superb. I wasn’t taking too many hits, even when Hugo turned up the volume a bit. One-one-two, then weave off the right hand. If I get stopped moving in, weave and come back out. Side to side.

Our bodies responded to one another from across the ring, then off of certain jabs I just felt, I don’t know, inspired, and let go with my punches: fours and fives, the combos flowed out of me. Hugo was excited but a little confused too, I think. I was confused. The smile on his face as he moved and forced the punches to roll off him seemed a little strained at times, and I knew it was only a matter of time before he really started boxing.

He waited until the third round, and I knew immediately by the way he was moving that I would have to do some work to stay in it. He bounced back and forth from right to left, seeming to cover half the ring this way. I’ve said before that he was a big guy, a professional heavyweight, and the sight of such mass moving that way was disconcerting. This round he was all punches. In no time I was up against the ropes trying to cover both my face with my hands and my liver with my elbows against the flurry of punches coming from all directions.

“Come on,” he said encouragingly. “Fight out of it. It’ll just keep coming till you fire back.”

I took a breath and pushed off with my gloves, creating a bit of space, then: five-six-three-one-one and circling.

“Nice work, Adam,” Frank called from the corner. “Nice work.”
Hugo wasn’t taking breaks though. He was back on me in an instant, now forcing me into the opposite corner, cutting off the ring, and we went through the same thing again: me struggling to cover up until I summoned the energy to fight my way out.

Somewhere far off I could hear the thirty-second buzzer, but I was distracted by Hugo coming at me, his gloves actually protecting his face for a change, a serious look in his eyes. Normally my first response would be fear; I would resent him for taking me too seriously. But now I didn’t hesitate, met him halfway and we stood in the middle of the ring trading blows and combinations. I felt one right hand land on his chin and he actually staggered for a half instant, right before, with what must have been three seconds left, he came back with a wild right uppercut that caught me beneath the jaw, literally took me off my feet.

And without knowing how I’d gotten there I found myself sitting down on the canvas, Hugo and Frank in front of me, helping me back to my feet. The bell had sounded although I hadn’t heard it. “I’m real sorry about that, man. You were giving it to me good though and I just got into it. I don’t know what I was thinking…”

Poor guy. He seemed genuinely upset with himself. If he only knew how happy it made me to take a real, honest blow from him, no holding back. It was something I’d had to earn, I felt.

“Good sparring tonight,” Frank said. “Adam, you’ve gotten much, much better. Too bad you ain’t younger otherwise I’d be looking to schedule you, and soon.”

I felt a kind of mild euphoria which may have had something to do with the fact that my head was still ringing and the room was slightly off-balanced. We removed our gear and Hugo talked the entire time about how well I’d done, apologizing again for
getting carried away but using my performance as his excuse. By now he’d figured out that I wasn’t upset. Far from it. Our faces both glistened with sweat and Vaseline.

When we’d gotten our gear off again we went and took a shower, again on opposite sides of the room and facing opposite walls. The water felt terrific. I felt terrific. And every now and then Hugo would say something about the sparring. “It was a good fight,” he called back over his shoulder, and in a lower voice: “Good fight.” And I listened to him over my shoulder, smiling.

That night we went out for drinks again—Hugo bought—and when I came home I was surprised to see that a few of Judith’s “company” were still lingering about in the doorway to the rec room. I could see past them into the darkly lit space, the pentagram at the far end faintly luminescent. They watched me enter.

“Hello, darling,” Judith said in that fake, haughty voice she used when she was surrounded by her little followers. There were a few ladies I didn’t know tidying up, or so I imagined, although I recognized the one talking with Judith in the doorway: Regina, the weird one Judith told me about, the one who loved her. She looked down at the floor, sullen and irritated by my intrusion. Judith, however, paid no attention to her. “How was boxing tonight?” she asked.

“It was good,” I said, wishing I could go into detail but not wanting to in front of the “company.”

“Was Hugo there tonight?” she asked, and there was something in her tone.

“He was.”
She looked at her watch. “You two must have gone out for drinks again, judging by the time.”

I nodded and turned toward our bedroom. I felt I needed another shower. Judith turned to Regina. “It’s so cute the way they go on together. Oblivious. He tells me they even shower together.”

At this I turned. “Excuse me?” I said, trying to sound menacing. “What was that?”

She turned and half-smiled at me. “I was just telling Regina how close you and your friend, Hugo, have become. It’s perfectly natural. Men tend to underestimate the physical connection they build together through sports.”

I looked at Regina and her eyes still were downcast; she had no interest in what was taking place between Judith and I, but waited patiently for Judith to be finished. I should have just left without saying anything but right now I was fuming. “I don’t know where you get off saying something like that to me—and in front of company—but you need to watch your mouth. Quit acting tough in front of your little familiars.”

Regina’s eyes flashed and I recognized then how much she hated me. I looked to the others and wondered how many of them felt the same way. It felt like the room was tipping in Judith’s direction.

“Tough?” she asked in that tone of phony equanimity. “I don’t need to act tough. I wasn’t trying to hurt your feelings. I was being sincere: I really do think it’s cute. More men should be in touch with themselves that way.”

Unabated, I turned and stalked off to the bedroom. We would talk about this later when her cronies were gone. Right now it was impossible. I undressed and stood beneath the shower faucet and closed my eyes, thinking about what she’d said and, now, while I
was alone, trying to decide if there was any truth to it. I imagined the shower at the gym, Hugo facing the wall behind me, the few glimpses I’d had of him naked; his big, dark body surrounded by steam. Was there any part of me that found him attractive?

No, I decided. Quickly. Definitively. Even if I were homosexual, I thought, Hugo was not one I could be attracted to. Judith was way off base. But then, had she even suggested that? I tried to remember her words. Maybe not.

I continued to think about it, and though there wasn’t even the slightest possibility of attraction, there may have been something to the physical connection thing. Nothing erotic, but a level of affection, at least, that was distinctly physical. Its deepest expression, I thought, was an embrace. I could imagine myself hugging him, even lying down with him, I was surprised to find, and still felt warmth and affection. Although the thought of anything else struck me as almost comical.

Strange, I thought. It was a fine distinction, but an important one. Most people probably wouldn’t see the difference. And it certainly was not something he and I could talk about, nor should we. I decided that this was simply what male friendship felt like post-pubescence. An aspect that must necessarily go unspoken.

When I came out of the bathroom, toweling myself off, Judith was sitting on the bed. The others were gone and she watched me with a fascination that was obviously sexual. I felt myself becoming mildly aroused and wrapped myself in the towel. I still was angry with her.

“What the fuck was that?” I asked, standing with my hands on my hips in front of the bed.

“I shouldn’t have brought it up in front of company,” she said.
“You’re goddamn right you shouldn’t have.”

“I’m sorry.” She paused. “I think you over-interpreted what I was saying though.”

I huffed. She started to explain herself but I cut her off. “It’s alright,” I said.

“Forget about it. I think I know what you meant. Not why you chose to bring it up in front of your friends…”

“It was Regina,” she said. “We were having a conversation and it seemed relevant. I shouldn’t have.”

I looked at her for a long moment, my last attempt to hold onto the anger, but I bought her apology. I sighed and sat down beside her on the bed, draped my arm around her torso. She sat back and took me with her, and for several seconds we laid on our backs, looking at one another. Her hand rested on my thigh, but made no attempt to remove my towel.

“What do you know that you’re beautiful, Adam?”

I looked at her, waiting to find out what kind of conversation this would be.

“You are. I wouldn’t try to take that away from you.”

Was she referring to what she’d said before, about the thing with Hugo? I was about to ask when she rolled onto her side and began stroking my chest. “It’s okay, you know. To have feelings. Any feelings, all feelings. As long as we love one another it’s all kindling.”

“You’re not trying to suggest—”

“No, I’m not trying to suggest anything. I just—”

She trailed off, searching for the right word although unable to locate it. I watched her, waited for her to finish, but knew somehow that what she was trying to say wasn’t
meant for words; it existed in a state of suspense, on the verge of expression but never quite finding form. I thought about helping her but knew this to be true myself. All I could do was lay there with her and take part in that strange sadness, allow it to bring us together. And it did.

I undid my towel and she rolled over top of me, paused and held my gaze without moving. “Do you want to feel something? Something special?” she asked.

I did not respond. She climbed off of me and lit a couple of candles by the bedside table, went to the drawer and produced a vial of some kind of liquid. “Close your eyes,” she said, returning to the bed. I did and I could feel her rubbing whatever it was over my eyelids, my forehead, and my temples. “Don’t worry about the smell,” she said. “It’s harmless.” When she finished I kept my eyes closed, laid passively on my back and felt her lean forward, kiss me once on the ear and begin to whisper something in a voice almost too low to hear. What I was able to perceive was a strange mixture of syllables and breath that, I admit, despite being incomprehensible, I found very sexy.

She continued to whisper and, as she did so, I found myself feeling more and more sleepy, detached, as though I was slipping into some kind of dream. I felt disconnected from my body and when the sounds in my ear ceased and the sensations started, the moment of penetration, it felt almost like it was happening to someone else. I summoned the strength to open my eyes and was shocked to see, not Judith, but myself lying on the bed beneath me, lips parted with pleasure although the eyes were focused ahead, on my own.

At first I was horrified. I felt a moment of panic in which I tried to move, to get up, hoping that if I did something would fracture and reality would come spinning back
into focus. But my own hands grasped my hips and held them in place. I looked down and I realized what had happened, that I was looking out of Judith’s body. I could feel myself inside of me and, perverse as it was, the sensation was so strange and exotic for a moment I was paralyzed by my own pleasure. I experimented and found that if I moved certain ways the pleasure increased exponentially. A jolt shot through me and made me collapse forward in ecstasy. I grasped my own shoulders, my chest, ran my fingers through my own hair. I wanted to shout, I wanted to weep at the affection I suddenly felt for myself; so much that I barely even noticed the tears forming in my bright blue eyes staring up at me, the indulgent smile fixed sadly on my face.
Shannon

The two of us usually don’t go into the woods after dark. We rarely go there at all. Nick loves living in Boulder and having the mountains close by, but never seems to want to go there. We sit on our back balcony, drinking coffee and watching them. So being there is the first sign something’s wrong.

“I thought you didn’t want to know any witches,” I said when he first approached me. “That being an outsider was part of it.”

“Well, the project’s changed a little.”

He told me about the witch he’d met at The Laughing Goat. How they’d talked and how it had given him a new idea of where the novel was going, how to end it. She’d invited him to some kind of casting ceremony at night, in the woods. He wouldn’t say why I was supposed to come.

“It’s important though, Shannon.” My hands were cradled in his lap, his eyes stretching as large as they could. “It’s for us.”

And I knew that he believed it. He was a romantic when it came to writing. Whenever I’d wake up in the morning he would already be in the studio, bent over his laptop and hunched into the small light of a table lamp. Sometimes a whole minute would go by before he noticed me standing there in the doorway, and it interested me to see his
expression: his eyes wide, mouth open, staring as though the words weren’t his but some communication from beyond. The ego communicating with the id.

He was afraid of those dark parts of himself, I think. The buried parts. Hence his fascination with possession, witchcraft, and the rest. Nothing frightened him more than loss of control because, perhaps more than others, he feared what he was capable of. That’s why I believed when he said he thought this was for us. Writing was his way of exploring those hidden parts of himself, of understanding and manipulating them. Protecting me, as it were.

And so, of course, I agreed. Never mind that I don’t really have a choice. Not here.

He leads me by the hand from the car up the hillside. The bald face is tinted red like there’s a fire nearby, although there’s not. Just a huge moon, hanging like a jack-o-lantern overhead. The tree line is pitch dark. I cling to his arm, my left foot and his right stumbling over one another.

“Do you think there are really mountain lions up here?” I ask.

“No idea,” he says.

He leads me to a spot in the dark where there is a trail, one I’m unable to see until we’re right upon it. And inside it’s the same story: I can see just enough to duck the branches hanging in our path, but I have no sense of direction, no sense of where we are going or even where the trail is underfoot. I am reliant on Nick, his awareness of these surroundings, too grateful to wonder where he got it from.

I follow after him, grasping his hand and trying to imagine what could be in store for us. I consider what he’s told me so far of the novel, and what I’ve read of his other
work, and can’t imagine it’s anything good. He’s a romantic, I know. Sentimental, even. But somehow he locates those feelings exclusively in darkness, in violence, death, and heartache. The thought of being a character in one of his stories is frightening, or even being close to him at all. Something fundamental about the way he experiences emotion can be found in his stories, I think, and whatever it is, I don’t know what to do with it.

“Will you please tell me what’s going to happen?” I ask.

“And ruin the ending?”

“I’m your wife first, not your reader.”

“That makes you my first reader.”

Despite myself, I feel a dull shiver of pride when he says this. I like being the first one to peer into these worlds. Before they’ve been polished. Before they cohere, exactly. Even though it’s when they’re often the darkest, I feel I can see more of him then. A part of him that is frightening, but also fragile, yearning. An instinct vaguely maternal kicks in, although tonight is different. I can’t remember ever being asked to go into the woods after dark.

“Baby,” I say, and he doesn’t answer. I can hear his breathing though. “Nick!”

“Yes?”

“I don’t know about this.”

“Know about what?” he says without turning.

“I’m not feeling so good. Not sure it’s the best time for me to be meeting a coven of witches.”

“Baby, it’ll be fine. They’re lovely people. These are real witches, not like the kind I write about.”
“What are we doing here then? I thought this was for your book.”

“Details. I’ll change the general mood when I write about it. Make it creepy. It’s mostly the little things I need to pick up.”

“It’s already creepy,” I mutter, and we continue walking for several seconds before suddenly I plant my feet. “Nick, I want to go back.”

He stops and turns to face me, although he’s only a silhouette. “Shannon—” he says.

“Please.”

He moves closer and grasps me by my hips, pulling our bodies close. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. I know it seems scary, but you’ve got to trust that I’m bringing you here for a reason. For us, remember.”

“I don’t believe you’re thinking about us,” I say. “I know you believe you are, but really it’s about you and what you want. Your book, not ours.”

“Where’s this coming from?” he asks.

“You tell me,” I say. His mouth tightens.

“Do you remember at our wedding, when Jeffrey recited that mantra?” he asks.

“Of course I do.”

“How powerful it felt, and how it seemed to charge everything—our vows, the ceremony, everything?”

“Yes.”

“I want that from this book. The same thing. It only works though if you go with me. Willingly, I mean.”
“And how am I supposed to do that? What choice do I have? You’re the one writing it!”

“Not exactly, I don’t think. At least, that’s what I’m trying to avoid. I’m really trying to convince you here. I need this to happen organically. It’s true, I can make anything I want to happen happen. But in order for those consequences to carry over I have to listen. I have to let the world, its characters, determine the novel’s progression. As much as I’m able, I have to let your voice be your voice. That’s the only way this has any meaning.”

“And how much is this my voice?”

He sighs and puts his hands on his hips, half-turns so that he’s staring off the trail into the darkness. I wait for him to answer, although he doesn’t.

“Do you know what I really want? Honestly?” I ask. My tone has changed. I can feel the frustration draining out of it, unaccountably.

“What?” he says, without turning, and I can almost hear a smile in his voice.

“It’s to say whatever you need me to say. Be whatever you need me to be. I can’t do that all the time. But here, maybe. If you do it right.”

“That’s not what I need,” he sighs, although I can see his teeth again. “You’re missing the point.”


“Shannon—” he says, catching up. His tone is frustrated, insisting still on this “organic progression,” although I know the truth, even if I can’t say it.
I turn and place one finger in his lips, bring my stomach close to his. His arms slip around my torso and we stand like that, in the middle of the pitch black woods. “Just promise me one thing,” I say. “That you’ll be generous. To both of us.” It’s the closest I can come to a real plea, and he can hear it, I know, in my voice.

My eyes have begun to adjust, and I cannot see his exactly—they are hollows burrowing into his face—but I can dimly make out his expression: his teeth glow like wolf’s teeth. “Alright,” he says. “I think I can do that.”

“Good,” I say, and draw close one more time, wrapping myself as tightly as I can around him. His shirt is damp and I can smell his perspiration, which is strange; he doesn’t usually sweat. “Then I guess let’s go.”

We walk another ten minutes until finally, ahead, a small ember of light comes into view through the trees. It grows as we approach, and the sound of women’s voices also resolves. Laughter, not malevolent sounding, but not innocent either. There’s a strained, manic quality to it, like when you’re laughing at something you know is not a joke.

Fifty feet ahead there’s a clearing. Inside, we can see the fire piled off to one side and a white pentagram etched into the dirt beside it. “Tell me again it’s going to be alright, baby,” I say, holding Nick’s hand. He pumps mine reassuringly, but says nothing. I look at him and I can see his eyes now, glimmering with firelight. I open my mouth to say something but the words aren’t there. I feel mute. His hand slips to the small of my back and I move gently forward, not resisting, at least not much, I think.

We enter the clearing and there are close to twenty people there, some milling about while others bustle around making preparations: arranging torches at each of the
pentacle’s five points, hanging bones from branches, and on the far side, a woman stands in front of a table with a black satin cloth draped across it, various ornaments and bowls arranged on top.

As soon as we enter the light, however, their motions stop and the women all stare at us. A sudden cheer falls flat against the quiet and several ladies hurry forward, greeting us and leading us a bit roughly by the elbows to the far side of the circle, where the woman in front of the table introduces herself.

“Judith,” she says. “And you must be—”

“Shannon,” I say.

She turns to Nick. “I’m glad you could convince her to come.”

“Me too,” he says, but doesn’t return her smile. She looks away and his eyes trail after her. The two women at our elbows lead us into the center of the pentagram where we kneel, shifting our knees to avoid the rocks and roots. The brightness of the clearing is gives way to the tree line, and above it the sky absorbs the red and orange tones like a fog around a streetlamp.

I cling to Nick, silently, unable to speak, unable to ask questions, which is perhaps the most frightening thing.

The others press along the outer edge of the circle and I recognize a few of them. One gentleman is the pastor of a local church, the one down on Pine Street. John, I think was his name. And another one, Rigpa, used to play volleyball in a social league with me.

So many faces, all pressing in, all leering, but it’s just the two of us in the circle.
Judith drifts to the top of the pentagram directly in front of us, cradling a large, black leather book in her arms. The script on the front is dark and illegible, blends into the binding.

She clears her throat. “And then,” she reads, “she began to read:

“Nick and Shannon, you both are here
To be bound and baptized by your fear

That no matter what or how you despair
Together always this nightmare you’ll share.

“The silk robe she’d been wearing slipped from her shoulders and floated into a pile by her feet, revealing her naked body which, though she stood in one place, appeared to dance and writhe in the firelight. A half-second later the rest of the company followed, stepping out of their clothes so that we were surrounded by a kaleidoscopic mob of naked bodies twisting and morphing in the flames. She continued:

“Much beauty and happiness to you shall come
Although suffering and weakness are what make you one.

A wonderful thing to live in the light
But to live in the darkness requires new sight

I consecrate you now to what you cannot know
What afflicts you now and wherever you go

That when fear and doubt creep into your bed
You’ll lie with it peacefully, and go where you’re led.
“I listened to the words and had no trouble comprehending them, although they seemed strange to me, like a wedding ceremony almost, although with something dark and foreboding at its center. I looked at Nick kneeling there beside me. He looked pale and unwell, couldn’t seem to hold himself upright. I inched closer, trying to wedge my body under his, to support him. ‘Are you okay?’ I asked. He just looked at me and nodded. I could not tell if he was afraid or ill.

“Judith turned and lifted a knife from the table, an ornate thing with a curved handle, and lowered it to the edge of the circle, began tracing it with careful, measured steps. With her body doubled over she was not nearly as beautiful, but she did not seem conscious of this. She stared, grinning and never breaking eye contact until she’d completed the circle and returned to her spot at its pentacle. The company shuffled backwards, and from somewhere outside of the circle a pair of children approached—a young, adolescent girl and a smaller boy. They looked to be brother and sister.

“The boy wore brown overalls, and the girl a plain, dark dress. Both old-fashioned, which had the effect of making them seem older. Behind them they led a goat on a rope leash. They paused in front of the circle, their eyes narrowed on us. Judith reached forward with the knife and carved what appeared to be a rectangle or doorway into the air in front of her. When she’d finished, she took the leash from the young boy and entered the circle with the goat, repeated the same motion with the knife behind her, closing the door.

“I looked at Nick now. I was beginning to panic. Although he looked no better. I knew what was happening then, as clearly as if I’d written it myself. Judith approached us with the book open in one hand, the leash with the goat in the other, the whole time
reading, reading. I strained to see the underside of the book, to read its title, but couldn’t make it out. All I could see was black leather and shadow.

“She continued: and even as she spoke the phrase, ‘turned the goat,’ already she was turning it, so that its rear faced us. She lifted its tail, and I looked at Nick. He swallowed, shuffling forward on his knees and leaning in close, hesitating for a brief moment before planting a long, wet kiss on the thing’s asshole.

“He lingered there, beyond what was decent or necessary, and when he finally pulled away he glanced at Judith, who nodded approvingly. He shuffled back and wouldn’t look me in the eye. Judging by his expression though, I don’t think he would have seen me anyway. His eyes were glazed over, wide as though he was staring beyond at something. I followed his gaze, but on the other side of the goat there were only trees.

“I turned to Judith and she was looking at me now, smiling patiently. I faced Nick.

“‘Is this really what you want?’ I wanted to ask, but couldn’t; had the feeling it would be the wrong question anyway. The gesture was mine to make, or at least I convinced myself of that.

“I took a breath and shuffled forward so that I was eye-level with that puckered orifice. Everything was quiet around me—except for Judith, of course—but somehow, in this moment, not even the sound of her speaking seemed to disturb the silence. It was like her voice had finally caught up with the present and was no longer distinguishable from it. Not even white noise, but something solid and immanent, like a tree, or a flame.

“I could feel Nick behind me, trembling with excitement, and without giving it another thought I leaned forward and kissed where he had kissed, feeling it contract and
shiver as my lips came into contact with it. My eyes were closed and I lingered as he had, my mouth making a wet sucking sound. And it was funny: with my eyes closed, I actually forgot briefly what I was doing, imagined for a moment that it wasn’t a goat’s ass I was kissing, but Nick. I allowed myself to slip deeper into that fantasy, gripping its haunches and pressing with my face.

“When I pulled away finally the naked people on the outside of the circle cheered, drowning out Judith. I shuffled back to where Nick was and wrapped myself around his arm and smiled. He smiled back, weakly but affectionately, one half of his face shining in the firelight, and the other hidden in shadow. I looked at him and believed, for a moment, that I knew what he’d been talking about all along. In that moment, I loved both halves.”

Judith’s voice came to a stop, and as soon as it did, another sound, wild and frenetic, began to swell. The crowd of witches parted and a tide of small children, all between the ages of four and six, spilled into the circle, shouting and leaping up and down, swarming us like insects and grabbing us by our shirts and screaming something we could not understand and laughing. I tried looking at their faces, thinking of whether I’d seen them before, whether I recognized any of them from the news. They smiled back, happy, blank. No matter how I stared, I could not place a single one of them.