

FAMILY TRADITIONS

A THESIS IN  
Creative Writing and Media Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the University  
of Missouri – Kansas City in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

by  
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## FAMILY TRADITIONS

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University of Missouri – Kansas City, 2010

### ABSTRACT

Family Traditions tells the story of young adults who have grown up as Wiccans. Because Wicca remains a new and small religion, the vast majority of its followers converted from Christianity or other faiths, and the number of people who have been raised as Wiccans is vanishingly small. These children learn to hide their religion from their schools and families and confront the negative associations society makes toward neopaganism while handling the disillusion and doubt that comes with any religion. But these difficulties also result in intense bonds between the children of Wiccans, and those relationships form the basis for many of these stories. The works include linked stories of a fictional coven and the author's own experiences of both the absurd and the profound.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled "Family Traditions," presented by Eric O. Scott, candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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## INTRODUCTION

I didn't mean to write these stories. When I first entered the fiction program at the University of Missouri – Kansas City, my intent was to work on a novel about angels. I turned in one story from that collection, and while it was well-enough received, something about it never clicked. Those stories have never really gone anywhere. I spent the first few weeks of that semester wondering what on earth I would write about, and wondering whether I had any business in a graduate writing program in the first place.

Then, in October of my first semester, a man I knew died of a brain tumor. His name was Michael Shew, though that was not the name I knew him by. His death hurt me a lot, but for reasons other than what I expected; I had known him as a poet of old gods, and I had loved him for that. I had been raised by Wiccans, and I thought he was like me: a polytheist, a pagan. I found out at his funeral that he had never actually been a pagan. That had just been a costume he put on. Really, was a Baptist. That hurt even more than finding out he was dead.

I ended up writing a memoir about that called *Hrafspa*. That story changed a lot of things for me, as a writer. It was the first time I had written a memoir in years, for one; now, memoir comprises about half of what I write, and several of the stories in this collection – *Three Encounters with the Gods*, *Lughnasadh*, and *The Snake and the Panda*, in addition to *Hrafspa* — are memoirs. The second, more important consequence of that story, was that I finally felt comfortable writing about my childhood and my religion.

I suppose what I'm trying to do with this collection is to expand some of the literary possibilities for new religious movements. The past decade has seen no shortage of characters in popular media who claim to be Wiccan, but almost all of it has to deal with the supernatural. What's left tends to be, essentially, pagan propaganda. The existing literature also deals exclusively with pagans who have converted to the religion; very little of it deals with people like me, who have had this as part of their identities since they were children. My goal, therefore, was to create a new sort of pagan literary fiction that dealt with the issues inherent in being a part of this religious movement without pandering to it, and without turning those characters into supernatural beings of some sort. My upbringing proved to me that pagans were *normal*; I wanted to write stories that didn't make us out to be super-humans or monsters.

Three of the short stories here – *Surrender Dorothy*, *Perfect Love and Perfect Trust*, and *Over the Rainbow* – form a linked cycle, centering on the character of Dottie Howard. Dottie has been the most interesting part of this work to me. I wrote *Surrender Dorothy* as a stand-alone story, and intended for it to stop there. However, something about Dottie – and later Andy Walstead, the other central character in these stories – kept drawing me back to her. Her development is one of the things I'm proudest of in *Family Traditions*.

Finally, a word on the title: a "family tradition," sometimes called a "famtrad," is a specialized term in paganism, meaning that a person inherited his or her paganism from some ancient family source. (The stereotype is one's grandmother, who learned it from her grandmother, who learned it from her grandmother, all the way back to the Stone Age.) I've always thought this idea pretty ridiculous. Wicca *is* a new religion; it was made up in the 20<sup>th</sup>

century by an English civil servant. I don't think that makes it any less "real" or justifiable than any other faith. I don't have any old grandmothers who have passed down their secrets of the Goddess to me. What I do have is the religion of my parents, and the dozens of aunts and uncles in my pagan family, which has been passed on to me. In the end, I think that's the only family tradition that counts.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This would have never come together if Christie Hodgen had not been willing to indulge me when I came to her, timid and uncertain, with the first draft of "Hrafspa." She, along with Michael Pritchett and Robert Stewart, guided me through writing all of the pieces in this collection, and I feel very lucky to have been taught by such talents. I'd also like to thank Loring Leifer and Joe Miller for their help on "The Snake and the Panda." Finally, thanks to Anthony Shiu for joining my thesis committee on such short notice.

A surely incomplete list of others who read, critiqued, and otherwise helped me shape these stories: Craig Workman, Helen Stead, Lindsey Quinn Osman, Liz Tascio, Christo Whelan, Lindsay Waples, Sean Malone, and the incomparable Karla Deel. Thank you all.

Several of the pieces in this collection have previously appeared elsewhere. "Three Encounters with the Gods" appeared in issue 8.2 of *Ashé! The Journal of Experimental Spirituality*; thanks to Sven Davisson for giving me my first publication. "Lughnasadh" and "Hrafspa" both appeared in *Killing the Buddha*. I was so pleased when Nathan Schneider told me "Hrafspa" had been accepted, I literally jumped up and down. Many thanks.

Matt Wilson, the Missouri State Prosecutor based in Kirksville, let me know just what the penalty is for throwing a brick through a window at Truman State University, for which I am very grateful.

Finally, I give the greatest of thanks to my family, to Coven Pleiades, and to my most frequent and favorite reader, Megan Kennedy. My love and my thanks.

DEDICATION and EPIGRAPH

For Sarah, Joe, Alaric, and Megan,  
and all the other children of the Pleiades

*"In my Pantheon, Pan still reigns in his pristine glory, with his ruddy face, his flowing beard,  
and his shaggy body, his pipe and his crook, his nymph Echo, and his chosen daughter  
Iambe; for the great god Pan is not dead, as was rumored. No god ever dies."*

-Henry David Thoreau

*"That's not what's bothering me – it's how to do it. These things must be done delicately, or  
you hurt the spell..."*

-The Wicked Witch of the West

## LUGHNASADH

We five stood in a furnished basement in the suburbs of Saint Louis, next to a plastic Christmas tree and a Frazetta painting. We held hands like we have since we were children, when the adults wouldn't let us talk during ritual for fear that we would invoke the spirits of Bugs Bunny and Luke Skywalker. We snickered as the priestess called the quarters of the Yule ritual by pressing play on a boombox. We told ourselves that this is not how we were supposed to worship the Goddess and the Horned God, that this was something foreign, silly. We pursed our lips and were dissatisfied at our inheritance.

No, our parents' living room was our church. That's where our families would gather on the Full Moon. With our wooden athames and rayon robes, we would follow along as Eric's mother cast a circle around the couches and coffee tables with an iron scimitar, while his father traced pentagrams in salt and water. We would follow the path from the east to the north calling in the spirits of elements: Megan's sister in the south, perhaps, Joe's father in the west. We boys would watch the girls join their mothers and invoke some aspect of the Great Goddess: "I am a violet, poking up from the fallen leaves," Sarah would say. We girls would watch the boys transform into the Great God: "I am the stag galloping through the forest," Alaric would say. We children would sing our hymns: "We All Come from the Goddess," "She Changes Everything She Touches," even "The Lord of the Dance," which our Christian friends would tell us actually belonged to them. We would sit on the hardwood

floor and eat sacred cakes and sip sacred wine, whispering to each other in serious voices:  
"May you never hunger, may you never thirst."

We five were once more than five, were seven or eight. That was before Aimee's parents quit coming, before Bridget became an atheist. We five grew up, moved on, moved away, scattered to work or college or other distractions. We came home for Yule and found something sad and childish. We wondered what was missing, what had been lost.

We sat in the den of the house in the suburbs, chewing on scalloped potatoes and roast beef, and wondered what to do. We longed for the mystery we felt when we were young. We longed for the magic that turned TV rooms into temples. We longed to feel something again at the moment the scimitar carved the mystic from the mundane. We talked, and we frowned, and we decided that next year, we would take the festival of Lughnasadh.

Lughnasadh, Lugh's feast, Lugh of the big hand, the clever wit, the bright-shining sun. Lughnasadh, the first of August, when Lugh sat at the peak of his powers and looked already to his decline and his fall. We found some special romance in this holiday that we could not express; perhaps it was simply the dream of summer, a place far away from the cold we felt on the longest night of the year. We went to the kitchen and told the adults. We read the surprise on their faces.

We spent the first turn of the Wheel of the Year looking through libraries, making reservations, deciding what to cook. We booked a pavilion in Tower Grove Park and forgot to pay the reservation fee. We found another shelter in another park and went there instead, amid grumbles of irresponsibility and inattentiveness by our elders. We wrote the ritual and assigned the parts, and we waited impatiently for August.

The eldest member of our family was waiting for us on Lughnasadh, already sitting in his wheelchair at the picnic tables when we arrived. He told us stories while we put out the tablecloths and plastic forks: stories of the early days, when his coven was just one of many magical projects with names like the Phoenix Temple and the O.T.O. His coven had vanished years ago, but its children, our covens, remained. We smiled, and half-listened, and tried to get ready for the show.

We went over the script once more before our parents arrived. Eric prepared to work the salt and water, as he had watched his father do so many times before. Sarah examined her curved cavalry sword and walked around the edge of the clearing. Her brother Joe was dressed in white with a leafy crown, and we could all see Lugh hiding behind his lean, serious face. Megan lay down in the grass and we surrounded her with wheat, outlining where she would lie when she, Lugh's mother Tailte, would die during the course of our rite. Alaric tapped expectantly on the head of his drum and hummed to himself: *This is the tale of Lugh the Sun King, who lost his life on solstice day...*

We looked up and saw the first of the sedans and minivans parking outside the pavilion. We saw the first of our aunts, uncles, mothers, fathers carry plates of feast-food to the picnic tables. We made our altar on a tree stump, placed the candles, incense, salt, water, knives, the cavalry sword, the wine and bread. We looked through the heat shimmer to the pond at the edge of the woods, and at the sun, and at each other. We marveled at this dream of summer.

We had not found what was missing; we had not found the magic of innocence again, our naïve dreams. Time had rid us of them. Things are never as we remember. But there are

things we can only discover about our parents when we take their places, things to learn about magic that only magicians can know.

We five took deep breaths and joined hands, pleased, at last, with what we had been given. We walked up the hill to the pavilion, and we welcomed our elders to Lughnasadh.

## SURRENDER DOROTHY

They got to the part with the flying monkeys, which meant her calculations had failed. Dottie had hated that part of *The Wizard of Oz* since she was a little girl: there was something about their appearance, the little suits and black feathery wings, that sent chills down her spine. That was why she scheduled for her ride to pick her up just before nine o'clock, which was, according to her itinerary, when the monkeys would first appear.

But this year the Candlemas ritual had ended eighteen minutes early, and it had thrown the entire agenda off. She would have to remember this, for future reference.

While they watched *The Wizard of Oz*, Dottie watched them. Her coven did the same thing every year, more or less. Most festivals took place in somebody's backyard, but about a decade ago people started to bitch about the cold during the winter festivals, and so Yule and Candlemas – and sometimes, to Dottie's annoyance, even Ostara, the spring equinox – got moved inside. This year they gathered in Uncle Geddy's basement for a candlelit ritual to Brigid, the Celtic goddess of fire. The ritual took fifteen minutes. Dottie remembered that they once took far longer, but that had been a long time ago, back when she was a little girl.

Now they sat in the living room, eating their pot-luck feast off of paper plates and passing around a stale joint, which Dottie refused when it was offered to her. They watched *The Wizard of Oz* every year, just like this: her mother, Uncle Geddy, and Peter and Linda Walstead, whom Dottie had avoided over the past year since the debacle with their son, Andy. Andy was not there, perhaps because he knew she would be, for once. More people

were there than that, of course, but too many of those people drifted in and out of the coven for Dottie to pay them much attention. Dottie liked stability, and those were not stable people.

Kate, her mother, looked at her and grinned, waggling her fingers. "Release the flying monkeys! Get me those slippers!" she said in unison with the Wicked Witch of the West. Linda, sitting next to Dottie's mother on Uncle Geddy's clotted-cream couch, cackled. Dottie's mother looked like anything but the Wicked Witch: she was a sweet-faced, slightly heavysset woman with skin the color of fertile earth and black hair edging towards gray. When her daughter didn't change her face from its usual bored disinterest, she rolled her eyes. "You never did make a good flying monkey, Dottie."

"Yeah, well," said Dottie, "we can't all be good at everything."

Dottie didn't get it, and she never had. Her mother had named her for this damned movie – Dorothy Howard, though nobody had called her "Dorothy" since she graduated from high school – and of all of the dozen people sitting around the living room, her mother was undoubtedly the most in love with it. She collected little figures and Christmas ornaments and movie posters – anything with the Wicked Witch of the West on it (and Glinda the Good Witch, to a lesser extent.) Hardly anything with the Scarecrow or the Tin Man, though. Dottie's mother had an eye for the witches.

Sometimes she thought it might have made sense before she was born. Kate told Dottie about the Satanic Panic, back in the 80s, right about the time Kate became a witch; she still had a mimeographed police booklet warning about the dangers of "occult and Satanic activities" that said witches sacrificed children and worshipped Satan. The reference art had

been taken from *Dungeons and Dragons* manuals. Ridiculous? Sort of. But that was how the police had been trained to react to witches. Worse than the police were Dottie's grandparents: country folk who kept a picture of Jesus on the cross next to the baby pictures. Dottie had been told to pretend she was Methodist around her grandpa up until the day he died. Kate had never felt able to be herself in public. Maybe that's why she needed a witch to cackle with in private.

Maybe. But that wasn't Dottie's life. Dottie had been about the only girl in school *without* a copy of *Teen Witch*.

Nobody noticed Dottie leave the living room, having taken all that she could of the damned chimps. Every now and then she heard an eruption of laughter from her elders in the other room as she wandered through Uncle Geddy's house.

Uncle Geddy's house had fascinated her as a child, and even today it still held a kind of wonder: a strange museum, built of children's toys and shadow boxes. As a girl she always wondered why he had so many toys when he didn't have any kids; Uncle Geddy had never even had a real lover as far as she remembered, and Dottie remembered everything. The house was strung with white Christmas lights year round, and the walls were full of bric-a-brac: antique beer cans, a thousand Hot Wheels cars, paintings Uncle Geddy did the semester he went to art school. Dottie's favorite room was the front hallway, covered in black and white photographs and mirrors.

She wandered into the front hall and found herself looking at a woman who had a face from the 40s. That woman smiled up at the ceiling, as though something delightful hung from a chandelier. Next to that monochrome face from was the image of a young woman

with caramel skin and a severe expression. That girl looked down at her watch, her lips mouthing the words "eight fifty-five." She and Dottie looked up simultaneously at the sound of a doorbell.

"I'll get it!" Dottie yelled to the other room. Nobody responded.

She pulled aside the curtain on the front door. A young man with pale skin and dishwater hair was standing outside, his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket. He smiled and meekly waved. Dottie let the curtain down and unlocked the door.

"Did I make it before the monkeys?" he asked.

"No," she said. "Monkeys came on ten minutes ago."

"Oh," he said. "Uh, sorry."

"Not your fault. The schedule was all off." She grabbed her coat out of the hall closet and yelled toward the living room. "Mom! Jeff's here!"

"Okay honey," called her mother from the other room, just as the crowd burst into laughter again; Dottie heard the Cowardly Lion in the background. "Love you!"

They walked out to his car. It was cold, even for February, and around midnight the rain would start coming down as ice. His car was at the end of the long block, a red '88 Toyota. He opened the door for her, like he always insisted on, before sliding into the other side. He patted the St. Christopher medallion on his dashboard and started up the car.

"So, uh. How was the thing?"

"It was fine," said Dottie. "We made candles. I didn't take any with me though."

"Cool." He backed out and started heading for Grand. "So, no sacrificed doves this time or anything?"

She smacked him on the shoulder. "I told you not to joke about that shit. I don't ask you how Jesus tasted this week."

"Okay, okay. Jesus. Sorry."

They took a right onto Grand and started driving around. Dottie looked out her rain streaked window and traced one of the falling drops with her finger.

"They weren't there."

"Your friends?"

"Yeah. Too busy, I guess. At least Lucy called and said she couldn't afford the gas money. Everybody else, though..."

"That's what happens when people move away. Any kind of drive gets to be a long one." He paused for a moment. "I mean, even you only make it to one or two a year, right? And you live here."

"Right..." She scrunched up her face; as they passed by streetlights, it almost looked like her reflection was melting. "Everybody's busy. Everybody's got their excuses." She looked up and saw that they were turning onto Kingshighway. "Where are we going?"

"I thought we might go to Atomic Cowboy. Have some drinks, run into some people?"

All she said was "oh."

"I mean, unless you don't want to."

"No," she said. "That's fine."

\* \* \*

As it turned out, they didn't run into anybody they knew at Atomic Cowboy, a bar that neither of them exactly liked but found themselves going to anyway. She sat in a booth, poking at a Shirley Temple with her straw and listening to the continuous thump of bad dance music. Jeff was out on the patio having a cigarette.

Dottie thought Jeff was a sort of Atomic Cowboy himself. He was cute, to be sure. Sweet, usually. He always held open the car door, always pulled out her chair. He made her an okay lasagna once. And yet...

Well, she didn't exactly like him, but she kept coming back.

Dottie watched the rest of the bar as she toyed with her drink. She recognized a few people. She went to high school with one of them, a chubby girl with frizzy red hair, but she was nobody Dottie had ever been close to. The redhead was there with two friends, a blonde and a tall man wearing a powder blue jacket that no white guy could have ever pulled off. Powder Blue was definitely hitting on the redhead, who seemed to appreciate the attention; meanwhile, the blonde seemed about ready to keel over after downing a shot of something brown.

The clock on the wall said ten-thirty. Dorothy had long since gone back to Kansas by now. The witch was melted and the Wizard had left her behind, and three clicks of her heels sent Dorothy from fabulous Technicolor Emerald City back to her aunt's grayscale farm, the place where, supposedly, she had always wanted to be.

The music drifted from one thumping bass track to another, just as vapid and nameless. Dottie stirred the ice around in her glass. Maybe things were different in the 1939, but it seemed like everybody she knew had opted to stay in Oz.

She was in the middle of finally drinking the Shirley Temple when the blonde fell into her booth and sloshed a glass full of kaluha onto Dottie's pants. Dottie shrieked and jumped up. The blonde collapsed to the floor, but her expression barely registered any sensation..

"What the fuck was that?" Dottie yelled, ostensibly at the woman at her feet but really to the whole establishment.

"I'm sorry," stammered the blonde girl, wearing a shiny teal shirt, now wet. "I fell."

"Yeah, I saw that. Jesus fucking Christ, I hate drunks." Without another word Dottie stepped over the blonde, who was still trying to get to her feet, and walked out to the patio. If Redhead and Powder Blue noticed the spectacle, they didn't say anything about it.

Jeff was standing near a pitiful little space heater with four other guys. He turned and looked at her with an oblivious grin. "Hey babe. What's going on?"

"Let's get out of here. The music's crap tonight and some drunk bitch just poured a gallon of kaluha on me."

"What? But we've only been here for a little while." He stepped away from the smoking crowd. "Here, let me get you some towels and--"

"No. Let's go." She sighed. "I hate this place."

"Then why didn't you say that?"

She didn't answer. He rolled his eyes and stamped out the remainder of his cigarette.

"Fine. I'll go settle the tab."

Dottie crossed her arms across her breast and stood as close to the space heater as possible. The place smelled like an ashtray, and the space heater barely put out enough

warmth to make the front of her legs feel warmer than the back. Certainly it wasn't going to dry off the liquor on her crotch.

Candlemas. The night of "fire in the belly." She almost wanted to laugh.

\* \* \*

They didn't talk as they left the bar. Dottie drove, even though Jeff had only had two beers and thought he was perfectly fine to get them home. They got out onto Manchester and drove for a while, passing through south city in silence. The car reeked of sickly-sweet alcohol.

"Okay," he said. "So what do we do now?"

"Let's just hang out at your place for a while," she said. "I don't really feel like being around people tonight."

"Am I not a person?"

"You know what I mean."

Jeff lived in one of the apartments in a four family flat on Utah Street, a brick building that used to belong to cantankerous old man down the street. The old man sold it in the housing boom to renovators who weren't quick enough about turning it over, who ended up selling it to another old man to rent out. Jeff lived there because it was cheap, and because there was a pretty good pretzel shop nearby.

They went up to his apartment and crashed onto his second-hand couch. Jeff automatically reached for the remote and clicked on the television. Reruns of South Park. He kept the volume low.

"Are you feeling okay?" he asked. "I'm sorry about that stuff at the bar..."

"Yeah, I'm sorry for making a fuss. I just..." She stood up. "I've got to change into some other pants. This smell is making me nauseous."

"You can borrow some of my sweats if you want."

Dottie grabbed a pair of green sweatpants from his dresser and went in the bathroom to change. She caught sight of herself in his bathroom mirror as she slipped her legs out of the jeans. Her solemn face looked back at her from the glass, nothing between them but a hairline crack and her boyfriend's rosary hanging from a peg.

She could hear the freezing rain outside, tapping against the bathroom window. It was February, and it was cold and dark, and for all the talk about the seeds of rebirth being planted on Candlemas night, she found herself doubting the whole affair.

It made sense when she was nine, the first year they explained anything to her. Candlemas was the sabbat where the Sun God was within the womb of the Mother Goddess. It was the fire festival. It was Brigid's feast. It was the sabbat where Lucy had stolen her brother Andy's Power Ranger. She almost smiled when she thought of that. She remembered the look of horror that only a seven year old boy can produce; in some ways she remembered it better than the face of the boy in the living room.

Candlemas-- all the sabbats, really-- had always been a time when she got to see old friends, others who had grown up with crazy pagan parents who burst into laughter at the words "I'll get you, my pretty!", parents who spent Monday nights doing "Thelemic ritual magick", parents who told them they weren't allowed to mention anything about their religion because their minds were still stuck in 1982. And now Candlemas had passed, and

they all seemed to have abandoned it: Andy, Lou, Lucy. Even herself. The children had all grown up and away, leaving their parents to go through the motions alone.

So what did it mean? What did it matter?

Dottie slipped on Jeff's sweatpants. They were far too big for her, but they would do. She folded up her jeans and sat them on top of the toilet. Jeff had turned the lights out in the living room and was watching some old black and white movie. She recognized Cary Grant, but not the female lead.

She sat down next to him and stared blankly at the television. He nudged her. In the dark, he looked like he might have been cast in monochrome as well: there was nothing but shadow to define his face.

"Hey. I, uh. I didn't know how exactly you do this, but I got you something."

"Huh?"

"For Candlemas. I got you a present."

"You don't really give gifts on Candle--"

He put his finger to her lips gently, and with his other hand, he produced a long candle in a brass candle holder. The candle was a dark, sensual red that stood out from everything else in the room, and it had a stark white wick.

She took it from him and looked it over, slowly. She couldn't think of anything she really needed another candle for at the moment. Her apartment – really her room in her mother's basement – was full of other candles, given as equally meaningless gifts. And, as she had attempted to say, Candlemas was not a gifting holiday in the first place.

"Thank you," she said. "It's beautiful."

He wrapped his arm around her. "Happy Candlemas."

They watched Cary Grant for a while, but it didn't take long before she heard soft snores. Her watch said it was 12:45. She turned off the television and sat the candle on the coffee table. After a moment, she slipped out of his arms and walked over to the window. She opened it up and leaned out to listen to the tinkling sounds of falling ice.

Dottie doubted she would be asking this particular boy for a ride home from Candlemas next year. She wondered if he really thought she was summoning demons or sacrificing doves. She wondered sometimes if he thought she was going to hell, or, maybe more to the point, if he was okay with that.

It didn't matter now. Dottie looked back at her candle on the coffee table with a weak smile, turned her eyes to the frozen street below her, and tried her best to forget.

## THREE ENCOUNTERS WITH THE GODS

### 1

I did not know that place. Well, no, that's a lie: of course I knew that place. I had walked down that cracked and broken sidewalk every day of my life, had swung high on that swing set, had climbed that old metal ladder up to the treehouse. Of course I knew that place. It was my front yard. But I did not know it that night, when I was twelve.

The sun and the moon stood together in the treehouse, holding hands as they never had and never would in the waking world. In the shadows of the tree stood the round figure of the earth mother, her skin the color of mud, one great breast draped over her oak brown robe. A few feet from the front porch stood two men. One was a graying man with grapes in his hair, with a face that looked somber even when he smiled. He was talking to a man with a ferryman's countenance who carried a staff and a hooded cloak.

On the other side of the evergreen tree, where earlier that summer a horse-trough swimming pool stood until we got rid of it, were three women. One of them was young and thin and loud, her hair long and black, and one was older, with a sweet face and a cruel glint in her eyes. Between them was the mother. She was my mother, yes. But she was also everybody's mother.

This was Samhain, the day when the veil between the worlds was thin. Halloween night, the first night of the witches' New Year, and the most holy day of our calendar. My parents said they wanted to do something different that year, instead of a normal ritual. They

had accomplished that; somehow they had changed a walkway surrounded by beds of dead peonies and toys abandoned to the wilds into something out of myth. They had changed it into a place where the gods were waiting for us.

We kids-- Sarah, myself, Joe, and Megan-- stood in the doorway of my parents' squat house. The gatekeeper called Sarah forward. I watched her walk up to the treehouse, the long red flame of her hair spilling behind her. Her brother Joe looked over my shoulder at the yard.

"Hey... I see your mom, and I see my parents. But where's your dad?"

I looked around. He wasn't Dionysus; that was Web. And I was pretty sure the Sun and Moon were the Kreynests. Joe was right. My dad wasn't out there. "I don't know. Maybe he's up between the trees." I pointed towards the front of the yard. "He probably didn't bring a light."

Sarah moved on from the treehouse and the gatekeeper called for me. I walked past the brush pile that we kept for birds to hide in and came to the treehouse. I listened to the Sun and Moon, who were also Dan and Becky Kreynest wearing papier-mâché masks. I only half-understood what they had to say; I was busy being disturbed by the earth goddess. When I left, Sarah had already passed through the other half of the yard and made her way to the three women.

The yard seemed denser than it used to be; in the dark I stumbled across rocks I was sure were not there in the daylight, and pushed my way past branches that I was certain were supposed to be much higher. I got to the front gate and felt a little disappointed: there were no other stations in this part of the yard, it seemed. I turned around and started walking

through the trees to the Maiden, Mother and Crone. But then I saw a small redness of embers glowing on the other side of branches, and I pushed my way through, and I saw him.

He was smoking a cigar, a big brown one, in long and deliberate drags, and he let the smoke out through his nostrils and his mouth. He was shirtless, and his belly was full and round and solid. His goat's legs were shaggy, tobacco-brown. His beard was full and his eyes were bright. His feet were hidden by the grass I had forgotten to cut, and so I could not tell whether or not they were hooves, but atop his head were two horns, shiny and black.

He looked an awful lot like my father, but he was not my father, not entirely, not then.

"Pan?" I asked, quietly.

"Live, love, and laugh while you may, for darkness comes at the end of the day," he said, and smiled, and tapped the ash from his cigar. "The god and the goddess mark your way."

I must have left him, then, though I do not recall how I came to be before the goddesses, who stood whispering beneath the evergreen and the dogwood. It was not long before I came back to the circle where Sarah was waiting, and where Joe and Megan would soon join us. We did not talk about it, if for no other reason than because Dionysus was there and it seemed impolite to talk about other gods in front of him.

Later that night, while we were eating feast, Joe turned to me and grinned. "Your dad was really cool. I think I liked his best."

I swallowed my cut of roast beef and nodded, unwilling to say that I wasn't sure that had been my dad.

The next day, as I was mowing the grass, I found a pair of blue jeans on the lawn. They had fur sewn onto the front of them. But those pants were muddy, and ancient, and something I was sure no human being had ever worn.

2

This story does not end well. As evidence of just how badly it ends up, keep this in mind: it ends in a White Castle. Nothing good ever came out of a White Castle. Plus, the encounter in the White Castle happens on a Thanksgiving, which only makes it worse. But the story itself begins a month before that. It was mid-October, my sophomore year of college. It was two in the morning, and I was walking.

Where was I walking to? Out. Away. I didn't particularly care where I ended up. I just needed to get out of Centennial Hall. It didn't take long for all the lights on Franklin Street to run out, leaving me alone in the dark walking through sleepy Kirksville. There were no lights on in any of the houses, except for the occasional flicker of a television. It was quiet, and I was alone, and I guessed that was what I wanted.

Stupid girl.

She had been sitting outside her dorm room, across the hall from mine, next to the trash cans and recycling bins. Her roommate said she had been there for half an hour, alternating between calling my name and stopping the roommate from going to get me. Eventually her roommate knocked on my door anyway.

Her name was Annie. I guess she was my girlfriend, then. She was drunker than I had ever seen her before, bleary and only half-conscious.

"I don't want you to see me this way," she said. Her brown hair was tied back with a red bandana, and her thick eyeglasses were smeared with something I couldn't identify.

"Come on," I said, and tried to pull her up. "Let's go to your room so you can sleep this off."

"I don't wanna move," she mumbled. "I don't wanna move, because you're ashamed of me."

That was true, but I've still never made out how that translated into "that means you want me to keep sitting by this trash can."

I would say that we argued for half an hour or so, but she did all the arguing herself. Sometimes her head would bob back and forth: she faced left and smiled, happy I was with her. Then she'd face right and wish I would go away. I just sat and wished my girlfriend weren't an alcoholic.

Eventually I said to hell with it and got my coat and walked out of Centennial Hall and into the dark. She gave me a weak, pitiful look, and then she slumped back into the garbage bags.

Franklin Street was a main road in Kirksville, one of the boundary markers for the town square and the college campus. It only took half an hour of walking for the road to trickle down to a line of small houses, and eventually, to an ignominious dead end in a patch of trees. There was a little clearing in front of the trees, and I stopped there. I thought about turning around to head home, but then I thought about Annie still muttering in the trash bags. I decided to stargaze instead.

There must have been thousands of stars visible, more than I had ever been able to see as a kid in Saint Louis – the city lights always blotted out the stars. When I was a kid I was sure I was going to be an astronomer when I grew up. Once I won an award for a speech about astronomy, when I was nine.

Now I was twenty. I tried to look for constellations, but I barely managed to spot the Big Dipper.

Franklin Street ended atop a hill, and just to the right of the trees was an open space where I could look down onto Baltimore, the other main road. The strip malls and Pizza Huts and tire shops stretched out beneath me, and far off in the distance I could make out the bright white letters of Wal-Mart. I felt my obligatory disenchantment and got ready to turn away, but over that tacky tableau I spied something in the sky I recognized.

The three stars of Orion's Belt hung in the sky, winter landmarks that stood out even in the middle of a city. My speech had been about Orion; I had read this book that claimed the pyramids in Egypt were built to be a reflection of the constellation on Earth, and they conceived of the constellation as their god Osiris.

Looking up at the sky over Kirksville, I could understand why they might have felt that way. I don't know how to describe it, except that I knew that, hanging somewhere above Woody's Tire and Auto, was Osiris. I don't want you to think that I saw a mummy or a pharaoh next to me; no, it was just stars. But I saw them differently than I had before and have since. In that moment I felt like I was standing before a wise king, and he was dispensing his wisdom if I would just listen.

*We lived by the Nile, he said. We lived by its ebb and tide. The Nile would flood, and it would recede; we would plant and we would eat, and that was how we lived for thousands of years. The river rises, and the river falls, and the river rises again; it all comes back around, it always all comes back around.*

I got back to the dormitory at three in the morning, and was relieved to see that Annie had managed to get back to her room. We didn't talk much for the next few weeks. I pretended that I had a lot of papers to write. She pretended to care about school. Eventually we went home for Thanksgiving, and that was when I got the call.

"My mom doesn't have any room for me this year," she said. I heard the sounds of highway traffic in the background. "My aunt lost her house and now she's staying with them and it's all a mess..."

"You could always come eat Thanksgiving at my parents' house," I said. "I'd love it if you would."

"No, you wouldn't," she said as a truck horn blared past. "You left me drunk in a pile of trash bags, for Christ's sake. You want me to believe you want me to be with your family? Right. I'm sure there's a White Castle open."

She hung up before I could protest.

I thought Osiris had been talking about her and me, that our relationship could be saved: some kind of river metaphor, love ebbing and flowing like the tide. It had hit a low point, but it would come back again. It would always come back around.

I only spoke to Annie once after that: a hollow little "congratulations" at graduation. In retrospect, I think Osiris must have been talking about something else.

I couldn't tell you why I decided to go to the midnight mass that Christmas Eve. Curiosity, I guess. The only service I had ever been to before that was at a loosely Baptist church in Kirksville, where the sermon was accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation and the preacher played electric guitar.

Saint Francis de Sales, by contrast, was a tall Gothic church a few blocks from my parents' house in Saint Louis. Saint Francis loomed over that south side neighborhood, built of brown bricks and green copper gutters and tall, ominous doors. On the central steeple there was an old brass clock face that was so ubiquitous to my childhood that I had never bothered to see if it actually kept time, or if it was just a broken reminder of another era in the church's life.

I was wearing a shirt and tie, but looking around the congregation, I wished I had thought to wear a suit. I walked down the red carpet looking for a pew. I sat down not far from an elderly woman and her husband, who took no notice of me. A moment later two teenage boys came down the aisle and stopped to cross themselves before took their seats. One of them gave me a dirty look. I was supposed to kneel before I entered the pew? Why had I never heard of that before?

*It's because you aren't Catholic, I thought to myself. Because you aren't Catholic and they know it.*

Near the massive altar sat a small army of altar boys and priests. Sometimes they got up to cross the room for no obvious reason. The front of the church was dominated by two

things: one was the never-ending cascade of pipes to the organ, like a Jacob's ladder unto itself. The other was a statue of a crucified Jesus, which I remember being thirty feet tall. I do not remember being able to see Christ's face; it was shrouded in darkness, and no feeling radiated from that statue except for suffering too personal to be expressed.

I did what my Catholic friends told me to do: I got up when other people got up, I knelt when they knelt, and I sat when they sat. The cushions in front of the pews were painful to kneel on, and at one point in the service we kneeled for an incredible length of time: it seemed like hours. All throughout I looked around, hoping nobody noticed me, hoping I didn't stick out.

I didn't recognize anyone in the crowd. Saint Francis served the neighborhood I had lived in my whole life, and I didn't know anybody there. How could that be?

I was frightened. Catholicism can be an intimidating religion—there's so much ritual, so much ceremony, so much left unexplained. This service was primarily in Latin, since it was the Christmas Eve mass. That had been part of the appeal for me, but it turned out to just be confusing and scary.

*Calm down. It's just a church service. These people are just trying to talk to their god in their way. Your own religion would be confusing and intimidating too, to someone who knew nothing about it.*

Good thoughts, but not useful ones. I was still overwhelmed. The altar boys kept going back and forth, back and forth, until I couldn't keep track of anything that might have cued them to move. Now the priest spoke in English, and I could barely understand his accent...

I felt beneath my tie for the small silver hammer I wore around my neck, and I focused on it, tried to remember to breathe. *They are just talking to their god. No different than you talking to Thor...*

That was when I felt the hand on my shoulder.

There had been an open seat between me and the elderly lady in the pew. It wasn't empty now. Or — well, yes. It was still empty. But somebody sat there anyway, a big man with a long, braided beard and tousled red hair. The man wore a shaggy blue tunic, the kind that Germanic tribes used to wear in ancient times, and a fur cloak that might have been made of wolfskin. He had a hammer next to him on the pew.

He did not look at me. He watched the priest and the altar boys, and sat silent, like a stone.

Eventually I turned and did the same. I kept kneeling and standing and sitting with the rest; he did not. He watched with a look that called the ceremony neither wrong nor right, and kept his big, warm hand affixed to my shoulder.

I left just after the priest announced the time for communion. My Catholic friends had made it clear that, no matter what, I was not supposed to receive communion. It was snowing when he and I left through the side door I had entered alone. We walked together out to my car. I never stopped to see whether there was only one set of footprints.

I talked for a while. I thanked him. I wondered out loud whether I was hallucinating. I asked him why *they* had won, how their confusing and terrifying religion had managed to wipe his kind out.

He didn't answer, not in words. Thor is a listener, not an advisor. But he answered the last question in the best and simplest way possible: he was *there*. If he was there, he could not be completely gone.

I exhaled, quietly and slowly, as we reached my car. It was almost two in the morning and I was drained. I looked into Thor's eyes, which were a clear and piercing blue, and I looked past him, through him, at the string of Catholics coming out of their church. They were both there at once, both, in their own ways, true.

I didn't offer him a ride. It wasn't as though he would have needed it. In any case, I don't think the gods have as yet gotten used to cars.

## THE THOR FISH

Austin ran his thumb across the glossy surface of the sticker. It was five inches by seven and showed the outline of a fish, black ink on white paper. The fish wore a Viking helmet and had a warhammer. Inscribed inside the fish was the word THOR.

"Where the hell did you find this?"

He and his brother Tommy sat on the tailgate of the pickup truck, once Tommy's, now Austin's. Tommy slung his leg over the tailgate and pulled a bottle of beer from the Styrofoam cooler. "There's this website that has all kinds of weird fish stickers. Jesus fish, of course, but they had Thor fish, Darwin fish, Flying Spaghetti Monster fish. I even saw a Vishnu fish with eight fins. I thought about getting that one for dad." Tommy opened up his beer with his keychain and took a drink. "Anyway, I thought you needed something to remember me by, and you've been getting into all that Norse stuff recently..."

"Well, thanks," said Austin. "It's... Special." He set the sticker aside and picked up a long stick to poke the fire outside. The flames sent up a curtain of sparks that died out in an instant. Slivers of firelight broadened across Tommy's lanky body and revealed the mud on his jeans, the twigs and grass camouflage of his sweater, his John Deere hat. Tommy had a skeletal quality, like a heroin addict. He hadn't always been so thin, but he shrank down a lot during high school. Austin suspected he might have been into crystal meth for a while, but he never asked.

Autumn rain fell on the truck camper. It punctuated the otherwise quiet glen, but wasn't heavy enough to smother the fire.

"What are you looking at?" Austin asked.

"Just the island. Taking in one last look." Tommy scratched himself and reached for the cigarettes in his back pocket. "I remember once we came out here, when you were real little. About Lammas time, must have been. Place was fucking crawling with baby toads. Could not take a step without upsetting about a dozen of the little bastards." He lit his cigarette with a blue lighter. "You loved 'em. We were halfway home when mom realized you'd stuffed your pockets with them."

Austin was pretty sure that story was bullshit. Any story where Tommy described him as "real little" had to be taken as apocryphal, considering Tommy was all of two and a half years older. But Tommy had always been a natural huckster, and wouldn't tell a story straight if he knew the truth anyway.

"I bet you'll miss it," said Austin.

"Of course I'll fucking miss it. I'm gonna be in basic for four months. By the end I'll be pining for shithole Arnold, much less Kaskasi Island."

Austin nodded and got a beer out of the cooler. Technically Austin wasn't supposed to be drinking for another two years, but this was his brother's last night in town and sharing beers was more brotherly than sharing Pepsi. The taste of the wheat ale was almost entirely in exhaling.

"We should have held a festival here," Austin said. "This'd be a good place for one."

"Which one, you think?"

Austin breathed, tasted wood-smoke and rain. "Beltaine would be nice. The island's pretty in the spring. We could go down to where grandma's place was, before the flood..."

Tommy nodded. "Maypole would look nice out there, a little ways from the pond. But who knows when the grass down there was cut last. The best part of this place is that there aren't any people around anymore, but... Well, nobody's around to keep the place civilized."

"I thought you'd like that."

"Oh yeah, for sure," said Tommy, pointing at his brother with the beer bottle. "Hell, if it were up to me, I'd say we do it skyclad and pray for chiggers. But most people ain't me."

"Heh. Yeah, and thank the gods for that, huh?" They chuckled. "I guess that's something to do when you come home."

They watched the fire for a moment and didn't talk.

"Something to think about, for sure," said Tommy.

"You figured out anything about the sabbats? What are you going to do about that in the army?"

"Eh. I'll just be one of them solitary practitioners for a couple of years." Tommy grinned. "Not going to make a big deal, but I don't think they'll care all that much. World's come a pretty long way, bro. Wicca's on the Approved List of Religions these days. Shit, servicemen can get a pentagram on their tombstones."

Austin frowned. "Don't talk about tombstones."

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Jesus, you're just like mom, thinking every Army post is in the trenches. I'm gonna be a quartermaster. It's probably safer than working for UPS." He

took another drink of his beer. "I'm just saying that we made the Approved List. That's pretty damn mainstream. Even if the pentagram isn't nearly as cool as the Atheist symbol."

"Atheists get a symbol?"

"Yeah, it's like Doctor Manhattan or something. This little atom cloud with a great big A in the middle. You see it and you're like, 'he didn't just give his life for his country, he gave his life *for science!*'" He sounded like a Flash Gordon villain.

"That doesn't make sense. You shouldn't get a symbol for *refusing* to believe in anything. Atheism's not a religion!"

"I guess they didn't just want a blank space where everyone else got a cross or a Star of David or whatever. Can you blame them? People get invested in their symbols." Tommy looked at his watch. "Jesus, it's one in the morning."

Austin nodded. "Yeah. You got a long day tomorrow."

"Mhmm. And so've you. Don't forget, you get to drive my ass to the airport."

Tommy crawled up towards the cab of the truck and pulled out a sleeping bag. "I was kinda hoping to sleep outside, but that wouldn't be such a great idea with the rain..."

"You're going to be spending plenty of time sleeping on the ground soon enough."

"Quartermaster, little brother," he said. "I'll do fine braving those dangerous warehouses." Tommy crawled into the sleeping bag and killed his beer. "Oh well. I lost track of the number of nights I slept in the bed of this truck. I guess one more's appropriate."

Austin kept sitting on the tailgate. He occasionally poked at the fire, until he decided it wasn't worth the effort anymore. He got up and paced around their little camp, which was a few minutes away from the old family farm that had been destroyed in the flood of '93.

Kaskaski Island always made him think of his grandmother, and the line of ancestors – in reality probably only a handful of generations, but in his mind, a chain with countless links – that used to live here. They were all gone, now: dead or moved away, escaping the flood or the isolation or the poverty. His family and almost everyone else had fled, had given the Island back to the Mississippi.

When Austin walked around Kaskasia, he felt like he was walking in the footsteps of his ancestors, like the whole Merseberg family was beside him. He could feel the Goddess – Freyja, as he was getting used to calling her – around him, in the glens and the fields, could see her in the lilies grown in roadside ditches. It seemed like a good place for goddesses: grandmother country.

He flicked on his flashlight and followed the muddy trail out of the glen through the sparse woods. Austin couldn't name any of the trees, much less the grasses or flowers. Tommy still had his roots in the land, somehow: he was a deer-hunter, a farm-hand, a backwoods botanist. Austin was just a city mouse.

The trail ran out at a creek, one of the dozens of Mississippi arteries that cut through the Island. On either bank stood tall grasses and duckweed. Austin shined his flashlight on the water and watched rain ripple outward as it hit the surface. He couldn't help but smile: it reminded him of a line in his coven's esbats. "Let this circle be as a pool of water," Aunt Sophie would say as she walked around the ritual circle with a sword in her hand. "Let its love radiate outward in ever-widening circles."

Yes, this place felt right. Grandmother Country.

He turned around, ready to go back to the truck, when something moved at his feet. He swung the light down to see what it was, and then grinned. The toad bleated at him and hopped away.

Austin got back to the truck and put the fire out with dirt and sand. The rain was starting to fall harder, and his skin was wet to the touch. He reached for his beer and finished it, then climbed into the truck. He nearly stepped on the Thor Fish with his muddy boots, but he saw it and picked it up.

He closed up the tailgate and ran his hand over the metal: still dry. He peeled the sticker off the paper and smoothed it across the metal, just above the Chevrolet logo. He noticed, too late, that it was a little cocked, but he kind of liked that; it added whimsy. He closed the back window behind him.

Tommy stirred as Austin crawled in.

"Sorry Tom. I was trying not to wake you."

"Don't worry about it," said his brother in a lazy voice. "Was barely asleep anyway."

"Well, go back to sleep."

"Right-o."

The brothers laid in the truck for a moment, listening to the rain patter against the metal roof.

"You're gonna take good care of my truck, aren't you?" asked Tommy.

"It's my truck now," said Austin. He rolled over to face the windows. "And yeah. Of course I will."

\* \* \*

Six months had passed since Tommy left for Fort Leonard Wood, and Austin felt like he had spent every minute of them in this drive-thru lane.

He'd been at a mediocre party with other hipster college students. Most of them he didn't know, and those he did know he didn't care much for. He liked their music – one of these parties had introduced him to Television and the Talking Heads – but he hated the drunken elitists that came to them. When he heard a gin-sloshed partygoer yell that he thought Stevie Ray Vaughn deserved to die in a plane crash, he knew it was time to go..

When he left the party, around 2 A.M., Austin realized he hadn't had anything to eat but a handful of stale Doritos in nine hours. That had brought him to this McDonald's in Bella Villa, one of Saint Louis's worst named suburbs, where the wait had lasted longer than many world governments.

He drummed his fingers against the steering wheel. There wasn't even a line — there had only been one other vehicle there. It took ten minutes for them to finally send that car up to the pay window. Austin pulled up to the speaker and waited..

It took two minutes for the speaker to crackle. "*WelcometoMcDonald'scanyouhold?*"

"Yeah," mumbled Austin. "It'll be a big change of plans." He turned to the Thor's Hammer hanging from his windshield and rolled his eyes. "It's like fighting off a pack of ettins sometimes."

He leaned back in his seat and turned the radio on: some modern rock, the kind where all the guitars are tuned like basses and the singer practices by swallowing sand. He wished they were playing Zeppelin.

A truck pulled into the drive-thru behind him. Austin considered yelling back to the poor bastard that he'd be better off going somewhere else. Austin was invested now, but that guy, he could still get out.

Austin hummed along with the bad music and looked over the menu for an eleventh time, even though he was going to get the same Big Mac he always got. Then he looked back at the other truck and saw it had turned on its high beams.

"Hey," called a voice: it was bassy, and it warbled. The driver sounded a little drunk. Austin squinted against the bright headlights and saw a man leaning out of the driver's side window. He couldn't make out much: an older guy wearing glasses and a dark baseball cap.

"Hey!" the driver called, again.

Austin ignored him and kept his attention on the speaker, wondering when he would get to order his damn Big Mac.

"Your sticker is making fun of my Lord," said the man.

Austin blinked. Sticker?

"What sticker?"

"You know sticker I mean. Your fish. Your fish is making fun of my Lord."

Austin muttered to himself. "Oh, great. A fundie." He shook his head and kept staring at the grille of the speaker, as if the attendant's voice would dispel the other truck. His cab got brighter: the other truck kept pulling up. Then the cab went dark again as the other truck's headlights fell beneath the edge of his tailgate. Their bumpers met with a lurch.

"Did you hear me?" called the man, his voice now colored with anger.

"No, sir!" Austin called back. He hoped the deferential tone would make the guy back off.

Austin got a better look at him now: he had a gray mustache, looked to be about in his mid-fifties. He was wearing a Cardinals sweatshirt. "You better get out of your truck and tear that sticker off, right now." He said it in the same tone a policeman uses to tell somebody to get out of a car. "You better tear it off right now."

"I think you ought to back off my truck."

"I'm only going to say this one more time. Your sticker is making fun of my Lord, and I don't appreciate that. You might think it's funny, but you don't treat God that way. You get out of your truck and you tear that sticker off, right now."

Austin was now convinced the drive-thru attendant was intentionally staying quiet, hoping that the argument would finish without him. Austin stuck his head out the window. "It's my sticker, and I'm not tearing it off. You should back off my goddamn truck."

The other truck backed off from his bumper, and Austin reached for the gearshift.

"A Big Mac is completely not worth this," he said, and then jerked forward as the other truck slammed into his bumper. Only his seatbelt kept him from cracking his head on the steering wheel. "What the fuck?" The other truck backed up again, and before any other thought crossed Austin's mind he dropped the truck into drive and drove over the concrete barrier dividing the drive-thru from the parking lot. He drove to the exit and turned right without even looking, heading toward I-55.

He looked at his rearview mirror and saw high-beams. "You've got to be fucking with me..."

The radio had moved on to some rock/rap hybrid that Austin hated, but he left it on. Music somehow felt necessary, even reassuring. Silence would mean desperation, and Austin wasn't comfortable with desperation. He spent most of his time around stoner pagans and passive-aggressive hipsters: he did not get into confrontations often. He barreled through Bella Villa, but the truck kept pace; occasionally it revved its engines and pulled closer, but Austin kept ahead. He absently rolled up his window before he thought to call for help.

"Phone. Call the police. Right, right..." He fumbled around in pockets for the little plastic rectangle, but only found his wallet. "Come on, come on, where is it?" He opened the glove compartment, but there was nothing there but old oil change receipts and he knew it. He heard the rough sound of the shoulder just in time to swerve back to the lane. "Would pick tonight to forget my goddamn phone, wouldn't I?"

His eyes never got used to the high beams: every time he looked back he was blinded. Every now and again the lights would suddenly fade away, which meant the truck had dipped close enough to hide behind the tailgate. Every time it happened Austin had to fight the strange urge to slam on the brakes and let the truck slam into him: out of fear, perhaps, or out of spite, or out of a simple longing to get it over with.

But this was Tom's truck, the one he'd bought on his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday for five hundred dollars and fixed up over the summer in 2004. This was the truck they had loaded up when Tom went away for college, the truck they had unloaded that December when Tommy came home and said he just wasn't a college kind of guy. This was the truck Austin had borrowed to lose his virginity in. This was the truck they'd gone down to the Island in last fall for Tommy's last night in the world. This was the truck Austin had put an Army bumper sticker

on, just below the Thor Fish, after Tommy sent word that he'd been assigned to the infantry after all.

Austin never touched the brakes.

Austin needed to get to a payphone, or a gas station—or, hell, another McDonald's. The northbound highway was more or less desolate until it got downtown. The highway raced through industrial wastelands, huge white towers full of lights that belched steam. There weren't many exits, and what few there were didn't lead to public places. It took ten minutes of 80 mile-an-hour driving to find an exit that advertised a Denny's.

Austin was convinced the other truck would hit him as he slowed down to the exit. He ran the stop sign at the bottom of the ramp and turned left toward the restaurant. The bright yellow sign glared at the dark street. There wasn't much of a crowd inside, but the lights were on and there were cars in the lot. Austin silently promised he would eat breakfast here every week from now on if he got through this.

Austin pulled into a parking space, and the other truck came in directly to his left. It was the first time he had actually gotten a look at the vehicle itself, a faded green Ford with posts in the back instead of a camper. Austin put his truck into park and without thinking turned the engine off. He watched the man in the other vehicle. The man's baseball cap clearly read GOD BLESS AMERICA. He seemed to be chewing tobacco.

They stared at each other for an uncomfortable amount of time. Austin considered dropping the truck back into drive and trying to speed out, but he was sure that the man was just keeping his foot on the brake, ready to pull out and follow him as soon as he was given the opportunity. Austin shot a glance inside, but nobody looked at them. He honked his horn

twice, hoping to catch somebody's attention, but the only person who looked up was a teenage Asian girl, who just rolled her eyes.

The man said something that Austin interpreted as "roll your window down," but Austin shook his head. The man said it again, but Austin still declined. The man sighed and reached down to his floorboard, and Austin was certain that this man had a pistol in his car and that he was going to die in the parking lot of a Denny's. Something about that was almost funny; nobody should ever have to die outside a Denny's. The man took whatever it was in hand and opened his door.

As soon as the man cleared the doorway Austin ran for the door. He crashed into the lobby of the Denny's and started yelling. "Somebody help me, there's a man out there with a gun and he—"

A waiter, a Hispanic guy with short, shiny hair and a round face, ran over to him. "Woah, woah, slow down, man. What's going on?"

"That truck—" He pointed outside. The man was nowhere to be seen. "The guy in that truck has been following me since Bella Villa. I think he's got a gun or something."

The waiter looked out the window and mumbled 'fuck' underneath his breath. "Uh. Okay. You just get down and stay down, man – let me get my manager, we'll call the cops. It'll be okay." The waiter ran off, leaving Austin alone in the waiting area. The Asian girl and the boy sitting with her both stared at him, though he couldn't tell if it was in disgust or disbelief.

Austin kept watching the trucks, wondering where the man had gone. The light honky-tonk rhythms coming from the Denny's speakers added an entirely uncomfortable counterpoint to the situation.

The man finally came around the side of Tom's truck. In his right hand was a razorblade; his other fist was balled up. He walked up to the window of the Denny's, staring directly at Austin. He rapped on the pane with his balled up fist, and then opened it. Strips of something white fluttered out of his hand toward the ground. Then the man went, got in his truck, and pulled away.

Austin ran outside and looked at the pile of paper shavings on the ground. Most of them were just glossy strips of white and black, but he found one that still said "OR." Austin started to walk around to look at the tailgate when the man's truck pulled back into Denny's and double-parked right in front of him. The passenger's side window was rolled down.

"It isn't funny," said the man. "I know you think it is, but it isn't. Kids like you, you don't give a shit for anything. You make fun of Jesus, you make fun of soldiers dying for your worthless ass halfway around the planet—"

"What do you mean, I make fun of soldiers? I didn't—"

"Don't give me that," said the man. "You'll never admit to believing in anything. You put shit on your cars to mock it. I got a son in Afghanistan right now, you little asshole, and you just—"

"I put it there because my brother's in Iraq!"

The man looked at Austin for a long time. "Yeah," said the man, at last. "I'm sure of that. I'm sure you do. You goddamned monster."

Austin stared at him dumbfounded. The man, at last, looked forward, dropped the truck into drive, and drove away.

Once the truck was gone, Austin heard the door of the Denny's open. "Sir? Sir, are you alright?" Austin turned around and saw the manager, a white guy in his forties, running out to him.

"I'm still here," Austin said.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm... The man, he left."

"We called the police. Come back inside, we'll get you some coffee while you wait. Did you catch his license plate?"

Austin shook his head. "No. No, I didn't." He looked at the truck. "I want to see what he did to the back of it first, but yes, I'll come in. Just a second."

The manager swallowed and looked like he was going to protest, but he didn't say anything. He just looked around, afraid that the truck would come back for another pass.

Austin walked around to the back of the truck. It was the first look he'd had since McDonald's. The bumper was punched in and had been dented; flakes of pale green paint were stuck to the metal. Austin ran his smooth, city-boy hand over his brother's tailgate. He paused at a spot where the paint had been scratched away except for a few patches of glossy white paper, about five by seven; below that, another spot with patches of gray. No details remained, no traces of whimsy. Just two spots of empty, corroded metal.

He felt like getting in the truck and flooring it, chasing the other truck and running it down. Austin was angrier than he had ever been in his life: angry at the assumption that his

silly little fish had anything at all to do with the man in the baseball cap, angry at the self-righteousness, angry that believing in Thor meant he didn't believe in anything important.

He thought about what his dad would say: that it was smarter to avoid a fight than chase after the man. The man might still have that hypothetical gun; middle-aged men don't usually fight fair. That was a reasonable thought. He tried to focus on that.

Austin followed the manager inside to wait for the police. They brought him a cup of black coffee – on the house, the waiter told him – and then more or less left him alone.

Austin scattered the pieces of the bumper stickers on the Denny's table and tried to put them back together, but the pieces were so warped that they were barely recognizable. The only thing that really survived was the head of the Thor Fish, with its Viking helmet, its warhammer, its innocent fishy smile.

He thought about that serene night on the Island, when Tommy gave him the sticker: thought about sharing beers, eating the last of the year's venison jerky, making the pilgrimage to the sad old farmhouse where their mother had been born. He thought about the creek and the rain and the toad. He longed to be there again, far away from here, back in the Island of the Goddess, back in the Grandmother Country.

Austin opened his eyes again and saw the bright red and blue lights of a police car appear at the end of the block. More bright lights coming for him. More people to ask questions he wasn't sure how to answer. More reminders that he wasn't in that peaceful glen on a deserted river island, that he wasn't in the land of the Goddess.

As the policeman got out of the car and walked to the door of the restaurant, Austin remembered that his grandmother had been a Baptist.

## PERFECT LOVE AND PERFECT TRUST

Andy the Green Man lost himself in the woods, far from traces of humanity. Here there were no roads or sidewalks, but instead only the lichen-wrapped paths of stones and thin bitter trees, peeking out from ancient leaf-beds. The sun fell only in fragments through the treetops, so time became meaningless: in these woods he felt no morning or afternoon. There was only the day, suffused with ghostly light, and deep, transcendental darkness.

The Green Man heard nothing but birdsong and himself, and he was happy.

He chanted the names of the gods, *Pan, Odin, Baphomet, Kernunnos, Osiris*, over and over and over, the names bleeding into one another so that each name and each god fell into the next, and every word became inevitable. This was an old ritual for him, to be in the wild, alone and singing. In the winter he would walk through the snowy forest with a rifle in his hand, praying quietly to Odin to spot one of his mighty bucks; in the summer he would wander to the duck pond on his parents' farm and strip off his clothes to become one with the muddy water. Today it was late spring, and he was waiting for the time to be right, for the moment when they would call him back.

Half a mile away there was a drop-off with a steep path running up it, and inside the cliff side there was a karst cave. It was still a natural cave, never taken over by hucksters who would level off paths smooth enough for wheelchairs and install electric lights in a place meant for darkness. Andy had been in his share of those kinds of caves, and he hated them. Bad enough to murder a living cave. It was worse to charge people to look at its corpse.

The cave was inaccessible by any road, thankfully. The nearest highway was miles off, and there were no good paths to it overland. The only real way to get to it was to take a metal canoe down the ever-brown Meramec River and float down for hours, until at last one made a turn and saw the cave's bluff looking down at the river. One could moor his canoe at the gravel beach at the foot of the bluff and venture into that cold, nocturnal world. That the cave was accommodating to humans was a gift. That the cave could kill an inattentive person was a gift of a kind, as well.

Andy's friend Lou had chosen to have his initiation into the coven done in his parents' house, in the living room the coven used as a temple on the Full Moon. Andy guessed that was good enough, but he wanted to be out somewhere in the earth itself. Even when Peter, his father, looked at him askance and mentioned that the first part of the ritual involved walking barefoot, naked and blindfolded, Andy never relented. He wanted to do it at the cave.

He had chanted all the way down the river, up in the front of the canoe, with Lou in the back steering. It had all felt very right, peaceful, like things were finally as they should be: even if on Monday he would be back at the refrigerator factory, where he meant to spend a summer and instead had spent a year and a half, even if he was still dodging questions from his mother about when he was going to return to college, even if he was going back to the basement he half-jokingly called his "apartment", today was going to be fine. Today, everything was going to be right.

Lou and the others- his "elders," though he disliked that term since some of those "elders" had only been pagans for less than a decade, not like Andy, who was born into it-

were down at the cave, preparing for the ceremony. Andy, of course, could not be a part of that. The mystery was integral to the ritual. Andy had gone his entire life so far without knowing what happened in an initiation; he was fine with waiting for a few more hours.

Andy had looked around and decided this was as good a place as any to stop. The ground was firm and not as rocky as usual here, and at a glance the trees seemed spread out in radial symmetry. A person could believe he had found the center of the woods here, unfolding out from this precise spot. But the Green Man always knows that there are little differences everywhere, tiny features that mark the infinite variety of the world. He hung his t-shirt from a tree branch because he wanted to feel the air on his chest. He sat down in the leaf bed with his legs crossed in a full lotus and closed his eyes.

*Pan, Odin, Baphomet, Kernunnos, Osiris...*

He sat there in repose, feeling his skin changing to the green of maple leaves, feeling his hair as moss, feeling his nipples become knots in the ripe trunk of his chest. He was the Lord among the Lady, her son and her father and her lover. He was the Horned God invoking himself, the Green Man, Andy Walstead.

*Pan, Odin, Baphomet, Kernunnos, Osiris...*

"Andy?"

And that was all it took.

Andy opened his eyes and looked down at his farmer-tanned body, suddenly aware of himself as something separate from the woods. He did not know how long he had been sitting and chanting. It could have been five minutes, or it could have been an hour.

He knew the voice, and he knew her footsteps, blundering through the leaf bed without grace. He frowned and looked around for her, eventually spotting her between the thin-trunked trees. She had pale brown skin and frizzy hair, and she was wearing blue jeans and a sky blue t-shirt from a Heartland festival a few years back. She hadn't spotted him yet.

"I'm over here, Dottie," he called. The words felt odd in his mouth, almost profane. She looked in his direction with a sudden expression of discovery and crunched through the leaves toward him. She raised an eyebrow when she got close.

"Where's your shirt?"

Andy pointed at the tree branch. "You know how I am when I meditate."

"I'm surprised you didn't take off your pants too," Dottie said. She had her usual resignation in her voice. She leaned against a tree and crossed her arms. It was hard to tell just how she wanted him to take that sentence.

"Leaves would make my ass itch." He stretched and stood up. "What's up? Is it time?"

"No. I just got bored sitting down by the fire by myself. They said they'd send Lucy up to get you when they were ready, but it'll probably be a while yet." She looked off to the side, not watching anything in particular. "You nervous?"

"My sister went through it. Lou went through it. You'll go through it." He shrugged. "What's to be nervous about?"

"They're going to blindfold you, you know. Lucy told me. Personally I would be scared shitless of walking through that cave blindfolded. You stand up too quick and you could get a stalactite through your head."

"Think of all the things that could get run through your head if you stood up too quick in Uncle Geddy's house. That's never stopped you." He shrugged. "It's not like they would let something happen to me."

"Accidents happen all the time."

"You're such a pessimist."

She did not disagree.

He retrieved his shirt and looked off towards the river. Then he looked at her, and hesitated before asking, "You want to take a walk?"

She paused, too. "Sure," she said, after a moment. "Is there anything interesting around here?"

Andy didn't answer. Instead he started walking off towards the south. After a few minutes of walking, Andy stopped and knelt to search through the leaves.

"What are you looking for?" asked Dottie.

"You know what scoria looks like? It's a kind of rock."

"I think so. That's the kind that looks like Mars or something."

"Yeah, that's one way of putting it. Anyway. Looking for something like that." He bit his lip and kept rooting around. "Not that it's actual scoria. Can't find that stuff in this part of the country..." He grinned and picked up something from the ground, and held it up so she could see it. "But you can find slag all over this valley."

"Slag?"

"Yeah, there used to be an iron plant about four miles from here. The smelting threw this stuff all over. Waste products." He stood up and tossed the slag to her. She turned it over

in her hands for a minute before handing it back to him. She seemed unimpressed, but it wasn't like that was unusual.

"Anyway," he said, "if we are where I think we are..." He kept walking, and then broke into a run. "Yeah, here it is!" Dottie followed him over. He was standing at the edge of what looked like a sinkhole, with sharp, steep sides. "Congratulations, Dottie. Here's our very own iron mine."

"That's a mine?"

"Yeah. Small little operations, back in the turn of the century. You can find them all over Hamilton Valley." He sat down with his legs dangling into the sinkhole. "Cool, huh?"

She shrugged and sat down next to him. "I guess. I don't know, you've always been more into things like that. I didn't even know this was called Hamilton Valley."

Andy's smile faded. They sat there for a moment, kicking their heels against the wall of the pit, listening to the birds singing. It wasn't that long ago that they would have sat in silence together for hours on end nearly every night, listening to Miles Davis records (his) or the Discovery Channel (hers) without feeling any need for words. But that had been a very different kind of silence, and Andy could barely imagine it now.

"So," he said. "How are you? We didn't get to talk on the way down the river."

"Alright, I guess. I broke up with Jeff the other week."

"The Catholic guy?"

She opened her mouth as if to protest that designation, but she shrugged, now past the point of having to defend him. "Yeah, him."

"How come?"

"Just didn't work out. We didn't..." She paused, scrunched up her face the way she always did when she was looking for the right words. "I don't feel like he ever got me, I guess."

Andy nodded. "I never cared much for him much anyway. That guy had shitty taste in music." He left it at that: he had shitty taste in music. It wasn't that he was a cowen, that he had been his replacement, that he had taken her away from them. Just a guy who listened to terrible music.

She laughed, a little forced. "Other than that... Just more of the same, I guess. Working at the bakery is the same as ever. Mom is as crazy as always. Keeps asking when I'll get out on my own again."

"When are you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Don't start." She lay back in the leaves and stared up at the treetops. She sighed in a way that signaled a change in subject. "Hey. Can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure."

"I don't think I want to go through with mine."

"With what?" He leaned back on his elbow and rubbed the soft spring dirt between his fingers.

"Well, they wanted me to get my initiation done next month. You know, round off the kids, I guess." She stretched out and put her hands behind her head, lifting her shirt up just enough that Andy could see her caramel stomach. "I don't know that I want to."

"Why not?"

She pursed her lips. "You ever feel like you aren't a part of it, anymore? Since Lucy moved away, and since... Well, since us."

"I don't think that changes anything between you and the Goddess, Dottie. Regardless of whether us Walstead kids are around, it's your relationship with her that counts."

"Whether you're 'around.' Heh." She shook her head. "You *are* my relationship with the Goddess, though. Everything I think about Her... Dancing the maypole, giving out Yule presents, burning John Barleycorn... Those are all things I did with you and your sister and Lou. And... And..." She paused. "Fuck." She looked at him with a sad smile. "I just don't see the point of it all if the people I care about are in other states." She paused, and added, pointedly, "Or avoid the festivals they know I'll be at."

Andy looked at the pit, expressionless. "I thought you didn't want me around anymore in the first place."

"Andy, just because I didn't think we should be together like that doesn't mean I wanted to disown you."

"Maybe you should have said that." He listened to her breathe for a moment, waiting to hear whether she had something else to add. "Besides, you only show up to a quarter of the festivals anymore anyway. By my figures, I'm not the one doing the abandoning here."

She leaned up to look at him. "You can be such an asshole."

"Just pointing out the facts."

She looked like she was about to get up and walk away, but she didn't – instead, she lay back down in the leaves, looking up at the sky, and never looking at him.

Andy found himself idly watching a pair of squirrels chase each other around the tree trunk and smiled at the familiar sight. He spread his arms out to take in the full experience of the earth, and he felt Dottie's skin against his fingers. Her flesh was cold— Dottie was always cold— but soft, and he remembered what it had been like to hold her.

He thought, for a moment, about reaching for her hand, but he decided against it. Dottie yawned and tried to pick out the position of the sun. "Why is it a secret?"

"Why is what a secret?"

"The initiation ritual. All they tell us is that it's about perfect love and perfect trust. Whatever that means. But they don't trust us enough to come prepared."

"Don't you trust them?" he asked, knowing that she didn't really trust anybody.

"That's not the point," she said. "I guess it's just strange to me. This is about being part of the family, right? So why secrets? Why can't they just let us in on what's going on beneath?"

Andy sat up. "You can't tell everybody everything, Dottie. Sometimes, I think you only understand things when you recognize what you don't see."

"How's that perfect?"

"Maybe it isn't." He shrugged. "Maybe it's just as close as people get." He stood up and brushed the leaves from his pants. "Probably ought to start back." He helped Dottie up, and they headed back toward the river.

Andy cleared his throat. "For what it's worth, I want you to do it."

"You're just saying that because you want to see me naked again."

He glared at her, but then he softened when he recognized how strange it was for Dottie to make any attempt at humor. "No... Just because it's time." He ran his tongue along the inside of his cheek, as he always did when he was thinking. "They didn't tell us things when we were kids, because we wouldn't have appreciated it then. We're old enough to get it now, I think. Old enough to understand the mystery. We always think of rituals as something we do to create a new segment in life, but that's not what they are. They're markers that the new time is already here." He looked at Dottie, his ex-girlfriend, his old friend, and rubbed her shoulder. "I feel confused sometimes, too, you know... And sometimes I feel like there's not much keeping me here, either. But it doesn't have to be like that.

"I'm going to go into the cave and accept that just because part of me is always going to be alone in the forest doesn't mean a part of me isn't always with you and Lou and my sister and all of our parents. Sometimes, you have to go out and make yourself belong... Not just wait for someone to tell you that you do."

"Doesn't it ever seem like the magic's gone out of it?"

Andy shrugged. "One kind of magic, sure. But there's others. There's other ore to put in that furnace."

Dottie stopped as they reached the edge of the bluff, where the trail led down to Green's Cave.

"I'll think about it," she said, and hugged him, and wished him luck.

Lou's dad, a burly, bearded man, was waiting for him in the mouth of the cave. He carried two things: a rope and blindfold. Lou's dad was wearing a golden robe, the bottom hem wet from the cold spring flowing through the cave.

"Hey Andy." He smiled at Andy and clapped him on the shoulder with visible pride.  
"Are you ready?"

The Green Man looked up. Green's Cave's entrance loomed overhead, one of the tallest cave openings in North America. The spring resounded against the stone in a persistent, peaceful rhythm. Andy smiled and nodded. "As ready as ever, I think."

Lou's dad led him into the cave, around a bend so that they could not be seen by passersby. "For the first part of the ritual, you're going to have to wait out here, by yourself. You'll be bound, and you'll be blindfolded." He looked into the cave and called to the others.  
"Are we all ready?"

"Yes!" came back the call. Andy recognized the voice as his mother's.

"You know that you're supposed to be naked for this, right?" asked Lou's dad.

Andy nodded. "I know. Only two things to bring with me, right?"

"That's right. Perfect love and perfect trust." Andy slipped off his shirt and his blue jeans and gave them to Lou's dad, who said he would take them to the circle and put them somewhere dry. Then he tied Andy's hands behind his back and tied the blindfold.

"Can you see?"

"Not a thing."

"Good." Andy felt the bristles of the older man's mustache as he was kissed on the forehead. "We're all very proud of you, Andy. Sit down. The guide will come for you soon." Andy sat down, his bare skin on the cold, wet stone, and listened. The footsteps carried for a long way, and then they disappeared. He could hear chanting in the distance, though he could

not recognize the tune for all the echoes. It was lost, dimly recognizable, but just out of reach.

Andy the Green Man did not know how long he would have to wait, cold, alone, and blind. But he knew that there was a point in life when one has to accept mysteries, to trust that there would be a point to all the confusion and rumor.

Dottie would be out on the river bank now, watching the canoes. He thought about her and found he wasn't angry with her— not for now, at least. So she had hurt him. So he had hurt her. Perfect love and perfect trust was the recognition that there was no such thing.

Andy thought about Dottie, and he began to chant the names of the gods.

## HRAFSPA

*I sit by the fire, lost and alone  
Four empty places, and one who stayed home.  
I drink to my kin  
Who walked Njord's road  
I drink to my kin who'll drink here no more.  
-"Gather Ye Pipers," Mikal the Ram*

The funeral had no coffin. I don't know if that meant that Mikal the Ram preferred cremation, or if he and his wife decided they'd rather not display the body. I didn't ask Roberto or Helena about it. I had, after all, only met Mikal the Ram once. I wasn't sure I even had a right to be at the service, much less to question it.

The funeral program called him "J. Michael Shew." I'd never heard that name before. It looked like it was going to be a long funeral, with more than a dozen speakers. The epigraph took me by surprise in more ways than one:

*Drop kick me Jesus through the goal posts of life  
End over end neither left nor to right  
Straight through the heart of them righteous uprights  
Drop kick me Jesus through the goal posts of life.*

We sat in a dim Protestant church with cream-colored walls and dark brown carpet. The modern building lacked sober artistry of the medieval, which I felt ironic, given what I knew of Mikal. Two podiums sat at the front of the hall and in front of them a series of tables covered in his possessions: t-shirts from Lilies Wars and a sheepskin that I recognized from

when it hung from his shoulders, set designs from church plays and failed get-well-soon cards from his students. An illuminated scroll, proclaiming Mikal the Ram's promotion to Laurel of the Society for Creative Anachronism, dominated one table. To the right a projector showed photographs from his life, before the brain tumor finally got to him.

I sat with Roberto, Helena, and the rest of our SCA family. The three elders sat in the row in front of us. They all looked like they had been crying. I've got no idea how old they actually are, but they seemed far older than they had before.

"How are you, Mo?" I asked.

Modar – the head of the household, balding, bearded, with large glasses – shrugged. "We have our good weeks, and we have our bad ones. This has been one of the bad ones." I guess I should explain the names. Roberto and Helena are, legally, Chris and Debbie; Modar's real name is Ron. They tend to call me Aldheim, though of course, that's not my name either. People make up new names for themselves in the SCA. Sometimes those names mean more to us than the ones our parents gave us; I once heard Roberto's father slip and call him "Berto" without thinking.

The SCA is a strange nerd subculture. Every weekend, we drive for hours to get to events, where we dress in clothing that hasn't been in style for six hundred years and tell lies and drink homemade wine and argue about tinctures and blazons until it's time to drive the hours and hours back home again. We take it as an excuse to buy obscure books about the middle ages, and bash each other in the head with wooden swords, to read old sagas and poems about the Anglo-Saxons and the Old Norse and the Byzantines, to tell stories to those

who would hear them. So it had been with Mikal the Ram, as well, who had been a famous bard within the society when he was alive.

The family started talking about Mikal to pass the time before the service began. I stopped talking, myself. They had all known him for years, had seen him at least once every couple of months without fail for a decade or more. But then, they were not children, as I felt I was, sitting in that church. Churches always make me feel uncomfortable.

I am not a Christian. I never have been. My parents were, once, but they became Wiccan in their twenties, and so I was raised a pagan. I had never been inside a church for anything besides a wedding or a funeral until my sophomore year of college, and I still find them to be strange, intimidating places: my idea of a temple was my living room, not a vaulted room full of stained glasses and crucifixes. I felt under my tie for the silver Thor's Hammer I wore around my neck and rubbed it for luck.

I knew the services were starting because Roberto quit talking. Only momentous events prompt his silence. The photographs faded from the wall, and soon they started coming in from all sides of the church: Mikal's wife, the dozen or so people who would speak to us during the service, and the preacher. They came in to the sound of bagpipes and drums, played by men in kilts who followed them into the room.

Some of them wore suits; some did not. I recognized one of the company as another SCA bard, one I had once spent an event trading tales with. He wore a silky black shirt with blue flames at the bottom. I had noticed several people who wore similar clothes, including one man who wore a Coca-Cola t-shirt and black sweatpants, claiming they were the nicest clothes he owned. I wanted to hit him. Mikal deserved better.

The first speaker opened with Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Dirge Without Music." A poem to mourn a poet. I wondered if in his final days in the hospital, cancer eating away at him, if Mikal had composed his own funeral service.

A poem to mourn a poet. It made me think of Loki's Song.

\* \* \*

This is the story that I was told of Mikal the Ram, not so many years ago:

In the early summer every year, the Kingdom of Calontir holds a war. The Lilies War, as it's known, is a week long SCA event held at a campground about half an hour outside of Kansas City (or, as it is known in the Society, the Barony of Forgotten Sea.) I have never gone, because I have never been able to afford a week off work, but it's the height of the year for many in the area. It's a camping event, all outdoors – it's easier to pretend it's 1100 A.D. that way.

This particular year, just before Lilies began, storm clouds gathered over that part of Kansas. On the first day of Lilies, when people were arriving to put up their tents and say hello to their friends, the clouds opened up and rain fell down in sheets, and it never let up until the day Lilies ended, when the sun finally reappeared and the mud started to turn back into dirt, just in time for everyone to pack up and go home.

About the fourth day of this mess, Mikal the Ram, dressed in his Nordic regalia, sheepskin and all, decided that he had had enough. He stamped out of his tent into the rain. His friends inside called out to him to get back inside before he caught his death in the storm, but he didn't listen to them. He went out into the middle of the muddy field, and stared up at the sky.

And he sang.

The song was one he had written for the god of fire and mischief. It was simply called "Loki's Song," and it went like this:

*I was born in battle's fire  
Laid beside my mother's corpse  
My toys the ravens of the field  
My lullabies the screams of horse  
But when that storm god you all praise  
Walks the earth and shatters trees  
You'll huddle close beside my gift  
Whispers prayers beside the spit  
And as the woodsmoke turns and twists  
You'll owe your lives to sly Loki.*

When I picture this in my head, I picture old Mikal – think about Falstaff wearing a sheepskin and you'll get the picture – standing alone in the storm with fire in his eyes and mad laughter roaring from his breast. I picture him shaggy and crazed and ornery, exactly like the Ram he named himself after. I hear him daring Thor to keep the storm going – mocking the Storm God to his face.

I smile when I picture that. Once, when I was on a date, the clouds opened up and rain fell in sheets for exactly the length of time it took for my girlfriend and I to run across the parking lot and get inside my car. The moment I started the ignition, the rain stopped. We

sat there, dripping and shivering, and looked at the sudden reappearance of the sun. I could only raise my fist in the air and shout, "Thor, you asshole."

That is how I worship; that is how I think of gods. I think they can be cantankerous or tricky or helpful. I think of them as something human, something I can know in the way I might know you, as a person.

I think of Mikal the Ram bellowing at the gods, and I felt kinship, for I have bellowed at them too.

\* \* \*

The man in the blue flame shirt had just finished speaking. He had to stop several times in the course of his speech to choke back tears. I felt sorry for him, and I felt envious, as well. I had liked Mikal the Ram, but the entire funeral seemed distant to me, something meant for other people. I was not grieving. Not really.

J. Michael Shew had taught art an elementary school. His principal was the next speaker. He was a bald man in a brown suit, and clearly did not like public speaking.

"I've only been principal for a few years. Michael had been there long before I ever got there. But my predecessor told me all about him: how Mr. Shew loved his students, loved to get them to play with art. He went out of his way to connect with them," said the principal. I listened to him describe how crazy Mr. Shew had introduced Talk Like A Pirate Day to the school without warning one year when he appeared for work dressed in an eye patch and a tricorner hat. I knew this man was a stranger. This man was not here for Mikal the Ram, may not have even known about Mikal the Ram. He was here for J. Michael Shew. And I realized in that moment that all I knew of J. Michael Shew was what I had been told in the past hour.

Who was J. Michael Shew? He was an art teacher. He had been married for years to a woman named Ginger. He had no children, though he had loved children. He drew cartoons and designed sets for church plays, had even written a handbook for designing sets on a budget that had been used for church productions across the country. And once, in the middle of acting in one of these church productions, he had accidentally hiked up his costume and inadvertently flashed his BVDs at a crowd of unsuspecting church ladies.

J. Michael Shew had developed a brain tumor and been told he had six months to live. He really only had one and a half.

I felt sorry for J. Michael Shew. He seemed like a good man, and his story was as sad as stories get. But I did not know him.

Three women sang "Down to the River to Pray." Then the preacher came back up to the podium, shuffling his notes.

"When I visited Michael in the hospital," said the preacher, "He said that he wanted me to read this passage from scripture for him. And he said I had to read it from the King James translation. Now, that's kind of odd, because in our church, we always read from the New International Version, and using the King James is, well... Odd, for me, anyway. But as I was preparing this, I realized why Michael asked me to read from it. This is from the second book of Timothy, chapter two...

"It is a faithful saying: for if we be alive in Him, we shall also live with him: if we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us. If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself. Of these things, put them into remembrance, charging them before the Lord that they strive not about words to no profit, but to the

subverting of hearers. Study..." At this point the preacher stopped for a breath, and smiled. "Study to *shew* thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

And just as I'm sure he intended, we all groaned at J. Michael Shew's final pun.

"Now let us pray," said the preacher. I watched as Roberto and Helena bowed their heads and clasped their hands, as most of the room around them did. I bowed my head as well. But I did not pray.

\* \* \*

It was January as January should be: cold and rainy, Viking weather. But we were inside, and it was warm there, and it was only through the windows of the rec hall that we could see the gray clouds and the mist.

The building was an odd one: a long hall with a kitchen at one end and a stage at the other. The ceiling was made of wooden planks that slanted upward until they met in the center. It brought to mind old Germanic halls – contaminated, perhaps, by the electric lights hanging from the ceiling and the glass windows in the walls. The feeling was there, nevertheless.

The event being held in that place was called Queen's Prize. It was an arts and sciences competition, and at first glance it looked like a flea market – rows of tables piled on with dozens of displays. SCAdians would create these projects and bring them out to be judged. The Queen picked the winner – hence the name of the event – but everybody got something for their efforts.

Many of my college friends were there with projects. Esa brought an elaborate dress that had taken her a month and a half to sew, and Kasha had composed a piece of classical music. Helena was in the little kitchen cooking three courses to be judged in the food competition, and Roberto was there with her, though he had not submitted anything. I sat at a table near the stage with my tawny rune-covered staff and several copies of a long poem I had written, which I would perform during lunch.

The poem was called "Gangleri the Wanderer," and was based on a familiar story in Norse myths: a stranger appears at a chieftain's hall one night and dispenses knowledge and stories, and by the end is revealed as Odin, the lord of Asgard. I wrote it in the alliterative style of Old Norse, which was sometimes awkward in Modern English, and tried to cram as much of the knowledge I had gained about old Germanic languages at school into it. It was the first thing I had ever written for the SCA.

My sponsor, a black-haired woman who called herself Dorcas, came over to me about an hour after I set up and took a seat at my table. "Hey Aldheim," she said. "How did your poem turn out?"

"Alright, I hope." I picked up one of my copies, bound in a decidedly not-period plastic paper cover. "Do you want to take a look at it?"

She started to read through it. She was about halfway down the first page when she stopped and looked up at me. "You wrote it in the style?"

"Yeah. I mean, that's what I was supposed to do, right?"

"For a beginner? I can't say I really expected you to..." She finished reading the poem and leafed through my documentation, which was almost as long as the poem itself. "Good

documentation, too. You college kids never know when to quit." She sat it down and smiled. "But you entered it for performance, not the poem itself, right? So let's hear it."

I started to recite the poem from memory, but I couldn't keep the alliteration in my head. The narrative made sense, but I was losing a lot of the poetry. Dorcas told me I should go ahead and read it off the page. I tried that, and it sounded better, though it meant that if I used my stick I wouldn't have a free hand for emphasis. We both agreed it was worth the trade-off.

When lunchtime came around, I and about five others were called up before the king and queen to perform our pieces. One recited, with much aplomb, about five minutes of selections from *Beowulf* in the original Old English to a crowd who mostly did not understand Old English; another, a girl I later discovered was thirteen years old, played a beautiful song on an Anglo-Saxon harp she had built with her mother's help. And then I stepped up, with my rune-staff and my Thor's Hammer and my poem, and I did my best.

*"Once in this world, there walked many wonders,  
marvelous monsters, and men who earned honor.*

*But oft have I heard of the old gods,  
the far travelers who once roamed these roads..."*

Dorcas said reading a poem was like rowing a boat: you row, then a beat, then you row. I saw 'Berto in the crowd smiling at me, even though I guessed that he could only hear a little of what I said. The acoustics in that room were awful.

I wrote that poem for the competition, yes, but I had other reasons, too. My parents had raised me Wiccan, but earlier that year I had gotten into a religion called Asatru, which

was based off reconstructing the religion of the Old Norse and Icelanders. I wouldn't say I "converted" to Asatru; conversion has always sounded very restricting to me, something for the monotheists to worry about. I had adapted it into my own beliefs, and found myself thinking about Odin and Thor and Freyja daily, trying to figure out how these new and powerful presences worked into my consciousness. I wrote the poem for them, to express what I felt made them so appealing to me: their flaws, their failures, their pain. Their humanity.

And eventually, after Gangleri the Wanderer had told the story of the world's birth and the world's end, the chieftain asked him why he had come to them, and this was what I said in his voice:

*"Allfather knows all that arises in Midgard  
from his high seat in Valhalla he sees  
all things that are or ever will be.  
Yet Allfather is maimed like those in Midgard.  
The gods know grief for their brother Baldr  
who left the light-lands never to return.  
The plight and pangs of middle-earth men  
belong to the Aesir and the Allfather.  
But the gods also know that glory is gained  
by men who live well and defy their doom  
through their great deeds of courage and kindness.  
Death comes to all who walk the worlds;*

*in the fate of man and god there is no shame.*

*In the end all things pass into the black;*

*shipped out unguided into the silent sea.*

*What shore we reach is known by no man.*

*What matters in life is the way that we live it."*

The crowd clapped, and the king made me tell a joke about Snorri Sturluson. Afterwards I went to find Roberto. He was standing next to a big man in a blue tunic, a man with gray hair held back by a silver circlet around his forehead. He had a sheepskin thrown over his shoulder, and a drinking horn on his belt. Roberto smiled and pointed to him.

"Aldheim, I want to introduce you to Mikal the Ram."

"Or Mikal Hrafspa, if you prefer" said the shaggy man, and he smiled. "It means the same thing, but in the old language. And that was a pretty good poem you wrote, for a beginner."

"Thank you," I started to say, before I was cut off.

"Except that you only had Gangleri reveal seven secrets! He has to reveal nine! Nine's the magic number!"

I had not even been aware that Gangleri had been counting out the secrets he told at all, much less that anybody else would think to listen for that.

"And when you banged your stick on the ground... That was good, but you did it on this floor, and this floor is tile. Doesn't make a very good noise, especially with the acoustics. Here, let me see your stick for a minute."

I gave it to him and he walked over to the steps leading up to the stage and slammed the stick against the bottom one. The noise was loud and resonant – it had exactly the effect I had been going for.

"And Odin always offers the first taste to Loki," said Mikal, handing back my staff. "Because he never knows if the old troublemaker poisoned it first, eh?"

"I — Yeah, you're right, now that you mention it."

Mikal smiled. "That's all okay. The main thing is just that next time, you don't read off the paper. Worst thing in the world for a bard. You've got to let it come out of your head. The paper just gets in the way. Not period, either!"

Roberto slyly waved to us and slipped off into the crowd, still milling around after the performances, waiting for the lunch break to be over. Mikal the Ram didn't seem to notice or care, and he clapped his hand on my shoulder.

"But that was still very good. Not many people do that... Not many go in for the Norse that way. I wrote a whole saga once in English in the Norse meter, and it about killed me. I'm glad to see others give it a try. I shouldn't be the only one who has to suffer."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small coin with a laurel branch on it, and put it into my hand. "I got a set of these coins when I became a laurel. This is the only one I have left. I'd like you to take it. And I'd like you to keep doing things like that."

I didn't speak much for the rest of that Queen's Prize, because Mikal the Ram was too busy talking- telling stories, telling jokes, reminiscing about events and wars long gone. He was impossible not to like. And for me, it was impossible to think of anybody else in the society who I wanted to emulate more.

He was funny, and genuine, and he believed. I could tell. He believed in the stories; that's why he told them so well.

I realized, later, that I had lost that coin. It was like realizing I had never picked up a child from baseball practice, as though somewhere, this important thing I had been given custody of was sitting in the rain, cold and resentful.

\* \* \*

After the funeral, Roberto, Helena and I piled into their red Honda sedan for the drive home. I sat in the back and kept quiet. Truth be told, when Roberto spoke up, I was thinking about Jesus, as I often do. Salman Rushdie once said that atheists are obsessed with God; I think pagans tend to be obsessed with Christ in much the same way.

"I want to thank you for coming along today, bro," he said, glancing at me in his rearview mirror. Roberto thanks me every time he sees me, like I'm doing him a favor. He thanked me once for letting him buy me three meals and pay my way into an SCA event.

"Well. You know." I fumbled for words. "I wanted to pay my respects."

"He would have been glad you came. I know you always say you only met him once, but I think you understood Mikal a lot better than most people did."

I didn't say anything to that, mostly because I didn't think it was true. I hadn't even known Mikal's name before we got to the funeral — his real name, I mean, the one that he used around everyone in the world but us. I hadn't known he was an art teacher, or that he had once flashed his BVDs at the church ladies.

I hadn't known that he was a Christian. I kept thinking of that bland modern church, and every time, I thought of Loki's Song. I couldn't get my past how they could both belong to the same man.

Beneath all that, I felt something like betrayal — nothing Mikal the Ram could have done on purpose, but betrayal nonetheless. I was coming to terms with my new outlook on faith at the moment I met Mikal. I wanted him to be the person who got it, someone who knew the old gods and believed in them like I wanted to believe in them. And he wasn't.

That wasn't his fault, of course. It still hurts to admit your legends are, in the end, only legends, after all.

"We need to get some stuff from this Russian grocery store near here," said Helena. "They make pretty good falafel, if you want some."

"Sure," I said. "Sounds great."

And soon we were eating falafel in a dingy little grocery store with a sandwich counter. We were surrounded by petrushka dolls and imported chocolate, lit up by the store's half-functioning fluorescent lights. I hoped to see something vaguely medieval among the shelves, but there was nothing there.

I bit into my falafel, the cool tang of the cucumber sauce mixing with the hot chickpea patties, and stared out the window. I could feel the hard August heat even through the store's air conditioning.

Helena set her tray aside and leaned forward on her elbows, as she always does when she's about to probe. "So," she said. "What are you thinking about?"

"Mikal," I said. "Just working out my thoughts."

"And those would be?"

"I don't know. Just trying to get my head around the idea that he's gone," I said. That wasn't the truth, really, but it was close enough. I didn't feel like getting into my anxiety about the religious tendencies of the dead over lunch.

"He was in a lot of pain, at the end," said Helena, sipping her soda. "He's in a better place now."

"I'm sure he is," I said. That, perhaps, was a bigger lie.

I would like to say that I pictured Mikal waking up in his hospital bed to find that all his pain was gone, and that he saw a beautiful, winged maiden standing in front of him, so radiant that the light fell off of her in waves. Perhaps she reached her hand to his, and together they walked the rainbow bridge into Asgard. Ahead of them Mikal might have seen an old man with a spear, missing one eye, and Mikal would have known he'd come home, at last.

But I can't say that.

I would like to say that even if he was not the pagan I had wanted him to be, I knew that he had gone on to Heaven — fluffy clouds, mansions and paved gold streets, whichever one he believed in – and that he was happy there, had finally gotten all that he deserved, even if it was from a God I didn't worship.

But I can't say that, either.

All I can say is that I miss him. I miss the legend I made him into. I miss the chances I might have had to hear his voice and sing his songs.

I think of Mikal the Ram, who has now shipped off into the dark sea that knows no shore, and I miss him. I miss him, even if I didn't know him. Maybe especially because of that.

## THE SNAKE AND THE PANDA

It was Saturday night of Memorial Day Weekend in MacLouth, Kansas, and the air was so humid that even while sitting still, I sweated so much that I wanted to wipe my forehead every fifteen seconds. But that would have ruined my makeup, the thick black and white greasepaint covering my face. I could feel the sweat welling up all over my body, seeping into my black sweater, my black pants, my black socks. Half of the eight hundred people here came to the Heartland Pagan Festival to be naked, and I wore a sweat-suit.

I sat along a trail in Camp Gaea's woods, waiting for my next visitor. At my spot sat a pair of lit tiki torches, a bag of supplies – animal crackers, water bottle, a flashlight that didn't work – and a single vine that wound its way down from the bough of a tree overhead. I tried to drape myself over it to get the panda look down, nibbled on grass to try and get into character. It didn't take long before I switched to the animal crackers.

My name is Eric Scott, and I am a giant panda.

To explain: my friend Sarah was in charge of the Rites of Passage committee, which holds certain rituals during the year and at the Festival itself. One of these rituals is the Vision Quest, where participants walk along the night-time trail with only chemical glowsticks and tikis to guide them. There are roots to trip over, branches to run into, and once, even a pair of escaped cows from the farm next door. People like me were the main attractions, though – people dressed to embody some kind of mystical concept, meant to give the trail-walkers a brief meeting with the otherworldly. The theme changed every year: once it had been the Major Arcana of a Tarot deck, each person dressed as the Fool, or the

Universe, or the Devil. Another year, it had been the signs of the Zodiac. In 2009 we were animals: a dog, a stag, an owl. And, as I said, a giant panda.

Since she became head of Rites of Passage, the Vision Quest has been Sarah's pet project. To me, it's always seemed tacky: a line of pagans, probably stoned or drunk despite warning signs, walking through the woods and talking to people in cheap costumes spouting canned metaphysical gibberish. Yet there I was anyway.

Money is the obvious reason to be on the Vision Quest: Heartland usually costs two hundred dollars, but volunteer work lowers that to twenty bucks. But really, it's because I owed it to Sarah. We grew up together in St. Louis's Coven Pleiades, and – maybe because she was one of the only pagan girls I knew – I had nursed a crush on her since I was seven years old. (I remember the first time I saw Sarah on the Vision Quest, years ago: she wore white and was lit by tall, burning candles. She called me close and whispered in my ear, *Welcome to the domain of Love herself...* I don't believe in much, but god, I wanted to believe in that.)

Sarah needed people to stand in the woods for her. Of course I said yes. That I had tried to come on to her the week before Heartland and found she saw me as a brother didn't get me out of the commitment.

A woman in a green sarong entered the torchlight of my grove: coppery hair, hips like Innana's. I asked her to sit down, and I took up grass-chewing again, hoping to improve the illusion. Her eyes adjusted to the firelight, and she grinned. "Why hello, Mr. Raccoon."

I recognized this woman. It took me a moment to place her, partially because I didn't have my glasses on and partially because the last time I saw her, she hadn't worn any clothes. I had seen her at the bonfire on Thursday night wearing nothing but a snake.

#

You can identify people at the Heartland Bonfire by their clothes. The clothed drummers sat pounding hides at the edge of the fire circle, far enough out that the air stayed cold, and improvised around a single droning rhythm called the heartbeat. The naked dancers spun and twirled around the fire itself: a black-haired woman spun veils around her body, while a bald man, body devoid of fat, leapt in the air. His comically large penis mirrored his spins and pirouettes. Everyone else lounged around the circle in various stages of undress, watching and listening to those more bold or talented than themselves.

I couldn't drum. The one time I tried, I actually killed the heartbeat and got a lot of looks that said 'amateur.' I didn't have the talent to be a bystander: I don't drink and can't mingle. So I did my best to dance, although I was too modest to take off my pants. When I got winded – I weigh 300 pounds, it doesn't take long – I mostly fell to the edge of the circle and wondered how everyone else kept it up.

Heartland always seemed strange to me. In my family's coven, all of the children – myself, Sarah, and her two brothers, Joe and Alaric – had been taught our whole lives to keep quiet about religion. "If they knew—" and "they" could be anybody, from Grandma to the school to the police— "they would take you away," our parents told us. We didn't tell anybody what we did on the Full Moon, because they wouldn't understand, because it would get us kicked out of school or make Mom lose her job. To this day Sarah's family pretends to

be Lutheran in public. Yet here, in the middle of Kansas, home of the Scopes Monkey Trial and the Westboro Baptist Church, is Camp Gaea.

A girl danced by, wearing only fox ears and a tail. Dancing isn't the right word.

*Stalking.* Like she was after a rabbit. Unreal.

I noticed a new dancer just as I got ready to start dancing again. She had to have just arrived; I couldn't believe I had overlooked her.

I watched her, transfixed, not because she was beautiful – Heartland does not lack for beautiful women – and not because she was naked, because nudity isn't taboo here. I watched her, watched the Willendorf-roundness of her body, half-hidden in fiery chiaroscuro, because she had a snake hanging from her shoulders. Its tail draped over her left breast, and its head coiled around her right arm. She danced like she was trained by Middle Easterners: slow rolls of her hips, unpredictable hand-signals. There might have been one hundred and fifty other people around that fire, but I couldn't see anything but this woman and the brown snake on her shoulders.

I wanted to know her name. I wanted to know everything to know about her. I watched her revolutions around the fire and resolved to jump in next to her and say something. I would do it after she made three cycles of the fire.

After six.

I'd do it after twelve.

\* \* \*

"Welcome to my grove," I said, in a slightly affected Chinese accent. "This is a place of contemplation and mystery." My particular canned metaphysical gibberish was

introductory Taoism: the importance of mystery, how spirituality was more about the unknown than the known. I'd first read the *Tao Te Ching* at eight years old, and this came pretty easily. Besides, what else would a panda say?

She nodded, still smiling.

"We should start with a question. Tell me something you don't understand."

"Something I don't understand..." She paused to think it over.

I had gotten strange responses to that question over the course of the night. *What don't you understand?* A man in thick glasses and a black t-shirt didn't understand why his wife refused to sleep with him. A middle-aged woman told me she wanted to go back to her ex-husband, even though they had been separated for a decade. A white-bearded man in a St. Louis Rams t-shirt told me he didn't have any mysteries: he's old and he had already learned everything he would ever know. He sounded sad and unfulfilled, and I wonder if he believed himself.

They told me these things. I was a 23-year-old in a panda suit. I did my best, but mostly, I just hoped they would tell these things to a psychologist next time instead of a guy pretending to be a bear.

"Okay," the Snake Dancer said. "I don't understand my path. My god, I mean... I don't know if I believe the right things about my god."

"Who is your god?"

She pursed her lips. I knew this look; I've given it myself before. The look said *I'm afraid you'll judge me*. I didn't know what she could possibly believe in that she thought I'd

be offended by, though; this festival had a featured workshop on "kink magick." Not much is taboo at Heartland.

I realized that I had taken her hand into mine, a gesture of comfort. This frightened me a little. I'm not the kind of person to do things like that, and in fact, I didn't remember doing it then. "It's okay," I said to her. "Tell me."

"Jesus," she sighed.

At first, I thought she was cursing.

"Wait, Jesus?" I asked. "You mean you're a Christian?" I remembered the curving sway of her bare hips before the firelight, and could not picture her kneeling before a cross.

"I've never been to one of these festivals before," she explained. "One of my friends is kind of a Wiccan and she convinced me to go. I'm finding interesting things, but... I don't know that I'm supposed to like it." She paused. "I mean, it's pagan, and I'm not." She still wore her judgment-fearing smile. "Does that make sense to you?"

Pagans have this conversation all the time. Christian kids read *To Ride a Silver Broomstick* in middle school and think it'll piss off their parents, so they decide to become genuine Witches. And they *always* want permission. They want somebody to say it's okay to worship the Goddess, whether it's from an author, or a coven, or just another 13-year-old with a pentagram. But here was this woman – this Christian – asking me, the pagan, if it was okay for her to believe in Jesus. Part of me didn't quite believe in the backwards conversation. The panda told that part to shut up.

"You believe that Jesus loves you, right?" I said, with her hand still in my gloved paw. "So don't worry about it. Believe what you want to believe."

I meant it. People at Heartland wear shirts with the words *Bad Religion* written below crossed-out crucifixes. People who got bios and photos in the program described the plot of *The Wicker Man* – a film where, in the end, a Christian man gets burned alive by a group of English witches – as the story of "an annoying Christian who discovers the world doesn't revolve around him."

I understood what it was like to be surrounded by people who say you believe the wrong things. I knew what it was like to hide your faith. And I wanted her to know it didn't matter to me.

"Don't worry about being on the right path," the panda said. "You make a path by walking it."

She looked at me for a moment with a different kind of smile, and then leaned in to kiss me on my black nose. I didn't worry about her smudging the make-up. "Thank you," she said. "You're a very helpful raccoon, you know that?"

She left. A moment later, another member of the Rites of Passage committee appeared, carrying a clipboard. "Hey, panda," he said. "I know you're trying to give everybody their spiritual revelation here, but could you hurry it up a little? We're getting backed up at the owl."

\* \* \*

About three hours after the Vision Quest's last traveler stumbled through my grove, I sat on a staircase landing near the shower-house. By this time I had washed off all the panda makeup and most of the black hair-dye, though neither of them would be completely gone until I had gone home and taken three more showers.

People walked by, going up to the fire or Leather Lane, and they did not notice me. Some wore jeans and t-shirts, many wore tie-dye sarongs, a few wore nothing at all. I did not say anything to them. My mind was far away from Camp Gaea, across the Atlantic, in Kazakhstan.

I had broken up with my girlfriend of two and a half years, Megan, just a few weeks before Heartland. She joined the Peace Corps when she graduated college, a year ahead of me, and shipped out to the former Soviet Union to teach English. We counted the time zones: there was no place in the world farther away from Kansas City than her post. We kept in touch through phone calls and email and the occasional package, and had one vacation together the summer before, but the distance strained things too much. We never confronted each other about it – neither of us ever had a serious relationship before that one, and we were both terrified at the idea of losing it. The break finally came in one three-hour phone call mostly made of silence.

For the better part of two years I had been in a kind of romantic limbo – certainly I *wanted* to pursue other women, but I always had Megan in mind. For months all I could think about was how good it would feel to be free. Now I was, and surrounded by hundreds of nude, sexually liberated women, too.

I have never felt more alone.

Three more people came up the stairs. One of them, a woman, stopped walking just a few steps down from the landing. I heard her say to her friends, "Hey, you guys go on without me." Then she walked back to the landing saw me. "What are you doing there in the dark, Mister Raccoon?"

The Snake Dancer still wore the green sarong I'd seen her in while she walked the trail; her kinky, copper hair still dripped from the showers. I saw her smile through little beams of moonlight.

"Just sitting here, meditating." Kind of the truth. "What are you doing?"

"I was walking with my friends down to the showers, and once I dropped them off I was going to Herne's Hollow. To meditate too, actually."

I nodded. "You know, I wasn't really a raccoon," I said. "I mean, they might be related, but I was actually a giant panda."

She looked horrified. "Oh my God. I didn't even – why didn't you say anything?"

"The panda shrugged. He's not very confrontational, I guess."

The horror started to shift into laughter. "Oh God," she kept saying, again and again – and I knew which God she meant. "I'm so sorry. That must have been awkward." She caught her breath. "Though you really *were* a helpful raccoon. I meant that."

"Thanks." I'm not sure I've ever received a stranger compliment. "Though really, anything you got out of it came from you. The Vision Quest is only as good as what you bring into it – what you're willing to give, what you're willing to take. And I don't think most people would have been brave enough to admit anything about Jesus here."

"I don't mention it around most Christians either," she said. "What I do doesn't really square with them, either."

"Like the snake dancing?"

She sat down. "Yeah. Like the snake dancing."

We talked for a while, trading stories of our respective beliefs – one of the major pastimes at Heartland. She told me that to her, Jesus was a trickster god, more Dionysus than Apollo; I told her about Thor, and the giants, and the Nine Worlds. She told me about belly dancing in a Middle Eastern restaurant in St. Louis; I told her about graduate school in Kansas City.

People came up the stairs, some stumbling drunk, some singing, but we paid them no mind. Even Sarah's brothers walk past us on their way to drum, and I just nodded at them, noting Alaric's imp-grin as he passed. The Snake Dancer and I talked for over an hour, passing religions back and forth to each other like children playing tag.

"So what were you going down to Herne's Hollow for?" I asked.

"To talk to Jesus." She smiled, self-consciously. "That still sounds strange. Going to a place named for one of your gods to talk to mine." She paused and started to correct herself. "Not that I think there's anything wrong with your gods, I told you that I was fine with—"

"It's fine. Gaea takes all kinds."

She nodded. "I should probably go. It's got to be two in the morning already."

"Could I come with you?" I asked. Fantasies flashed through my mind: Herne's Hollow was the grove dedicated to Holy Manhood, and supposedly full of invigorating phallic energy. I pictured entering the Hollow with a beautiful woman, and in a near-trance turning to kiss her, kiss her and maybe more, there in the Hollow under the moonlight –

"No," she said. "It's something I really need to do for myself."

She got up and started to walk down the stairs again. I called after her before she got far. "Hey," I said, "I never told you my name."

She stopped and looked back. "Well, not past Mr. Raccoon, or possibly the Panda, anyway," she lilted.

"Eric," I say.

"Maria," she responded. Then she put her finger on her chin and reconsidered.

"Mimi." And then she kept walking.

I went back up to my camp, where Alaric and Joe sat stoking a low fire. "Hey, panda-man," called Alaric as I sat down in a Coleman camp chair. "Who was the girl?"

"I met her on the Vision Quest. Her name is Mimi."

Alaric has two expressions. Occasionally he wears a face of total serenity; he's more in tune with nature than I will ever be. The rest of the time, he has that damned imp-grin.

"What'd you do after we left?"

"We talked," I said with a sigh. "And then she went down to Herne's Hollow to meditate."

"Wait, you let her go down there by herself?" He rolled his eyes and went back to poking logs with a stick. "One of these days, Scott, you're going to start liking girls, but I sure as hell don't know when."

\* \* \*

Late on Sunday night it started to rain. We were lucky that Heartland; most years, a tent-destroying rainstorm rolls in on Saturday, but a shade-fly could handle the rain that night. Mimi and I sat in the campsite called Elysium, eating cantaloupe and warming ourselves by a fire built in a hibachi.

"Are you coming back next year?" I asked her.

"I want to, yes," she said. She swallowed her cantaloupe. "What about you?"

"I'm pretty much married to it," I said. "Sarah would drag me here by my hair if I tried to avoid it."

The drumming had mostly stopped – the rain drove people away from the fire, as it had driven us away. All around Gaea, people were returning to their campsites, ready to sleep, ready for the morning, when they would pack up and return to their normal lives – wearing work clothes, avoiding any mention of religion, telling their children not to talk about the Goddess. Alaric tells me that the reason he comes to Heartland is for the reprieve it gives him from the real world, the world where he has to hide who he is and what he believes. At Camp Gaea, he can just be himself – a pagan, among pagans, unafraid.

I wonder what it says about me that the only time I felt that way was in the company of a Christian.

Mimi looked up through the trees that sheltered Elysium. "I don't think it's going to let up any time soon. I should go to bed. Long drive in the morning." She stretched and walked over to her tent, a squat thing covered completely by a brown tarp. I followed her over, away from the sight of the other campers, to say goodnight.

"It's been good to meet you," I told her. "You added a lot to the festival for me." I wasn't telling the whole truth, like usual – I'm always too afraid for that. She *was* the festival to me, the Gaea in the camp. Heartland promised thousands of potential religious experiences: a marketplace full of trinkets and crystals and herbs, offers for the "nine worlds massage," aura readings, workshops for raising families, workshops for fetishistic sex magick, rituals designed to take you into the heavens, down into the earth, promises to create

wholly new practices, promises to reunite you with your ancestors. And none of it meant as much to me as this Christian girl in her green sarong.

"It was good to meet you too," she says, and maybe she hid similar misgivings. Maybe she was just being polite.

I dearly wanted her to invite me beneath the brown tarp. For that matter, I dearly wanted to *suggest* that she invite me in. But she did not, and I did not, and I kissed her on the forehead and said that I would see her the next year.

I didn't see her the next year, though. Actually, I never saw her again. Every time I pass through St. Louis, I think of calling her, but I never do. Call it fear: fear of women, fear of Christianity, fear of ruining that perfect weekend in 2009. Sometimes she seems like a mirage: someone who appeared in my life just as I needed her. That moment beside the fire eating cantaloupe had been the first time I hadn't thought about Kazakhstan in months. I don't know that I fell in love with Mimi, but I certainly fell in love with the idea of her: the Goddess dancing in the night with a snake coiled around her, like the Tarot card called the Universe.

On Monday I packed away my wet tent and stuffed my dirty clothes into a duffel bag. Despite the fuss of taking down tents and loading cars, Monday morning is always the quietest time of Heartland. Nobody wants to talk, because talking means saying goodbye. I found Mimi before I left, kissed her on the forehead, gave her a poem I'd written for her after she'd gone to bed. And then I got in the car and started on my way home.

You have to pass through a little Kansas town, all on one side of a gravel road, to get to Camp Gaea. There's a Methodist church with a message board out front. Sarah and I

always noticed and laughed at the sign's messages as part of our Heartland rituals: "There are some questions that can't be answered by Google," it once said. "Son Screen Prevents Sin Burn." We wonder sometimes whether the Christians know about the camp of naked pagans down the road from them and whether they say anything about it over Memorial Day Weekend. More than likely, they know, and they pass over us in silence.

I passed the church, driving behind a line of five other Heartland cars, and saw the message board. No joke that day. It read, "Live simply, love generously, care deeply, speak kindly. Leave the rest to God." It seemed like good advice. Pity I knew I'd never take it.

## THE LIVES OF THE APOSTATES

*"The world has always warmed to its fallen heroes. Hector rather than Achilles, Robert E. Lee and not Ulysses S. Grant, stir the imagination of posterity, however lost or wrong-headed the causes they championed. They fill the Valhalla of our fantasies. The emperor Julian is in a similar class. The wonder of historian and artist is still aroused by the late-Roman prince, nephew of Constantine, who lived his early years in constant peril of sharing his father's fate, his youth in almost total isolation, and his early manhood as a wandering and dreaming student. Yet he almost overnight turned into a born leader, and an administrator who bent every effort during a reign of twenty months in a hopeless effort to restore the old religion. His death in battle at the age of thirty-two in a grandiose scheme to conquer the Persian Empire and emulate Alexander the Great seems only to add stature to what objectively was a wasteful and futile endeavor."*

*-W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity**

## I

I have this fantasy about throwing a brick through the window of the House of Jesus, just to watch the glass scatter amongst the inspirational books and Precious Moments figures. I don't know if I would steal anything. It seems like I *ought* to; stealing is all that separates the thief from the common vandal, but I'm not in the market for anything at a Christian supply store. I know I would get caught. Kirksville is too small to get away with anything, except maybe on graduation night. It might be worth it for the jokes, though. "Yeah, I robbed the House of Jesus. Guess I should have known he'd have good security."

I drove past the House of Jesus on my way to work one evening in early September. It's in the town square, which is a little out of my way, but I like to make a point of driving past it just to fantasize. I saw the clerk, an older woman with roller-tight auburn curls, sweeping up out front and waved at her. I remember this one time last year, in my sophomore year of college, when she got a big FedEx shipment, big enough that she could barely lift it. I swooped in and lifted the box for her. The labels told me that it was full of copies of *The Purpose Driven Life*. I remember wanting to run off with the box and throw it into the glass-riddled alleyway behind the Dukum Inn – to make a point, I guess, though I've got no clue what that point would be. Anyway, I pushed out and carried the box into the store for the woman, and she called me a nice young man. She's a sweet woman, but not a great judge of character.

I turned onto Scott Street and headed up to a complex of generically modern buildings – half a dozen of them, so similar that only the address numbers tell them apart. A wooden sign out front read "CHERITON VALLEY." I parked and headed to building 3A. Even before I got my keys out, I could hear heavy metal on the television. This was not a great omen for the evening to come.

Three men were in the living room: two sitting, one jumping up and down. Mike, my counterpart, sat in a tan armchair staring at the television. Mike was one of the few black guys native to Kirksville. He was a couple of years older than me, twenty-seven or twenty-eight, and built like a scarecrow. "Hey man," he said. "You're early."

"I thought I'd come in and get my paperwork done." I looked at the television and saw two huge, sweaty men in underwear grappling, confirming my suspicions: the heavy metal had been entrance music. The boys (I shouldn't call them *boys*, I should call them *mentally-handicapped-adults*, but I can't help it) loved pro wrestling. Well, Donny, the one who jumped up and down chanting "Un-der-taker! Un-der-taker!", he loved pro wrestling; he demanded to watch every episode of WWE programming we got on Cheriton's basic cable plan. Jimmy, so far as I had ever seen, never liked – or even noticed – anything.

I grimaced at the tape. "Hey, Mike, can I talk to you for a sec?"

"Sure." Mike didn't stand up so much as *unfold* out of the chair. We walked out of the white-and-beige living room to the white-and-beige kitchen. "What's up?"

"It's eight o'clock," I whispered. "Why the fuck are they watching wrestling?"

"Donny wanted to watch his Undertaker tape. Wouldn't shut up about it. It's almost over."

I glanced over the counter to see a Hell in a Cell match from the late '90s. The Undertaker choke-slammed his opponent, Mankind, through the top of the cage and down to the ring twenty feet below. Mankind was going to lay there for a few minutes with a broken tooth up his nose, before getting up again despite the screams of the announcers to stay down. I knew this because I'd been forced to watch this tape about twelve times already.

"Jesus Christ," I muttered. "It gets him all wound up. He's supposed to go to bed in an hour and a half."

"He'll calm down. Seriously, Lou, he would have been more aggravating if I hadn't put it on. Kid loves his Undertaker." The "kid" was older than either of us, but that's beside the point.

"Yeah, yeah. I know. Putting him to bed's going to be hell, but oh well." I shrugged. Both of my boys had given me worse nights. "Anyway, paperwork."

"Let me know when you get done so I can start mine."

Considering I was essentially a baby-sitter, the paperwork seemed pretty unreasonable. There's a form for clocking in, another for clocking out, a timetable for meals, a timetable for meds, a minor incident report form (used it when Donny tripped over an end table and twisted his ankle), and a major incident form, which I've never had to use. There were others, too, but they didn't come up much. I filled out my clock-in sheet. "Hey, Mike. They had dinner yet?"

"Yessir," he said. "Finest Spaghetti-Os in the state of Missouri." Jimmy stirred at the sound of Spaghetti-Os, but quickly went back into his catatonia.

One less thing I needed to fill out. I finished up my beginning-of-shift duties and went back into the den. "Alright, chief, take it."

"The bridge is yours, Number One," he said, and went back to the kitchen. After about ten minutes – in which approximately three minutes of actual wrestling had occurred – I heard Mike close up the paperwork binder. "See you guys Tuesday."

"Not working tomorrow?"

"Nope. Taking the day off. Haven't had an actual date with Essence in weeks."

"Right on," I said. I hated saying that. It identified me as the lame middle-class white boy that I was. "Have fun."

"Bye Mike!" Donny almost-yelled.

Jimmy said nothing.

\* \* \*

I got Donny to sleep around ten o'clock, after arguing for an hour about whether the Tombstone Piledriver belonged to the Undertaker or his "brother" Kane. At least I think it was an argument; it's hard to tell with the boys. We agreed that they both used the move, but 'Taker used it first.

Sometimes I let Donny stay up, but he was high-functioning enough that he had a job at the Ponderosa Steakhouse, and he needed to be up early for that. That was a two-edged sword for me: the boys weren't the most scintillating company, but once they were in bed, my only job was to not fall asleep until six AM. Mostly I watched TV. I got acquainted with the slow drift from the end of primetime into late-night news and talk shows into the faerie-world between two and five AM, where infomercials for strange kitchen appliances and

evangelistic pleas from megachurches filled the airwaves. Sometimes I did crossword puzzles or read. During the semester, I usually did homework.

I sank into the easy chair and flipped the channel over to *The Daily Show*. The show was funny but forgettable – some Bush gaffes, a segment with the bald guy "on assignment." At the commercial break I started to look through my phone for somebody to call. Names scrolled past: people who I probably would never talk to again but who had been important enough to me, once, that I couldn't bring myself to delete them... A repository of relationships, sorted by ringtones and thumbnails.

Lucy came up. Lucy Walstead. Next to her name flashed a photograph of a smiling girl with turquoise hair. You might have mistaken it for wig, but only if you didn't know her.

I sent her a text. *Hey. You busy?*

About a minute later, I got a reply. *Not really. What's up?*

I hit the call button and muted the TV. Garbled closed-captions appeared. *IT'S A WONDERFUL IDEA*, the captions informed me long after Jon Stewart's lips already indicated the punchline, *EXCEPT FOR THE PART WHERE IT DOESN'T WORK*.

"Hello?" said Lucy.

"Hey, kid. How are you?"

"A little late for you to be calling, isn't it?" She yawned. "I mean, I'm good, but don't you have class?"

"Yeah, but I've got work in the morning."

"Oh, right. Night shift, huh?" Lucy usually sounded like she was talking in her sleep: high and quiet, a voice full of strange lilts and notes. "That must be rough. Any morning classes?"

"History of Christian Thought I at eleven."

"Christian Thought, huh?" she said. "Well, that should be a short class." We both blurted out in synchronistic chuckles.

"That's terrible," I said, "and you're a terrible person for saying it."

"You laughed."

"Well," I said, "I never said I *wasn't* a terrible person."

Her voice turned serious. "Really, though, why are you taking that?" she asked.

"You're just going to end up pissed off about it."

"Blame the dean. I have to take something from the Abrahamic tree, and every other class starts at seven in the morning. It's that Protestant work ethic for you."

She chuckled. "Good luck, I guess. What's the plan? Sit in the back, try not to fall asleep?"

"Miss Walstead, you offend my honor as an academic and a scholar," I said. "I intend to confront these ideas from a position of cautious respect and thoroughly interrogate them as a student of comparative religion ought to approach any system."

"Uh huh."

"...From the back row while doing the New York Times crossword."

"That's my boy." She paused. "Christian Thought I, you said. What's that go up to?"

"600, I think. Christian Thought II is medieval."

"That mean's Julian's in there. Well, that's something – you'll get to read about him."

"Yeah, that's something to look forward to. Last pagan emperor. 'Oh boy! In chapter eight we meet a cool guy who tries to bring back the gods, but he fucks up, gets killed, and Christianity inherits the earth instead!' That's a thrill a minute right there."

"Okay, well. Still, it's a break from reading about old men excommunicating each other, right?"

"I guess."

I realized that I hadn't talked to Lucy, other than the occasional text message, since the Midsummer ritual my parents had at their house in St. Louis last June. It was the first time our little pack – me, Lucy, her brother Andy, our friend Dottie – had all shown up to a ritual together since the year before, when our parents had finally initiated us into the coven. It's mostly distance; Lucy lived up in Madison, studying linguistics, and I lived in Kirksville. Dottie and Andy still lived in St. Louis, but neither of them went to many festivals anymore, not after they broke up.

Lucy wore a white robe that day, cotton, and when the wind blew I could see the nubs of her breasts push against the fabric. We stood next to each other in the circle – we always stand next to each other, ever since we were little kids. I think of my life as this long line of Lucys that stretches back into the darkness of youth: Lucy at eight, dressed in magenta, her hair still blonde, Lucy at fourteen, the first time she dyed her hair green, a vivid counterpoint to the deep emerald of her Samhain clothes. I watched her grow from a little girl to the tall, violet-haired Valkyrie I saw at Midsummer, and I grew along with her, starting squat and short, becoming taller and broader and hairier, holding her hand all the while.

She wore a white robe that day, the last time I held her hand, the last day I'd passed her a chalice of white wine and kissed her and wished that she would never thirst and never hunger.

"You going home for Harvest?" she asked.

"I don't know. Probably. I hadn't really thought about it..." I heard a noise from the boys' room. "Hey, Luce, hold on a minute."

"Sure. Is something wrong?"

"Not sure. I'll be right back."

I sat my phone down and walked down the hall to the bedrooms, but before I got there, Jimmy walked out. He had taken off his pajamas; he stood in the middle of the hallway, naked and hairy. He looked right past me, as though I weren't there, and then kept walking. I let him by me because, according to the law, I can't touch either of them. And, frankly, because I knew the kinds of shit Jimmy got into sometimes, and I didn't long for any occasion to touch his bare skin.

"Hey, buddy," I said. "Come on, get back in your room, it's late."

He walked to the front door and took a few steps out into the parking lot. Just what I needed: Jimmy walking around Kirksville naked on my watch. I followed him out into the chilly autumn air and watch him stop at the edge of the sidewalk and look up at the moon.

"Jimmy, come on, you'll catch a cold. Come on back inside, buddy."

He didn't move; Mother Luna had entranced him, and he just stood there with his arms slack at his side, staring up. God, what I would have given to just be able to grab him

by the shoulders and drag him inside. Instead, I found myself stepping up next to him and looking up too, hoping that none of the other caretakers saw us.

I looked at Jimmy. He had a wide vacant face and a scraggly beard and pockmarks all over his body. Most of the time, he just sat on the couch and did nothing at all, but occasionally he got urges like this one and couldn't be dissuaded from them. Donny understood when I told him to do something; he might argue, he might yell, but he understood. Not Jimmy. Jimmy just had his silent life and his occasional mystic compulsions, like the time we took the boys to the carnival and he'd just stayed on the Tilt-A-Whirl for an hour, refusing to budge an inch when he was told his turn was over and he had to go. Jimmy almost never wanted anything, but when he did, by God, he wanted it with the totality of his being.

I put my hand on his shoulder and patted him gently. "Come on, buddy. It's cold out here. Let's go in."

For a second I felt him tense up like a brick wall, but then he turned soft, and he let me walk him back into the house. I led him to his room, where I discovered he'd shit his pajamas, and felt both vindicated and horrified. I dressed him in another pair and carried the dirty ones out to the washing machine.

It took me twenty minutes, all told, to get back to the phone. By then, Lucy had hung up, of course. She'd left a message: *Sorry champ, class for me tomorrow too. Give me a call when you aren't on the night shift, we'll find something good and schlocky on cable. Love, Lucy.*

The boys weren't yet up when Dana arrived. Dana's my boss, sort of. She doesn't sign my checks, but she's the one officially "in charge of the house," meaning that she looks over the paperwork and makes sure Mike and I aren't neglecting the boys. I don't talk to her much. I mean, what did we have in common? She grew up in Macon, half an hour south of here, had two kids, got a divorce when she was 38. She took this job to pay her bills. Me, I'm a city mouse who spends his time writing about Humean epistemology. She's the sort of person I don't want to be when I'm in my forties: prudent, quiet, and not at all disappointed with where she ended up. I want to be reckless, and loud, and constantly disappointed. I look forward to disappointment the way a factory worker looks forward to quitting time.

\* \* \*

I walked into my apartment about 6:35 AM and noticed the television was on. The volume was so low that the sour-faced newscaster only had a dull hum for a voice. My roommate sat on the couch reading a book by lamplight. He wore the same clothes he had the night before: black cargo pants, black combat boots, a black t-shirt that informed the world, MY INVISIBLE FRIENDS THINK YOU'RE CRAZY. Silver chains everywhere. He flipped a page and didn't look up.

"Hey Grimey," I said, and locked the door. "Up early, aren't you?"

"Never went to bed," he said. Grimey flipped some of his long, oily hair out of his face. I worry about his hair. Sometimes I think I should do what my Aunt Mabel did and put plastic sheets on the couches, just to protect them from grease stains. (They are *my* couches, after all. I think Grimey might have bought his own office chair, but I wouldn't swear to it.)

"Been up reading this book."

"Oh." I walked closer to him and peered over his shoulder. "Hey, wait a minute. Is that my copy of *Prometheus Rising*?"

"Yeah," he said. "You loaned it to me."

"When?"

"A while ago." Grimey can be frustratingly laconic. He doesn't do it to be evasive, not intentionally – usually – but it's damned annoying. His answer to any question involving time is "a while."

"I couldn't find it when we were moving into the apartment. Are you telling me you've had that book for, what, a year and a half now?"

"You never asked for it back..."

Sigh. "Well, just put it back when you're done."

I got ready to go catch a nap before class, but Grimey spoke up again. "This quarter experiment he talks about here. The one where you're supposed to visualize a quarter, like, really hard, in your minds' eye? And then you go out and look for the quarter, see if it's real?"

"What about it?"

"You ever try it?"

"Nah. Never tried most of the stuff in that book," I said. "I think Bob Wilson's a good philosopher, but I get the idea, you know? There's all kinds of things that we just don't notice when we're out walking around. No point in wasting time looking for that particular thing."

Grimey nodded in the way he did when he tried to look wise. Grimey has never struck me as the kind of person who will ever look "wise." He always looked like a slightly underdone infant, still just a little too pink. "So you never found one then, huh?"

"No, man." I leaned against the wall, beneath Grimey's poster of some metal singer. "I never found a quarter."

"Because you didn't believe in the quarter."

"Because people just don't abandon quarters on sidewalks. Those get picked up. I found some pennies, once, down by the library."

He set the book on the coffee table. "I'm going to try it. Watch me, I'll be drowning in them before the week is out."

I nodded. "I'm sure. Look, man, I really need to catch a nap before class. We'll argue about your delusions later, alright?"

"You got it." He grinned. Grimey had excellent teeth; his mother's a dentist. "Sleep well, my friend."

"Right. Thanks."

Down the hall and to the right, that was my room. Hard to open the door all the way due to the dirty clothes on the floor. Grimey and me, we didn't live in an exactly "responsible" way, but neither of us minded the other's slovenliness, so we got along. We met because, at Lucy's suggestion, I tried to start the Truman State Campus Pagans group in my freshmen year. Six people joined the Facebook group. Only Grimey showed up to the meeting. I never imagined that I would end living with a man who only answers to the name

"Grimalkin," but in Kirksville, the pickings were pretty slim once you moved beyond fratboys and evangelists.

Before college, I would have called Grimey a "K-Mart pagan." That's what my dad always called people like him: they picked up a book, thought being a witch sounded cool, and went looking for supplies. When they had acquired enough essential oils, pentagrams, and varieties of incense, they declared themselves True Witches and began to preach the gospel. (I learned to stay out of Grimey's room early on in our friendship due to the overwhelming mixture of marijuana and Nag Champa. After negotiations, he agreed to ease up on the Nag Champa.) K-Mart pagans were easy to make fun of, and we, ourselves claiming to be the One True Pagans, liked to feel superior to them, but...

I looked over at my altar. I've kept an altar ever since I moved away from home, but I've never been great about upkeep. The statues of the gods – Odin, Mercury, Thoth, Athena as the token female – hadn't been dusted in a while, and the wine in the little chalice had evaporated long ago, leaving behind the strange honey resin that serves only as a trap for fruit flies. Around the little island of gods churned a sea of dirty socks and discarded homework, and beyond that, an unmade bed and a television whose only function was to play video games.

I really should have dusted off the table, said a few prayers, made a few offerings. I didn't have much to give beyond a cheap jug of white wine in the kitchen, but I always believed the gods appreciated the thought more than the materials involved. Apparently I wasn't much good at keeping the thoughts in mind either. There were a lot of things I'd

neglected: the piles of laundry, the stack of unreturned library books, the calendar of moon phases Andy got me for Yule. A lot of things I should have already done.

I should have, but it was seven AM and I had class in four hours. I told myself 'maybe later,' but I already knew that I wouldn't.

## II

I used to wonder if Dr. Eccleston ever polished his skull. The fluorescent classroom lights glared off the top of his head so brightly – I didn't think skin was supposed to *do* that. He was probably in his mid-fifties, and the hair he had left was a faded red. He wore a mustache but no beard. He probably should have, though. It would have covered up that crater in his chin that bulged whenever he talked.

Male professors – here at Truman, anyway – seemed to come in two basic varieties: suits and sweaters. Both were safe, academic clothes, but they served different functions. A suit, especially the collegiate tweed jacket variety, projected an aura of authority: *I am an expert. You are a student. Defer to me.* The sweater, almost always knit wool (which should tell you something), said the opposite: *I'm a human being, too, the first among equals. Confide in me.* Just first impressions, of course, both laced with bullshit, but they told a lot about what kind of person the professor thought he was. Dr. Eccleston definitely wanted us to think he was a Sweater Prof: your kind old uncle, except with a doctorate in Church History. He might as well have had *Trust Me* embroidered on his chest.

He was teaching us about martyrdom one day in mid-September. "Tertullian – one of the church fathers in chapter six – he said that 'the blood of martyrs is the seed of church,'" Dr. Eccleston began. He juggled a piece of chalk in his left hand; probably an affectation, to make us think he was really thoughtful. Like he's sorting through a thousand complications trying to find what will best explain it to amateurs like us. "That is, the faith of a martyr

could convince a pagan to convert to Christianity. Faith worth dying over isn't something you see every day. For Romans, faith was something you did with the same passion you put into going to the bathhouse, or buying groceries – a civic duty. Something for appearances. Not worth getting killed over."

I saw the implication in what he said – the Romans didn't really care about religion, so their religion wasn't really valid. That was nonsense, though – sure, a lot of people felt that way about the Olympians, but what about the mystery cults? What about the Eleusinians? Isis and Osiris? Soldiers bathing in the sacred blood of a bull sacrificed to Mithras? Wasn't there passion there?

"But martyrs also caused a lot of problems. Questions come up about how a person is supposed to react to persecution." Dr. Eccleston leaned on the wooden podium at the front of the class. *Relax. See how relaxed I am?* "Say you're a Christian in the year 303. The Emperor Diocletian is engaging in a big persecution, because the Oracle at Didyma told him that Christians are hindering Apollo's ability to predict the future. You've heard of some horrible things happening – there's a story of one man who was scourged with a whip, had salt and vinegar poured in his wounds, and then got boiled alive. Another man had molten iron poured all over his body. And then the Emperor's men come knocking at your door. What do you do?"

I raised my hand. So did a couple of other students. This was a pretty average Truman class – 23, 24 students. Most of them had silver crosses around their necks, or wore t-shirts stating they graduated from Chapel Grove Methodist School or the like. The rest of the class

– I guess I include myself in this group – seemed to be made of bored kids who wanted to get a degree in Philosophy and didn't see why they had to sit through all this Tertullian bullshit.

Dr. Eccleston pointed at the middle of the class, at me. (No, I didn't end up sitting in the back row doing crossword puzzles. Give me a little more credit than that.) "Lou?"

"Given the choice between being boiled alive and lying about which god I like best? I think I'd go with lying."

"That seems sensible, doesn't it?" Dr. Eccleston nodded. "So you turn over your scriptures and you burn some incense to Jupiter and Romulus, and you think you've gotten off pretty well. But then you head back to your Christian church the next week and your friends aren't sure what to do with you. Maybe it sounds reasonable – you avoided potential execution or torture – it's hard to blame you for that. But then somebody brings up the martyrs..."

"You see, some people confronted with that situation weren't as practical as you, Lou. They said, 'no, I won't betray my faith. No, I won't burn an offering to your false god.' And some of them were carted away and killed. They stood up for their beliefs in a way you did not. They must be better Christians than you – shouldn't you have laid down your life for your faith, as well?"

"But that's ludicrous," I said. "Did they really think Jesus preferred that His followers get scourged to death than burn a little powder for the other team?"

"That was the subject of one of the big schisms, actually. When Constantine the Great was in power, some of those bishops who'd turned over their texts to be burned – some who even turned in other Christians to the authorities – were reinstated to positions of power. The

Donatists called them *traditores*. If that sounds a lot like *traitors*, well, you get the idea. The Donatists wanted to have a church of saints, not sinners, said there should be no forgiveness for a traitor – that, in essence, it was either martyrdom or excommunication. No inbetween. That pro-martyr sentiment was enough keep the Donatists going in northern Africa for centuries after Rome fell."

Naturally, the church, that high bastion of redemption, would rather you died pointlessly, and their bishops spent decades arguing against any kind of forgiveness. I guess I should have figured. Even in matters of real life and death, they manage to turn it into another story of old men shouting dogmas at each other. That's all there really is in this class: martyrs, old men, and the band of small-town evangelists and apathetic philosophers forced to listen to them. Dr. Eccleston kept talking for another twenty minutes, but I quit taking notes.

\* \* \*

Grimey lost the coin flip that night, so he had to cook. Thank God. I lost the flip the last three days and had begun to fear another streak like back in April, where I ended up cooking for three weeks without reprieve. We liked the randomness of the system – both of us were attracted to a certain degree of willful irresponsibility. I'm not sure how much of a victory it was that night, though. Grimey had to cook, but that meant I had time to do my homework for Eccleston.

Certain professors get a reputation for their idiosyncrasies. This one medievalist took her job as the University's Grand Marshal very seriously. She carried her official club with her everywhere, threatened to wallop anybody who interfered with her students' education.

Another guy, this white-haired German, jumped around the classroom, said that an active body encouraged active thinking. Eccleston was most famous for his homework: every reading had an accompanying double-sided legal sheet with questions and blank spaces. The first time I got one of these I couldn't imagine needing all the space; then I realized that the space was for questions like this:

*2. Describe the relationship between the Roman Empire and the Jewish race at the time of the birth of Christ. What provinces and cities were historically Jewish? Who were the local governors circa 30 A.D.? Describe the interactions between the following groups at the time of Christ: Sadducees, Pharisees, Sanhedrin.*

The information was in the textbooks, addressed in the order the worksheet posed the questions. But a single item could tackle twenty pages of the main textbook, not to mention the supplements. Eccleston gave us about three inches to write in. Never in my life have I written so small.

"Jesus Christ," I said eventually, and put down my pen. "Why doesn't he just ask us to rewrite the goddamn chapter? It would be more honest."

"Who?" asked Grimey. He looked up from the griddle, which was full of French toast. (Grimey makes breakfast-for-supper a lot when he loses the coin flip.)

"Eccleston. Christian Thought guy. I mean, these worksheets..."

"Oh, Dr. Eccleston?" I saw him flip a slice of toast, but it broke apart, and he dropped it on the floor. Grimey shuffled it off to the side with his toe. I'm not sure if we ever got around to cleaning it up. "I had him for Judaism, freshman year."

"I didn't know that. Why were you in Judaism?"

"Hadn't declared my major yet." Grimey eventually settled on English, after a failed semester in Physics. "Took it for my philosophy and religion elective." He looked over at the kitchen table. "Yep, same worksheets. Man, I remember one... Four lines of questions, and the last sentence was, I swear, *summarize the past six thousand years of the Jewish experience.*"

"What did you write?"

Grimey lifted the French toast with his spatula: three pieces for each of us, plus a couple of microwave sausage links and a slice of cantaloupe. "I just put down *Abraham, the Temple, persecutions, Nazis, Israel.* I mean, what else was there room for?" He brought the plates over and sat down; I did my share and got some cans of soda from the fridge. We didn't use glasses. Most days we were doing good if we used the trash can.

"Still," Grimey said as he bit into his sausage, "Preacher-Man isn't a bad guy. I've had worse professors."

"Preacher-Man? That's funny." I took a gulp of soda. "Your class call him that?"

"Nah. People from my church. 'Preacher-Man's trying to organize this year's Vacation Bible School and he...'"

"Wait, wait. What do you mean, *your* church?"

Grimey hesitated, tried to cover it up by taking a sip of his cola. "Uh, well, you know. Church. When my mom comes to visit. She makes me go to church."

"I thought you and your mom just went to Pancake City on Sundays."

"Yeah. Pancake City." He chewed his bubblegum-pink lips and cut up a piece of toast. "Pancake City and church."

"Your mom doesn't know you're pagan?"

"Fuck no, my mom doesn't know. She can probably take a guess, but I'm not bringing it up to her."

We ate in silence. For a minute the only thing to hear was the little clatter of knives and forks on dishwasher-safe plates.

"I guess it's a good thing your mom doesn't like me much, or I might have blurted something out about it," I said. "Sorry, man. I thought she knew."

"It's not a big deal," he said, but of course, that was a lie. I didn't press it any further.

"So... Eccleston is, what, a member?" I asked. "Some volunteer?"

"Dude, he's the pastor."

I set down my fork. "What? He can't do that. He teaches at a state university."

"I don't think that matters. He does it in his free time."

"How can he be objective about anything he teaches if he's preaching on Sunday? Why would they trust a fucking pastor to teach anyone about Judaism?"

Grimey shrugged and ate his French toast. "Tenure, I guess. It lets you go places."

\* \* \*

I woke up at 3:30 that morning with boiling iron hissing on my skin. A dissociative moment followed; I could not tell whether I was in my bedroom in the Community Chest apartments or in some Roman dungeon while a legionnaire wore trenches in my skin with a scourge.

Somebody – Grimey or a really inept burglar – was crashing around in the kitchen. Grimey had gone out drinking, but I stayed in; I had a long shift at work the next morning.

The rest of the revelry started to filter in through my window: the bacchanalia of undergraduate life, parading through the parking lots of this apartment complex and every one like it for a mile. Everyone in Kirksville was drunk, and I was dreaming about martyrs.

The boiling iron sensation finally subsided. Just cold sweat now. I rubbed my temples and lay back down.

Martyrs.

The whole world's obsessed with martyrs. St. Stephen and Thomas Beckett, James Dean and Tupac... It barely matters what they died for, whether they had any idea that they were dying for something at all. They died without seeing the Promised Land, and there's something glamorous about that, something romantic. We don't like happy endings, not really. There's something so much more fulfilling about tragedy, about failure...

Through the wall, I heard a man yelling. "I don't care about your fucking magic quarters. Where's the goddamn scotch, Grimey?"

Grimey mumbled something, too low to hear. I'd finally let my eyes close, ready to venture back to the torture chambers, when three loud bangs hammered on my hollow plastic door.

"Hey, Lou," Grimey said in a high warble, "Where did we put the scotch?"

I affected a waking groan. "I think we drank it all."

"Oh." A beat. "Fuck, man. You were sleeping, weren't you?"

"No," I sighed. Dumbfuck. "I wasn't sleeping at all."

\* \* \*

Grimey looked like he was dressed for 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Picture Day. There was nothing specifically awkward about his suit and tie (dark blue, drizzled with periwinkles); it was more that he just wasn't a suit person. Grimey liked baggy jeans that jingled with silver chains; slacks might as well have been laced with itching powder. He'd even slicked his hair back from its usual dirty sprawl. (I don't know how he got the idea that the best way to look respectable was to add *more* oil, but there you are.) He looked out the window at the brick church on the Square and gave me a look of delicious annoyance. "I can't fucking believe we're doing this."

"Calm down," I said. "They know you here, don't they?"

"That's my point!" said Grimey. "They're going to ask me about my mom and why I haven't been coming to services and whether I'm going to volunteer to, I don't know, paint the rec center or something. It's embarrassing."

"It's not such a big deal."

"If it wasn't such a big deal we wouldn't have come." He sighed. "You're the obsessive one."

We parked across the street. I couldn't see any indication of which door to go through; the church seemed more like a compound. It had four visible white doors and the potential for more hidden in alleys and rear walls. None of them looked ostentatious enough. "How the hell do we get in?" I asked.

"You parked on the wrong side of the building, dumbass," said Grimey. "Come on."

Grimey led me to the other side, where an ornate door flanked by pale Grecian columns waited. A young woman in a blue dress and a young man wearing a white shirt but

no coat stood at the doors with leaflets. Neither of them acknowledged Grimey, and Grimey, for his part, just looked at the ground. I looked at the lime-green flier and read it over:

*September 16, 2006*

*Corpus Christi Baptist Church*

*David Eccleston, Pastor*

*'To teach the word of the Lord, to follow His commands,*

*To share His Gospel, to glorify His name'*

Church news followed: choir practice had been canceled, and Deacon Lindquist would be absent over next week to attend a conference in Boise. The Youth Service Corps needed money to go to New Orleans to help renovate houses after Hurricane Katrina.

I had no idea how *red* this church would be until Grimey and I were inside. All the pews were covered in red upholstery and the walls were the color of a thin scab. The scarlet carpet squished a half inch with every step; I felt like I was wading through a river of coagulation. The aisle led to a series of wide stairs with a podium at the top. At least that was wood-grained. Green plants waited in pots behind the podium, but the red made even the most innocent fern look sinister.

"I thought churches were supposed to be all white and pure," I whispered to Grimey.

"Maybe it's to let us know where we're headed."

We sat down in a pew near the middle. Middle-aged women in conservative dresses had us flanked on all sides. I looked around the room and soaked in the scenery: pillars that held up the balcony and the ceiling, brass crosses that dominated the walls, tall and narrow windows that dispersed the sunlight into diffracted radiance. Grimey reached for the hymnal

and tried to bury himself in it, but within thirty seconds the woman to his left looked at him and gasped.

"Herman! I haven't seen you here in weeks."

If Grimey looked at me, he would have seen my face bent around one word: *Herman?* But he didn't. He sounded like a mall guard on Black Friday. "Hi, Mrs. Beaumont."

"It's so good to see you," she said. "How are you? How is your mother?"

"We're both fine," said Grimey. *Herman.* Grimey.

"You haven't been here – busy with school, I suppose – so you might not have heard, but the rec center needs a new coat of paint, and if you wanted to volunteer..."

\* \* \*

The Sweater Prof was a Suit Preacher: dark gray outfit, crisp white shirt, black tie. In the classroom, the suit meant formality, meant distance, meant *stay at arm's length*. At the pulpit, it meant something else: *I'm a man of God, but I'm not some strange mystic like those Catholic fellows with their long black robes. I'm here to preach the Word, but I'm not the only one with the line to the Man Upstairs. I'm one of you – just the one up front.* Same kinds of messages the sweater sent, really. All context.

He opened with a quote from the bible – Mark something something – and a brief prayer. It seemed very "traditional" to me, whatever that means. I had been to a Catholic service, more reserved and formal than this; I had been to another Baptist church here in Kirksville and watched the preacher pull out a Telecaster. Churches never seemed cohesive; they talked about the same god, but they didn't even use the same books, really. They all had different idea about what God really needed out of you. Some of them felt standing up and

kneeling down in the right order was very important, and some felt like all you had to do was show up and put a couple of dollars in the till, and some didn't even care if you showed up or not, because your salvation had been determined at the very start of the world...

They all had one thing in common, though: between them, they were the True Faith. They could quarrel over the details, but one of them had it right. The world had progressed from the barbaric totems of the primitives to the hedonistic pantheons of the pagans to the One True God, who by definition was all perfection, all beauty, and all benevolence. The rest was all backward-looking heresy. I had never been raised to believe that; my parents had turned away from Christ in their 20s, and they'd brought me up as a heathen. I thought the whole Christian story was bullshit, their theology simplistic, unbelievable.

And yet... And yet.

Part of me always wonders if they are right. And part of me, in the pit of that doubtful fragment, believes they are, and will never believe anything else.

There isn't an atom in my body that could be called Christian. But sometimes, I still think that I'm going to hell.

"Friends, I want to talk to you about something today," Pastor Eccleston said. "Something called apostasy. It's a word we don't use much anymore, but it comes from the Greek, meaning 'standing apart.' It's a word we use for people who have turned their backs on God, who have decided to stand apart from Him and His word."

The pastor leaned on his pulpit just as he leaned on his podium in the classroom. "I've got a story to tell you about a young man I knew back in seminary. This young man – handsome fellow, broad shoulders, good teeth – this young man had known from the time he

was six years old that he wanted to be a pastor, as his father had been, as his grandfather had been. So he worked hard in school and he got accepted into a fine seminary. I might be biased, of course, since I *am* speaking about my own seminary."

Grimey looked like his eyes had been stapled open. The middle-aged women, however, seemed rapt. Admittedly, Eccleston had a fine voice for the pulpit: a steady baritone with just a hint of folksy wheeze. Sort of like Garrison Keillor.

"So he goes to seminary and studies. But you know, in seminary, you spend a lot of time looking over the scripture and reading scholarship... Different things come up. You read about the different dates people attribute to the gospels. Different translations of the Greek. Sometimes you run across something that contradicts everything you'd been taught – that although your copy of the bible has the word 'Lord' everywhere, that word's really all kinds of different words and the people who put it into English didn't tell you there was any difference.

"So this young man starts to question things. He thinks to himself, 'this is all so inconsistent. Where's my eternal truth? Where's my Word of God?' And eventually, he starts to think that it's all a big mistake, a joke nobody came up with a punchline for. He quits the seminary, quits the church. Becomes an apostate. It happens all the time.

"You might have guessed who that young man really was, I'm thinking. It was me.

He paused to take a drink of water. Nobody made any noises, not even an unruly child.

"I quit seminary about a year before I would have finished, moved up to Chicago and taught at a community college. I didn't have anything to do with the church – really, nothing

to do with God. I wasn't quite an atheist, but I certainly wouldn't have called myself a Christian. I regarded it all as superstition. Things just didn't add up.

"I went home for Christmas one year – I guess I was about thirty – and my mother insisted that I go to my father's Christmas service. I went just to placate her. But I got to the church that morning, and saw my father, this sixty-seven year old man, up at that pulpit, just preaching his heart out. At first I looked at him and I thought about how silly he sounded. I remembered one of his verses from a class I took. We looked at eight different translations of that verse and each one seemed like it meant something different. I remember that.

"But then..." Eccleston paused, took a deep speech-turning breath. "But then, I heard the fire in my father's voice. I heard the Holy Spirit behind him. At that point in his life, he was already having troubles: heart problems, bad arthritis. But up there, on that pulpit, he moved like a man thirty years younger, like a man who'd had his burden lifted. It was beautiful. I saw him in a way I never had before, that day.

"Friends, I went home after that service and poked around at the old family bible. I re-read some of the finest scriptures: John 3, Corinthians, the Sermon on the Mount. And you know what? I realized that I had been looking at the wrong thing, the whole time. I had been looking at these quibbles that didn't really matter. Sure, the bible has its flaws – flaws introduced by men who were imperfect, as I was imperfect. But God was there. He was there in my father's breast that Christmas morning, and He was there, in the words of scripture. And He is here, right now, in each of us."

He stood up to his full height, and looked down at us with a kind, reserved smile. "It's not our place, friends, to judge those who have turned from the path, who have been seduced

by the traps and conundrums that surround us. It's not our place to hunt the apostates among us, who might be among us in this very church, today. Sometimes it takes time for people to come around. Sometimes it just takes time."

He finished with a prayer. Everyone bowed their heads but Grimey and I, and one young man two rows ahead of us. Grimey and I looked at each other. I don't know what he read in my face. I hope it was anger.

Grimey put in a dollar when they passed around the till, but I passed the plate to the woman on my right with nothing more added but the warmth of my hand.

\* \* \*

Grimey managed to escape without being pressed into rec room duty. He got in the car and slammed the door. "Well. That was entertaining as hell, wasn't it? It sure beat sleeping in."

"I thought it was enlightening," I said.

"Huh?"

"Proves how much bullshit people are willing to eat if you present it right. Come on, what was the moral of that story? 'I learned that all of the facts about Christianity contradict each other and all this dogma was a fabrication, but gosh darn it, my daddy gave a good speech and that proves there's a God?' Fuck me."

I started the engine and pulled out. Grimey leaned back and rested his elbow on the door. "I don't know, man. I mean, at least he said it's not anybody's place to judge, right? Better than fire and brimstone."

"Nobody's place to judge because eventually all the heretics will realize their mistakes and give in to the One True Way. Bullshit."

"I think you're taking this too seriously, Lou."

We passed through the Square and headed down Franklin Street toward the Community Chest.

"Yeah, well, I don't think you take it seriously enough."

We got back to the apartment without speaking any more. Grimey went into his room to change into something black and spiky. Me, I hadn't slept in a day and a half. I went into my room and slipped off my shoes, threw the dirty socks into the sedimentary layers of laundry on my floor.

The One True Way. There's a part of me that knows there really is only One True Way. That's logic, isn't it? Somewhere there's a correct answer, and when you find it, everything else is proven wrong. Who knows how you would act when you found that kind of truth? Would you spend your whole life telling everyone else about it? Would you run off and become a hermit, content to live in the beatific peace of true knowledge?

Would you die for it?

I sat there staring at the altar of my gods of reason. They stared back, unblinking. It felt like the statues were judging me, solving me like an algebra equation.

I walked over to the altar. I picked up a handkerchief from the floor, the cleanest thing in arm's reach. I started to angrily dust off the statues of my gods, and just as angrily, I started to pray.

### III

*Anyone who had a heart wouldn't turn around and break it*

*And anyone who played a part couldn't turn around and hate it...*

"Sweet Jane." Lucy's ringtone. I groaned and looked over at the clock: 4:57 PM. Shit. It had only been about four hours since I got home from church. I considered ignoring the call and going back to bed, but grudgingly I rolled over and flipped the phone open.

"Yeah?"

"Hey Lou," she said. "You busy?"

"Not especially," I said. I sat up, back against the wall, and stifled a yawn. "What's up?"

"Did I wake you up?" Lucy asked. "It's like, five."

"I didn't get home from work until noon."

"Oh." She paused. "I'm sorry. Do you want me to call back later? I didn't mean to wake you."

"No, no, it's fine. What's going on?"

"I wanted to ask you a favor. Are you going home this weekend?"

I ran over some dates. Today was the 16<sup>th</sup>, so then... Friday would be the 21<sup>st</sup>. "Shit. I forgot all about Harvest Home. I hadn't really made plans, but I guess I should..."

"It's actually good if you aren't," she said. "Well, good for me, anyway. I got a paper into a conference this weekend, down at Mizzou."

"Hey, congratulations."

"Thanks," she said. "I don't really know anyone in Columbia, and it's a pretty long drive from here, so I was wondering if I could crash at your apartment over the weekend."

"Sure, of course..." I could feel the saltwater finally draining out of my mind. Mixed blessings – that would make it that much harder to fall asleep again. "Why aren't you just going to St. Louis?"

"Well, I would if I were going to *your* parents' house, Lou. But getting to the farm would tack on another hour each way." Lucy's parents lived on this little farm they called 'the Elysian Fields,' about forty minutes south of St. Louis. "And I got into a big argument with mom the other day and would rather not have part two come up the night before I give this paper."

"Oh. That's fair," I said. "Yeah, it'll be fun. I'll make sure to ask off of work."

"Awesome. Thank you so much." She sounded sincere, but... Anxious? Hell, I didn't know, maybe it was just me. The whole world looked a little anxious on four hours of sleep.

"Any time. Maybe we can do something for Harvest Home while you're here?"

"Sure, that would be great," she said. "Listen, I better let you get back to sleep, huh? You sound pretty beat."

"Wouldn't be the worst thing that ever happened to me."

"Oh yeah?" For the first time in the conversation, I could hear her smile into the receiver. "What was the worst thing, then?"

"Well, there was that time I met you."

"So the worst time of your life happened when you were six months old?"

"That seventh month was killer."

I swear, I could *hear* that girl roll her eyes. "Get some sleep, Lou."

"I will. See you this weekend, Valkyrie."

Lucy hung up, and I set the phone back on my bedstand (by which I mean a couple of plastic stacking storage containers.)

I couldn't get back to sleep, so I got up and studied for next week's classes instead. I'd already done my Logic homework, so I turned to Eccleston's class. That week we were reading about the House of Constantine, the emperors who brought Christianity to Rome. Constantine the Great saw – well, he claimed he saw, after the fact – the sign of Christ in the sky over the Milvian Bridge, and after that he was pretty open about what religion he wanted to see in power. He stopped funding the pagan temples, made the bishops get their acts together at Nicea. He never converted openly until he was on his deathbed, but it wasn't any kind of secret. His sons, despite being murderous, in-fighting bastards, kept up the support of the Church. Forty years of Christian rule. They never made it the official religion – that wasn't until a couple of emperors later – but the Romans knew which way the wind was blowing, and by and large the Romans followed Imperial fashion.

But then there was Julian.

He was a prince, unfortunately, and because he was a prince he was the enemy of the emperor Constantius. The emperor had his family murdered when Julian was a child, sparing only him and his brother, Gallus. Julian was a baby, so he was no threat; his brother was a cripple, so neither was he. Constantius recruited Gallus to be his Caesar when they were older, and Gallus was successful enough that Constantius had him murdered too. ("Thou shalt not kill." That's how the commandment goes, right?) When Julian was in his 20s,

Constantius realized that he needed someone to take control of Gaul while he was busy in the east. He also realized he had murdered every reasonable candidate for the job, except for Julian – Julian, who was just a dreaming scholar at this point, spending every moment reading books and visiting philosophers. Julian received a summons from the emperor and was crowned Caesar by the man who had killed his entire family and forced him to live his youth in exile.

He did good. Everyone expected Julian to just be some figurehead, an imperial face at the back of the army, but he turned out to be a hell of a general. He pretty much followed Julius Caesar's playbook when it came to invading Gaul, but Julius wrote a pretty good playbook. He also made a point of sleeping in the barracks with his soldiers, doing their workouts, going through the Roman equivalent of basic training. His men grew to love him – and that led where it always seemed to lead when dealing with Roman armies. One night Julian found himself proclaimed Augustus. Emperor. Preventing that kind of thing was *why* Constantius killed everyone else.

It really looked like there would be a civil war as Julian and his army made their way to Constantinople to meet with Constantius, but then a strange sort of miracle happened: Constantius caught a fever and died en route to Constantinople. When Julian entered the capital city, it was as the sole emperor of Rome.

As soon as he knew that, Julian threw off his pretenses and revealed that Christian rule had, at last, come to an end. A pagan emperor reigned again; the rule of the gods had been restored.

I wonder about Julian in that moment. He had been a pagan for years – practically his whole life – and yet he had to keep it a secret except to his closest friends. How did he feel, I wonder, when he finally took off the mask? How liberating was it? Impossible to know, but I hope that it was glorious – a tiny mote of perfection, gleaming against the pain, one moment of pure joy as he welcomed the gods, the same gods standing on my own altar, back into the empire's graces.

And then the stupid fucker got himself killed trying to be Alexander the Great.

I read in one of Eccleston's books that when Julian died, the Christian bishops cheered. "The little cloud has passed," they said. The little cloud. Rome passed back into the hands of the Christians, and so did we all.

They called Constantine "the Great" because he converted the empire to Christ. For trying to restore the faith Rome had been built on, Julian got an epithet, too: they called him the Apostate.

\* \* \*

Eccleston was late to his office hours on Tuesday. It was posted right on the door: 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM, Tuesday and Thursday. 11:15 already. I wished he'd hurry up; I had Logic in forty-five minutes, and for whatever reason, they stuck that class over in Violette Hall, the math building. (Well, okay, Logic is kind of mathematical, but – look, it's a dumb place to hold class when the Philosophy department is halfway across campus.) He didn't leave any notes with the secretary letting her know he would be late...

I sank down into the horrifying orange couches in the hallway outside the Philosophy and Religion offices. Sometimes I wonder how Truman's design program justifies itself when

this building exists. From the outside it looks okay – just a brick building with big glass doors and some obfuscated entrances. From the inside, though – Jesus Christ, even I know that basing your décor around beige walls, orange couches and purple carpeting is revolting. It's like the colors were picked out during an acid flashback. Down here in the back halls, the effect is compounded with noir lighting. Sometimes you think Philip Marlowe could come walking through the halls, pausing to comment on the garish carpet before kicking in somebody's door.

I was there to talk to Eccleston about my term paper for Christian Thought. The idea of writing some bullshit about St. Ignatius made me want to trade places with Sisyphus. I knew what I wanted to write about – I just needed to get his approval first.

It was 11:21 when I finally heard the jingling march of a man holding a ring full of keys approaching the hallway. Dr. Eccleston appeared, holding a stack of essays in one hand and his key ring in the other; he wore a brown sweater, the kind you'd be embarrassed to get from your aunt as a Christmas present. He smiled when he saw me. "Oh, hello, Lou. Are you here to see me?"

"Yes, sir," I said. *Sir*. What a puss.

"Alright. One second, let me get in the door..." He shifted his papers. "Could you give me a hand with these, just for a second?"

I took his papers. They were the first essays for another class he was teaching: Exploring Religions, the introductory course. I saw that the top paper was about Hinduism, and I started wondering again how Eccleston could teach a class like that in good faith. What the hell was a preacher going to say about Shiva?

He opened the door. Eccleston's office was extremely clean: ordered bookshelves, very little clutter, in-box and out-box next to his computer. It's hard to know what to expect about professors' offices; just next door, one professor (remember the Grand Marshal? Yeah, her) has an office that is completely, every single inch, covered in journals and books and articles and gods know what else. She acknowledges that you will step on something important trying to get to a chair. She shrugs and says she can read around the footprints.

"Thanks, Lou," Dr. Eccleston said, and took the papers back and stacked them in his in-box. He sat down in his chair – a nice office chair, completely different from my orange-fabric-and-beige-plastic chair. "So what can I help you with?"

"I wanted to talk to you about my term paper. I know it's early, but I wanted to clear my topic with you..."

He nodded. "Sure. Always good to get started early. What's on your mind?"

"Well, I know he isn't technically a Christian thinker, but I wanted to write something on Julian the Apostate." *The Apostate*. They should have called him *Julian the Philosopher*; the man was practically Marcus Aurelius. But people respect philosophers too much. An apostate? You can cheer the man who stabs an apostate to death as a saint. "I was rather taken with the chapter we read for this week."

Eccleston leaned back in his chair and tapped his fingers against his chin like an old Chinese hermit. "Hmm. Well, he certainly was an important figure – the things he said defined the church for a little while. And of course, he's interesting in his own right. Romantic hero and all that." He nodded again. "Well, what would you be writing about specifically? Julian and Christianity?"

"His thoughts about pagan charity were really interesting to me, that whole idea that people were only attracted to Christianity because the Christians let the poor eat with them for free. He wanted to not just revitalize paganism, but also to reform it, you know?"

"Mmhmm. Yes, it's intriguing to consider how much this supposed 'apostate' was borrowing directly from Christian morality. A number of people have written about how he was really, at heart, still very involved in the Christian mindset – he just preferred different metaphors."

"Different metaphors? He endorsed a completely different religion. I mean, the marketplace of divinity—"

"Julian's fundamental policy was to impose the Christian hierarchical system upon the Olympian pantheon, when it boils down to it." He said it forcefully, shut me down. He looked up at his shelf and pulled down a book. "Here, give this one a read – it might be helpful to you." It was simply called *The Last Pagan*. Endorsements from the *Catholic Herald* and *Church Times*.

I took it without complaint. No point. "Thanks, professor."

"Not a problem, Lou. Come back when you've got a draft started and we'll see what we can come up with, okay?"

I nodded and started to stand up, but I got this odd compulsion as I did and sat back down. "Hey, Dr. Eccleston. Can I ask another question?"

"These *are* my office hours. That's what I'm here for."

"Well, it's another thing about Julian. Just... Purely hypothetical."

He smiled his kindly-uncle smile. I wondered how much he was acting. "Shoot," he said.

"What do you think would have happened if Julian hadn't gone on campaign? What if he'd just gone to Constantinople – lived to be an old man?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure I see the point of the question. It's a matter of historical fact. He died; his plans failed with him. They were already failing when he was killed, truth be told."

"I know it's historical fact. Still. What if he'd lived?"

"Do you mean, would Europe have gone back to paganism?" He considered this for a moment, and then shrugged. "No, I doubt it. The forces were already too entrenched at that point. Julian's cause was always a lost one. Romantic, but deeply impractical."

I hesitated before pressing it any further. "Do you think it was a good thing, then, that he died when he did?"

His smile broadened, but it was a chimpanzee grin, full of quiet frustration and dominance. "Lou, again, it's a matter of history. Whether it's a good thing or a bad thing is irrelevant; it happened."

"I know, but... Still. Are you glad it turned out the way it did?"

He sighed, ran his fingers through his thin hair. "Well, if he hadn't, I'm not sure I would be here – certainly not having this conversation with you. Even though I think he would have failed in the end, there are a lot of things that I take for granted in my life that might not exist if he had been around longer. Julian lived long enough to end many of the church's schisms, but not long enough to ruin the church as a whole as he'd wanted to. If he

had... Well, who could say what things would be like now?" He sat up and looked at me again. "So while I dislike the idea of anybody dying violently in the first place, least of all a man who tried to be noble and ethical... I suppose I am glad it turned out as it did. As I said, we wouldn't be here if it hadn't."

I guess that was a fair enough answer – honest, even if he still tried to weasel out of it with all that "whatever happened, happened" talk. I got up, took his book, and shook Dr. Eccleston's hand. "Thanks, professor. I was just curious."

"It's a good trait in a philosopher," he said. "Have a nice afternoon, Lou."

I walked out of the cavernous hallways of McClain and back into the sunlight. I still had a few minutes before Logic, long enough to slowly stroll along the brick byways of Truman's campus, soaking in the last moments of summer before the inevitable turn to fall. The quadrangle was still green and full of Frisbee players and freshman couples huddled on blankets.

I drummed on the cover of *The Last Pagan*, watching the people on the quad. It reminded me of when I was a kid, visiting Andy and Lucy at the Elysian Fields over the summer. I'd spend whole months there, sleeping in Andy's room, playing tag in the fields outside their house. Sometimes I wonder where those summers went – why they had to stop when they did, why we just silently decided to quit visiting around the time I was 14. And then other times I remember them – I see them in Lucy's face, still shining, still eternally summer.

I know, I'm a sap. All pessimists are. You can only be so judgmental when inside, you really, really want things to turn out better than they are now.

\* \* \*

Lucy's car, a white Chevrolet Cavalier, pulled up outside the Community Chest around 7:30 on Friday night. She had dyed her hair again: she'd gone back to blue, but more of a royal blue than the turquoise she used to wear. I watched her as she jumped out of her car and grabbed a pearl-colored suitcase from the back seat.

"Hey you!" I called from my window.

"Hey yourself!" She looked up with a grin on her face and bounded toward the door. I went downstairs to let her in. I offered to take her suitcase, but she wouldn't let me. Grimey looked up from the TV when we got back to the apartment and gave her a silent greeting with a wave of his hand, but then he turned his attention back to the set.

I had voluntarily lost the coin flip that night. (Over Grimey's protests, I might add – he complained that I was screwing up some perfectly good chaos.) The first time I had a serious girlfriend, freshman year of college, I'd called my dad a few days before Valentine's Day to ask him what I could cook to impress a girl. He said he always preferred lobster, but given my general state of (and I quote) "broke-assedness," a good quiche Lorraine would do the trick. Turned out to have been a bad choice: that girl was lactose intolerant. (And I know what you're thinking. "How did you not know that beforehand?" And the answer is... Well, I don't have a good answer for it. I didn't know. We got Chinese and I ate quiche for a week.)

Anyway, regardless of that first incident, I've still held out faith in my old man's advice, so... I made Lucy a quiche. She took it with a bemused smile. "Since when did you know how to cook, Lou?"

Grimey looked positively disturbed. "Seriously. I was expecting Mystery Mac'n'Cheese."

"It's Harvest Home! You're supposed to feast." I sat it on the kitchen table and poured us all glasses from the wine jug. "So shut up and feast."

We dug in, ate, drank cheap wine and listened to Lucy tell us about her paper. We pretended to understand; it had something to do with derivational syntax, but it was all way over my head. This was a disadvantage I'd had with Lucy for years. Sure, maybe I knew more details than she did about what I studied, but she knew the basics – and really, she was probably better versed in the comparative religions stuff than me. (I never got into eastern religion, but her parents have always had a soft spot for the Buddhists.) Meanwhile, I had no clue about linguistics. She called me once at two in the morning positively giggling over the Korean language. "You just don't understand, Lou, this agglutinative construction stuff is so fucking cool," she said.

"You're right," I said. "I don't understand."

Grimey didn't talk much throughout dinner, and I didn't really understand why. Grimey's pretty outgoing – more outgoing than he really has the talent for, honestly – but he seemed distracted. But one of the first Guy Laws I learned was not to pry too deeply into your buddy's mind without being asked – and sometimes, even if you *are* asked – so I didn't press him.

When she was finished with her quiche, Lucy raised a toast. "Happy Mabon. It's good to spend it with family."

*Family?* Ouch. Grimey and I raised our glasses too – his a pint glass, mine a bourbon snifter – and clinked them together. Then we drained the last of the sour wine.

"What time do you need to be up tomorrow, Luce?" I asked, once the obligatory post-feast yawning and stretching had finished.

"Pretty early – I think I need to make it to Columbia by nine AM or so. Maybe a little later if I'm willing to miss the first session." She leaned forward onto her elbows, rested her chin in her hands. "Why, what did you have in mind?"

"Well... It *is* Harvest," I said. "I mean, since neither of us is going to make it home for the ritual tomorrow... I thought maybe we could do something. Nothing fancy, you know, but something. Maybe go out to Thousand Hills?"

"I didn't bring any of my ritual stuff, but... Sure, that sounds fun." She turned to Grimey, who jumped out of his trance when he realized she was talking to him. "You want to come, Grimey?"

Well, fuck. Why did she do that?

"Uh, sure. Sounds great – just let me get my jacket."

Grimey went to his bedroom to get his coat. I started to clean up -- a lengthy process that consisted of grabbing the dirty dishes and putting them into the sink to age for an indefinite period.

"Oh, I forget to tell you on the phone earlier," I said while turning on the tap for the patented 'cold-water soak' method. "I tried, but I couldn't convince them to let me off tonight. I've got to go in around midnight."

"That stinks," Lucy said. She scratched something out on her essay, then bit her lip and erased the scratches. "Well... Maybe I can keep you company for a little while? I mean, I need to get *some* sleep before tomorrow, but..."

"That's completely against company policy down at Cheriton." I shrugged and dumped the last of the dishes into the sink. "Notice how I said that like I give a fuck."

#### IV

The sun had already set by the time we got out to Thousand Hills State Park, a few miles north of town. They built the park back in the 50s, I think, when they dammed up the creek to make Kirksville's water supply. (They did make, in all fairness, a pretty beautiful lake out of it.) I didn't make it out there as often as I should have. The last time was the year before, when Grimey and I and a few other people barbecued at the side of the lake. Grimey had a stand-off with a raccoon that remains legendary. It was a miracle he didn't get rabies.

We pulled off the road over by the lake shelters. The gate was already closed off for the night, so we had to walk down to the shore. The full moon hung low and the light of Luna made the stars look like pricks in a pane of frosted glass.

I grabbed a small box of ritual supplies from the trunk and set up a makeshift altar by the lakefront. I ran over my checklist: an athame; two bowls (one for salt and one for water); a chalice for the wine; some cakes (okay, a handful of Famous Amos cookies); a sword; some incense; three candles. That was enough.

"I didn't bring a robe with me," said Lucy as she helped me set up the altar. "Guess that means I'll have to go skyclad, huh?"

Grimey laughed; so did I, though nervously. It wasn't like Lucy needed a robe, anyway; she was better dressed for the part than either of us. We were wearing jeans and hoodies; at least Lucy was wearing a skirt, one of those long, flowing brown ones with embroidery on the hem. She slipped her shoes off and wiggled her toes in the grass. She did

the same thing the first time I ever visited the Elysian Fields, that Lughnasadh, when we were kids...

"Probably for the best that we don't have robes," said Grimey. "This is gonna look weird enough if a ranger comes by and catches us."

"Catches us? Catches us doing what?" Lucy asked. "I don't think it's against the law to burn a candle unless we're stupid about it."

"I meant, well..." Grimey swallowed. "Just that the ritual might look weird, to a coven."

"Don't worry about it," said Lucy. "Just relax – we'll be fine."

"You want to do the quarters, Grimey?" I asked. "Since there's only three of us, we'll have to jury-rig some things."

"Uh, sure," he said. "When do I do those...?"

"Right after Lucy finishes casting the circle," I said. "It's easy."

We joined hands there, in front of the lake and the starry night, took deep breaths. I felt the warmth from both of their hands – supple heat from Lucy's long fingers, the clamminess of Grimey's palm. I closed my eyes and tried to focus. Perfect love and perfect trust. Bring nothing with you but perfect love and perfect trust.

I kneeled down and started drawing a pentagram into the bowl of salt. Lucy took the sword and walked around us, drawing a circle in the air. "This is the circle," she said, "this is the space between the worlds. Here be magick. Here be love. So mote it be."

"So mote it be," we said.

I mixed the salt and water and drew a spiral emanating outward – widdershins or counter-widdershins, I could never remember which was which – and handed it to Lucy.

"May this circle be as a still and silent pool, its love radiating outward in ever-widening circles," she said, her voice like a waking dream. "So mote it be."

"So mote it be."

Finally I lit the stick of incense and passed it to her for her final round.

"Let this circle shine like the stars and the moon," she said. "But let each of us shine with our own individual light. So mote it be."

"So mote it be."

Grimey seemed nervous as he called the quarters. We had to steer him a little bit, pointed him toward the east to begin, but by the time he made it to the west and started invoking the spirits of water, he seemed more comfortable. I watched his posture as he shifted from one direction to the next, calling in spirits; with each turn he seemed to shed a little of whatever uncomfortable suit he'd worn into the circle.

We kept the ritual short – after all, there were only the three of us. After the quarters we talked for a little bit about Harvest Home, the second of the Harvest Festivals, the harvest of fruit (or was it grain?), after Lughnasadh and before Samhain. We talked about the Goddess and we thanked her for Her gifts; we talked about gods stalking through the fields and the forests, listened for Pan's goat-steps in the grass. And eventually, Lucy held took the athame and held it in her hand.

"You ready for the Great Rite?"

More than you know. "Sure."

The Great Rite is the most important part of any ritual, you see; it's this moment that represents the union of all things. The priestess holds the ritual knife, the athame, while the priest holds the chalice of wine. Then the priestess points the knife down at the cup, which tells the priest to say...

"As the athame is to the male..."

"So the cup is to the female," she replies.

And then in unison, they bring the athame and the chalice together, dipping the blade into the wine. "And their union is the creation of the world." So mote it be. So might it be. So I wish it would be.

I put the chalice to Lucy's lips. "Thou art Goddess," I said, and she drank the cheap wine that we had turned into the kiss of the Goddess. "May you never thirst."

Her face puckered a little as she swallowed. "Thou art God," she said, suppressing a cough.

\* \* \*

Grimey drove a black Buick made in the mid-80s. At first glance, it looked like a station wagon, but not really: something about it was off, like you were looking at the second picture in one of those "What's the Difference?" puzzles in *Highlights for Kids*. Sometimes people didn't get it until you pointed out the shape of the tiny, tinted windows, the small metal lines near the rear. When people figured it out, every one of them would turn with a look somewhere between horror and absurd amusement and ask the same question. "Jesus Christ, Grimey," they'd say. "You drive a hearse?"

Grimey's hearse was decommissioned about six years ago. It was a piece of junk – as you'd expect, a hearse gets a lot of miles put on it, and whatever funeral parlor owned it apparently didn't keep up the maintenance too well – but that didn't matter to him. He loved the hearse despite the bad mileage and the rusted muffler, because he thought it reflected him: dark, but funny in a bleak kind of way. Nobody else saw it like that. It reflected him, sure: much like its owner, the hearse really wanted to be dark and brooding, but just ended up being kind of awkward.

The three of us were driving back from the Harvest ritual, rounding the curvy roads of Thousand Hills State Park. Lucy was up front (my insistence), while I sat in the back, on the raised wooden platform coffins used to sit on. Grimey drove slowly – not that he had much choice, given the dead weight of his vehicle. I had driven it once, when we were moving to the new apartment, and it turned as though all the corpses were jamming the wheels.

Lucy had her head against the windows, and though I couldn't see her face, I knew she was staring at the stars. She lifted her head from the glass when we passed the NOW LEAVING THOUSAND HILLS sign. "So Grimey," she began, "had you ever done a ritual before?"

Grimey shook his head. "No. Well, one." He took a hand from the wheel and brushed his greasy hair out from his forehead, then sat it back at nine o'clock. "When I was seventeen, I guess it was, I heard there was this open Full Moon. I snuck out of the house and borrowed my mom's car to go. I didn't get to do anything during it, though – no calling quarters or anything like that."

"Did you like it?" she asked.

"Sure," he said. "There were things I didn't get, and some of it was pretty cheesy – they did this thing where the priestess did the journey of the goddess to the underworld and lost her clothes along the way. I kind of got the impression that was there because they liked the idea of the priestess getting naked and getting play-hit with a scourge." He grinned and pulled onto the highway back to town. "But there were a lot of people there, and they liked it, and I liked being around them. They told me about some books. I guess that's how I got started."

"But you only went there once?" Lucy shifted in her seat. "I mean, if you liked it..."

"Yeah, well. My mom found out about me sneaking out and she threw a fit, especially since she didn't believe me when I said I'd gone out to the mall." He shrugged as though it weren't a big deal. "She grounded me, yelled about abusing her trust. Anyway, I didn't want to go through that bullshit again, so I never went back."

Lucy frowned. "I guess she wasn't crazy about you being pagan, huh?"

"She, uh, she doesn't know. I think." Grimey gripped the steering wheel a little more tightly. "I always made sure to keep my books locked up in my suitcase, and I never wear any of the jewelry or anything when I'm around her. She's pretty Christian. You know how it is."

Except we didn't, Lucy and me. I mean, sure, we've had asshole relatives and strangers barking about witches our whole lives, but not our parents. We got into fights with them like everyone does, but not about religion. We never had to hide. Not like Grimey.

"That isn't right, though," Lucy said. "It's your life, your path. You shouldn't have to get somebody's approval to live the way you want to live, Grimey." She touched him on the

arm. I saw that and felt a little irrational annoyance with Grimey, as though his drawing sympathy was ruining a chance I hadn't been willing to take for twenty years. It probably influenced what I said next.

"Lucy's right, man," I piped in. "I think you ought to tell your mom. As long as you keep it a secret, it's like there's something to be ashamed of – like *you* believe there's something worth being ashamed of."

"Right, exactly," said Lucy. "That's the major barrier to acceptance, you know? It's like being gay. Being closeted is safer, right? But if everyone's in the closet then the rest of the world doesn't have to learn to accept them."

Grimey drummed on the steering wheel as we passed the fields of corn and cattle on either side of the highway. "I see that, but... But I don't know. I don't think she would take it well."

"You're a big boy, Grimey." I put my hand on his shoulder. Solidarity. "She needs to learn to live with it. You're her son, she's can't go *too* crazy."

I watched Grimey's face in the rearview mirror, illuminated only by the lights of the odometer and the gas gauge. It took a moment, but soon a smile started to cross his pasty face. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe you're right. I'll have to think about it."

Lucy smiled, her "good through mischief" smile, something I recognized from years of benevolent pranks. Exactly what I was looking for. Maybe Grimey was good for something after all.

\* \* \*

We traded cars at the apartment – Grimey got out for the night, and Lucy and I took her car over to Cheriton Valley. Lucy pulled into the parking lot and put the car into idle. Classic rock playing on the radio: I think it was Van Halen. The lights in the houses were all out already; my boys, and all the others like them, had already been put to bed. Only flickering lights of televisions gave any signs of life.

"So which one is yours?" asked Lucy.

"3A. That one right there," I said, pointing two houses down from where we were parked. "Can you stay here for a minute? I need to go relieve Mike... He's a good guy, but you know, having company is against the rules. I don't think he'd care, but—"

"Quit babbling." She poked me in the shoulder. "It's a stealth mission, I get it. I'll sneak in when he's gone."

"Okay, okay." I popped open the door and lumbered out. "See you in a minute."

Mike was already waiting at the door when I walked in. "When I said I'd cover for you, Lou, I thought we were talking about, like, thirty minutes. I was supposed to be off an hour and a half ago."

"I know, I know. Sorry, man. I got held up."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I'll bet. You know, you could have just brought your lady-friend in with you. I told you I wouldn't tell Dana."

"I know. I just felt like it would be awkward if it was obvious that you knew what I was up to." I walked back to the kitchen to grab my start-of-shift paperwork. "Besides, it's less fun if she knows you're a willing accomplice."

"So long as you remember that you owe me." He grabbed the doorknob, but stopped short of actually leaving. "Uh, hey, I know it's happy-fun-night, but I probably ought to tell you something..."

I glanced up from the sign-in sheet. "Yeah? What's up?"

"Jimmy's mom's been calling. Hell if I know why – I'm not even sure Jimmy understands what the phone is. But you know how that crazy bitch gets. Minute I picked up she started screaming at me."

"What for?"

"I don't know. Said we were mistreating him or something. It was hard to tell – she's got that little old woman voice. I wanted to tell her she needed to put her teeth in before she called. Anyway, I've told her twice now that she's not allowed to talk to Jimmy, and that if she calls again I'm going to call the cops."

I rolled my eyes. "That's fucking great. Don't we have a restraining order on her or anything?"

"Just a piece of paper. Don't mean a thing if you don't think anybody has the balls to call in on your octogenarian ass." He shrugged and opened the door. "Anyway, just be on the lookout. I doubt she's gonna call this late, but it might happen in the morning. As for me, I'm going to the Dukum."

"Have a pint for me, huh?"

"You got it, chief." He took a step out and looked back. "Hey, just do me one favor. If you fuck on the couch, sanitize that shit."

"I don't think you need to worry about that. I don't particularly want to fuck in Donny's spot. Who knows what's happened there?" Sadly, I knew exactly what had happened in Donny's spot over the years.

"Whatever you say, man. My lips are sealed." He tipped an invisible hat. "Night, lady-killer."

I gave him a mocking sigh, and returned the gesture. "Night, Mike."

I got halfway through my paperwork before Lucy tapped on the door. I opened the door a crack and put my face in the margin. "What's the password?"

"I know where your parents keep the baby pictures."

I opened the door all the way. "Cheater."

"All's fair in love and war, kiddo." She put her hands on her hips and surveyed the living room: the couches and the television and the Formica coffee table. She turned around in a slow circle, taking the room in like it was an art installation. "Geez, this place is lifeless. There isn't even anything on the walls."

"Donny used to have a wrestling poster, but he got mad one day and ripped it up," I said. "And Jimmy... Well, Jimmy doesn't really have the appreciation for artwork, y'know?"

"Poor guy," she said. "He's the one who just kind of sits there?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Never says anything. I'm not really sure he's high-functioning enough for this environment sometimes... They occasionally talk about moving him to a hospital or something."

She sat down on the couch, right in Donny's spot. She looked sad and thoughtful. "You ever think about what it must be like for him? Going through life not really

experiencing anything? You and Mike and whoever else all guide him around, feed him, take care of him... But he probably doesn't understand why you do it, or why his life is the way it is." She shook her head. "I think about it and I just think... What a gray way to live."

I sat down on the couch next to her, trying to think of a reassuring example – something to prove that Jimmy's life wasn't all bad. But I couldn't. Donny could hold a job, got to meet people, even had a hobby of sorts in watching wrestling – there was some variety to his life, some things that made him genuinely happy. Not for Jimmy. Every day for him was the same. Get woken up, get fed, sit on the couch until the next meal time. Repeat until it's time for bed.

Sometimes I wonder what it was like for him before... Donny had always been slow, but Jimmy used to be "normal." He'd been in the system for decades by the time I got assigned here, but I'd seen the files. Some kind of brain trauma when he was in his mid-twenties, though nothing ever specified what it had been...

Lucy poked me in the thigh.

"What?" I asked.

"You're being pensive. Also, you owe me a terrible movie."

"Right, right." I grabbed the remote and started flipping through the channels, all seventy-two of them. "You thinking contemporary schlock, or classic schlock?"

"See if you can find something with Vincent Price. I'm in a Vincent Price sort of mood."

We didn't find any Price movies on, or anything else from the golden age of B-movies. No appreciation for the old masters anymore. We settled on the Sci-Fi Channel,

which offered some sort of alien-saturated flick with acting so wooden it could have repopulated the rain forest. We came in late, after the titles, but that didn't matter – titles only matter for movies you're willing to admit you've watched.

When Lucy and I were eleven years old, we both got our own televisions and our own telephones. I remember that first movie, *Die, Monster, Die!*, a terrifically bad film based on an H.P. Lovecraft story. Andy had hung out in Lucy's room during it, and they would pass the phone back and forth, but Andy never really cared for horror or sci-fi; he liked Westerns. Lucy and I, though, we ate them up. About once every two weeks for years I would call her, or she would call me, and we'd turn on Sci-Fi or TNT or FX and laugh our way through the demise of some poor film student's hopes for respect.

Lucy still laughed at the rubber-faced aliens ("I think they just took a hair-dryer to a Nixon mask!") and moaned in disbelief at the plotting ("Did he *really* just run into the Birthing Chamber without putting on his radiation suit?") But something about it felt off to me. I laughed because she laughed, but only to play along.

Jesus. The last time we'd done this, I realized, was when we were sixteen. Somewhere in the fall of that year – October, now that I think about it, two weeks before Samhain – she'd called me up on a Saturday night and told me to turn to AMC. I remember the film: *Rosemary's Baby*. We laughed at it the way our parents laughed at *The Wicker Man*. I remember Lucy mimicking Mia Farrow's desperate plea: "All that chanting through the wall? That's called an esbat! They use blood in their rituals!"

"Oh yeah, that reminds me," I'd said. "Dad says we're running short on plump Christian babies this month. Could your mom pick some up before Full Moon?"

"Well, maybe," Lucy responded. "But they're so hard to find fresh this time of year."

And then we came to the end of the film, saw Rosemary walking through the secret door in her closet to the elderly couple's room. Saw the coven of witches, cooing over a baby in a black crib with an inverted cross hanging over it. Saw them turn to Rosemary, that poor Catholic girl, and raise their hands in rapture. "Hail Satan! Hail Satan! The Year One has come!" All the rumors had been true: the witches were real, and their esbats and their sabbats celebrated Satan raping and impregnating that pale waif.

We didn't laugh at that.

"Lou!" said Lucy, prodding me again with a long, sharp finger. I jumped with a start. "Where is your head tonight, man?"

"What? What'd I miss?"

"Were you paying any attention? The baby alien just burst out of that guy's skull. I swear to God, it looked like they'd microwaved a Peep and glued it to his forehead."

"Oh. Sorry, I guess I missed it. Mind was somewhere else."

She picked up the remote and turned the volume down. "What's on your mind, philosopher?"

I hit her with one of the blue couch pillows, and immediately regretted it; I'd had to clean the boys' various fluids off that pillow too many times. "I was thinking about when we used to do this, when we were kids," I said. "Why did we stop?"

She shrugged. "Mom got tired of us bogarting the phone all night, as I recall. She said if I needed to talk for that long all the time, I needed to start paying for a second line."

"Really? Was that all?"

"I think so. Why, what did you think?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. I just thought it was one of those things where one week we did and then we just... Forgot. Grew apart."

She smiled – the gentle smile, not the mischievous one – and ruffled my hair. "Don't be so serious, kid. Me and you, we're family. We don't grow apart."

*Kid. Family. We don't grow apart.* I was so sick of that thought. I guess I didn't put up a very good poker face, because Lucy noticed. "What?" she said. "What's wrong?"

"Luce... Look, is that what it is? Is that what you think of me as?"

She frowned. "Of course I do. What else would I think of you as?"

And that was when I stuck my tongue in her mouth.

To my everlasting horror, she gagged. She pulled back from the – well, "kiss" might not be the right word, but that's what it was trying to be. She blinked at me and didn't say anything. I could feel the blood rising to the surface of my cheeks.

"Oh, Jesus," I eventually mumbled. "I'm sorry."

"No, no, it's okay," said Lucy. She consoled me with a pat on the arm. Nurturing instinct. Goddamn it. "I'm – I'm glad I know, but, Lou, I don't – I never thought of you – Jesus."

A space marine screamed on the television as another of the Microwaved Peeps from the Abyss burned its way through his skull. The two of us just sat there for a moment.

"...look," she said, after a moment, "Don't worry about it. But I'm going to go. I mean, I need to drive to Columbia in the morning, and I need to look over my paper, and..."

"And you don't feel like spending the night."

She swallowed, then shook her head. "No, Lou. I'm sorry." Then she brightened up, too obviously a front. "You know how it is, kiddo. Gotta put the C.V. first if you want to get ahead in the university."

"You're right," I said, playing along. "Your paper. Right."

We got up and walked to the door. I opened it for her and followed her to the car. She unlocked the door and looked up.

"Grimey's probably out or asleep," I said. "Key is under the welcome mat of the apartment next door. Don't use the one under our mat, it doesn't work."

"Right, right." She started to get in the car, but paused and walked back to me. She gave me a hug, but our usual goodbye kiss noticeably moved from a peck on the lips to the cheek. "And thanks for putting me up for the night."

"Anytime," I said.

She got in her car and pulled out, drove away towards the Community Chest. I stood in the parking lot for a long moment, wishing I smoked so I would have some reason to keep standing there, watching for a phantom of Lucy's car.

"Fuck," I said, quietly, after a while.

Dr. Eccleston frowned as he looked over the draft of my paper, occasionally pausing to *hem* or *hrm* or scratch his chin. Sometimes he would reach for a red pen and mark something in the margins in his loose script. I watched him from the hard orange plastic chair on the other side of his desk, not saying anything. When he finished, he looked over the works cited page and then set the paper down with a final grunt.

"So what do you think?" I asked him.

"Do you want my honest opinion, Lou?" He leaned back in his chair and looked at the ceiling. "It's a pretty decent draft, but I think perhaps you should consider a different topic."

I frowned. "What? What do you mean?"

"Looking over this, and from my observations in class...Well." Get to the point, old man. "It feels like you have taken a shine to Julian. Not that there's anything wrong with that, of course – no less than Edward Gibbon had the same kind of reaction – but I'm afraid that it's interfering with your objectivity. There can be a danger in concentrating on the men in history whom we admire – we can forget about their faults, or romanticize them into something that better fits our desires."

"And you think my paper's doing that?"

"At least in places. Here, let's look at your conclusion..." He pushed the paper toward me, so that it sat halfway between us on the desk, and flipped to the second-to-last page. He had circled the last two paragraphs and scribbled words like *substantiate* and *unverifiable* in the margins. "'History's course is rarely fixed, and sometimes is no more predictable than a

coin flip,'" he quoted. "'Had Julian the Philosopher survived and had a reign as long as his uncle Constantine, his reforms would have likely led to a renaissance of paganism in the Eastern Roman Empire. Just as Christianity prospered under the Emperor's patronage, support for the traditional Roman religion would have bloomed under Julian's guidance. If his reign had been longer, had he not chosen to go to war in Persia, it is entirely likely that the Galileans would not have prevailed after all.'" He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Lou, but that's a fairy tale. In addition to being completely unprovable – he *did* die, and paganism *did* fail – what you're describing was always unlikely. Things were too far gone..."

"I know that you've said that before, professor, but I think that's too simple," I said. "I mean, Constantine's support raised Christianity from just another mystery cult to state religion. If he could do that to Christianity, why couldn't Julian do it for paganism?"

"Have you studied the Reformation much, Lou?" He didn't actually wait for a response. "People left the Catholic Church because they were dissatisfied with many things in it. Well, of course, the Catholics noticed this, after a while, and they had the counter-reformation to try and get back some of their support. But they never really recovered from it. Certainly they didn't bring all those Protestants back into the fold. And the Catholics had better organization than the pagans ever did." He sat up, folded his hands on the desk. "When people leave a faith, it's very hard to get them to come back."

"So forty years is really all it took, you think? A religion that had been around for centuries could just be displaced forever by a few decades of neglect?"

He shrugged. "It was a pagan world for a long time, yes. But we grew out of it."

Grew out of it. Like the time you thought you were going to be an astronaut. Just a phase we were passing through. "Are we going to grow out of the Christian world, Professor?"

He smiled, but it was a would-you-please-get-out-of-my-office sort of smile. "Some would say we already have. I think that's overselling it, personally." He slid my paper all the way to me and stood up. "Like I said, it's not a bad paper at all, but... I think you should take a hard look at your work and think about whether or not your points are truly objective. This was only the first draft, after all – you still have plenty of time to revise." His smile shifted, became a little more genuine. "For what it's worth, I think Julian's a fascinating man too. After all the bloodshed and in-fighting the emperors before him participated in, it was nice to have an intellectual on the throne. The Romans thought so at the time, too. But oftentimes, our heroes are the very worst people we could write about."

I nodded and took the paper back. "Thanks, professor."

"You're welcome, Lou. I'm sorry we couldn't talk longer—" no, you aren't, you lying fuck— "but I have to rush. Department meeting."

I followed him out into the hallway and watched him lock up. "Really? What's on the agenda today?"

"Oh, the usual," he said. "Administration, grants, tenure review." He turned and gave me a tip of an imaginary hat before walking down to the department office. "Anything in the world but religion!" he called over his shoulder.

\* \* \*

Grimey's mother darkened our doorstep around three PM on the second Saturday after the incident with Lucy. (I was handling it well, except for the occasional spasm of writhing mortification.) She pulled up in her sea-green minivan, a holdover from when Grimey was younger. She had really wanted to be a soccer-mom, you could tell; she had invested in the minivan with the hopes of shuttling Herman and all of his little friends around from game to game, where she would watch him making shots and blocking goals and whatever else it was kids did on that field. Meanwhile she would sit in the stands, in a sundress and big sunglasses, gossiping with the coterie of mothers. The American Dream. Grimey's mom never really recovered from finding out she had an "inside kid."

Anyway. I saw her park her minivan next to Grimey's hearse and get out. She wore jeans and a magenta sweater, wore her brown hair up in a sort of bouffant. She didn't smile as she approached the door.

"Hey, Grimey!" I called. No answer. I walked down the hall and heard the shower going. Typical. "Hey, Grimey!" I called again and rapped on the bathroom door.

"What?" he said, voice muffled by the hollow wooden door.

"Your ma is here."

"Ok. Let her in, I'll be out in a second."

The doorbell rang and I opened the door for her. Grimey's mom is a short woman, shorter than me or Grimey by a head, but she has a presence about her that, I swear, makes her son shrink by a couple inches whenever she's nearby. Around her neck she had a small golden cross, not gaudy at all. "Hi, Mrs. Hemphill. Gr..." I paused and realized I'd always just called him *Grimey*, even in the rare occasions I'd had to talk to his mom. She'd never

called me on it – then again she'd never paid me much mind in the first place. Should I call him Herman? Should I just call him Grimey?

Grimey's mom looked at me expectantly. "Yes?"

"He's in the shower. He'll be right out."

I led her into the living room, which Grimey had made uncomfortably tidy the night before. He got so obsessive about it I was afraid he'd started using amphetamines. "Can I get you anything?" I asked.

"A glass of water would be fine," she said. I got it for her, and she remained silent otherwise. No questions about my classes, or whether I'd found a girlfriend, or what kinds of clubs I was in. I found something admirable about that. I mean, sure, I was getting the cold shoulder, but I can appreciate people who don't mire themselves in that kind of bullshit.

Grimey came out of the shower a few minutes later, hair free of oil, wearing the stainless red Dobson Hall t-shirt he'd gotten during Freshman Week and kept sequestered in the back of his closet for when he needed camouflage. Good start to the "not hiding anymore" campaign, Grimes.

"Hi sweetie," said his mom, and she pulled him into a tight hug and kiss on the cheek. As usual, she didn't acknowledge I was in the room at all as I did this; her eyes were only for him. Grimey shot me an embarrassed grin and kissed her on the forehead.

"Hi mom," he said. "How was the drive?"

"Awful. The road was full of maniacs, people going 70, 80 miles an hour the whole way. No wonder there's so many accidents."

"Oh?" I said, breaking into the bubble of maternal affection. "Did you see many accidents on the way?"

She blinked as though she had forgotten I was in the room. "Well, no. But you hear about them all the time."

"Ah, right," I said. "Well, have fun, Grimes. I've got that... Thing. You know the one." Not that there was a "thing," but nobody deserves to have a roommate hanging around when his mom is around.

Grimey looked relieved to hear my excuse. "Uh, right. And then you have work later, right?"

"Yeah. See you in the morning."

I busted up as soon as I got to the car. Poor fucker. He'd still be squirming for days after she left.

\* \* \*

I took over the house from Dana that night without much fanfare: same cigarette on the front porch, same half-hearted salute. She didn't even come back inside once I'd gone in. Her paperwork was already filled out and filed, and she'd even left mine on the counter, an uncapped pen waiting for my signature. I guess she was antsy to get out, though who knows why; I would be really surprised to find out Dana had somewhere to be.

Donny and Jimmy were in good moods – well, good moods for them, anyway. Donny camped out in front of the television and watched cartoons. I filled out my paperwork and then flopped into the easy chair in the living room. I didn't recognize the cartoon, but it kept Donny entertained, so I let it be.

And Jimmy just sat, watching the wall. He had his groove in the couch and his spot on the wall, and he spent most of his life in them.

All of the reports I read about our house talk about how easy Jimmy is to take care of – how he almost never causes problems or wrecks anything or objects to taking his meds. Donny was the rough one, the one who might argue with you or throw a fit if he didn't get his way. The guy I replaced always complained about Donny, said he could never get him to behave, but Jimmy? What a peach.

Looking at him then, I couldn't help but think of what Lucy said about him. *What a gray way to live.* I'd rather have a Donny. Donny might have been rowdy, but *people* were rowdy. People got upset if they didn't have their way, if their favorite TV show wasn't on, if you made them a hamburger when they wanted spaghetti. Jimmy didn't do anything of those things. The only thing different between him and a coma patient was that he kept his eyes open.

"Hey, Jimmy?" I said. "Hey, buddy. Look at me."

Jimmy roused slightly and twitched his eyebrows. Almost a frown.

"How are you feeling, Jimmy?" I asked. I said it slowly. He didn't respond, but his eyes moved – maybe recognition, maybe just my mind wanting to see it. "Are you hungry, pal? Do you want me to make you—"

Someone pecked at the door – sharp notes struck on the glass with a key. I checked my watch and saw that it was 9:23. Weird. Almost nobody ever visited the boys that late. I grimaced at Jimmy. "Uh, hold that thought, bud. Let me see who that is." Maggie, working over in 3C, maybe? She always lost her pens...

I opened the door and saw an old woman in a dress too stuffy and ugly to be anything but handmade, her vulture-face pulled into a frown. Before any of that registered the smell hit me. *Essence of Wilting Violets.*

"Uh, hello?" I said. "Can I help you?"

"I'm here for my son," she said, deadpan. "Jimmy, the one on the couch."

Oh, shit. "Mrs. Everett? Jimmy's mother?"

"That's who I am. Now get out of my way. I'm taking my boy out of this hole and back home, where he belongs."

No, no, no. The reports didn't mention it specifically, but everybody knew exactly how Jimmy had gotten hurt – the hospital report said he'd been checked in with multiple contusions and bruises, even a cracked rib. She'd said he'd fallen down the stairs, but nobody really believed that. Jimmy was in state custody because his mother had pushed him.

"Look, you can't do that. You can't even take him out for a visit this late – he's supposed to be in bed in a few minutes."

"I'm not taking him on any visits. I have thought about it over and over again and I ain't going to let you fools bring him up wrong anymore. I'm taking him and we're going home."

Donny stood up and came over to the door. "Hi miss!" He looked back at Jimmy.

"Hey, Jim! Company!"

Jimmy looked at the door and cocked his head slightly.

"Donny – Donny, go to your room, okay, buddy?" I said.

He looked at me with hurt eyes. Donny's feelings bruise like peaches. I promised I'd make it up to him later, somehow. "What? But why?"

"Just do what I tell you, okay?" I said. Fuck, Donny, this was not the time... He looked like he was about to argue, but, thank god, he cooperated and stumbled off to his room.

"How long you planning to stand there? Get out of my way," said Mrs. Everett. "Jimmy! Come on, we're going."

Jimmy rose to his feet and took a few slow steps toward the door. I did my best to stay between him and his mother, but... Fuck, laws, rules. I couldn't stop him if he wanted to go. I couldn't do anything but try and talk him out of it, and, well, trying to reason with Jimmy was like trying to reason with a four-year old. (Fuck. *Still* not supposed to think of him that way. Still not working out so well.)

Well, maybe I couldn't reason with him, but his mother was an autonomous person. She had to be reasonable. Right?

"Look, Mrs. Everett, I know why Jimmy's here instead of at home with you. You aren't his guardian – you don't have any right to this. I will call the police if you keep this up. I don't think you want that at your age, do you?"

She ignored me and pushed past into the room.

"This is kidnapping, Mrs. Everett. You are committing kidnapping. If you just leave now, I'll ignore it and we can forget all about this." That was a lie – I planned to call Dana as soon as I sorted this out, and if I had my way this old bat wouldn't be allowed within a hundred feet of 3A. Assuming I could stop this.

"Jimmy, the car's double-parked. Let's go. Listen to your mother."

He followed her to the door. I thought about grabbing him by the shoulders, trying to convince him, but... Fuck, she could testify to that. Attendants manhandling their patients. Accusations of rampant abuse in Cheriton Valley. She'd get me fired, maybe prosecuted too. "Jimmy," I pleaded, "Listen to me, man. If you do this, bad things are going to happen, okay? You won't have your medicine, you won't have us checking up on you, you won't—"

"What he won't have are you people doing the job that's mine." She scowled at me. "He's my son, not yours. He ain't a thing to you but a meal ticket. He deserves better than that."

"He deserves better than you."

She glared at me, and then motioned to Jimmy. He followed her outside, and I followed him. "Jimmy, this is your last warning, man. Just come back inside, I'll make you some ice cream and you won't be in trouble at all. Just come on back in. You remember what happened last time you left? How we had to change your pills and take away your privileges?" I swallowed. "Don't make me have to do that again."

Jimmy looked at me, then, actually looked me in the eyes, and it seemed like he was sorry for what he was doing. He looked as though he knew this would probably end up badly for him, that he would end up going off his meds and have his symptoms flare up again, that his mother would berate him and probably beat him for failing to understand concepts his brain just wasn't able to comprehend. He understood this would hurt him, and when he got back to the house (*if* he got back to the house) we would have to punish him – not for vindication, but because we just couldn't take the chance of him leaving again.

But it was his mom. What was he going to do?

Maybe that was all in my head – maybe I was just projecting – but it looked that way.

That's all I know.

Then Jimmy got into his mother's blue station wagon, and soon, they were gone.

\* \* \*

Dana finally sent me home at about five that morning, after hours of paperwork and phone calls. ("You've done enough for tonight," she said.) They hadn't found Jimmy or any sign of his mother. They could have already been in Indiana, for all we knew.

I kept running over in my head what I could have done differently, but short of throwing her out I couldn't think of anything else. That didn't make me feel any better about it. Or about my prospects for staying employed, for that matter.

It was still dark when I pulled into the Community Chest apartments. The lights were dark in all the apartments but one – mine. Did Grimey forget to turn out the lights? No – when I opened the car door I heard black metal blasting from our windows. Motherfucker. I was surprised the cops weren't there for breaking noise ordinances. I tramped up the stairs to our apartment intent on murdering him.

"Grimey!" I yelled when I got inside. The only reply I got was a hideous metal scream, the kind that sounds like it starts somewhere around the eight circle of Hell and works its way up. The whole apartment was trashed: books, *my* books everywhere, the trash can knocked over, even a broken beer bottle behind the couch. I slammed my fist against the off button on the stereo and listened for any sound of him. "Grimey, where the fuck are you?" No answer again. No sign of him in the kitchen. I found him in his bedroom, sprawled on the

floor with an empty bottle of Boone's Farm and a conspicuous blue stain on the carpet next to him. His room stank: alcohol and pot mixed into a noxious concoction. He groaned when I flipped on the lights.

"Grimey, what the fuck happened?"

He looked up at me with bleary eyes. "Lou? M'sorry, man, I'll clean it up in the morning..."

"Your 'in the morning' can kiss my ass. This place is a wreck. What the hell happened?"

He struggled up to sitting. "Things didn't go so well with my mom... I dunno, I got really drunk."

"Do I look like I give a fuck about your mommy problems? If you had any clue what I've been through tonight... Jesus. Get the fuck up and put this place back together."

He seemed to come out of his haze at that. "Hey, fuck you," he said. His voice was still slurred from the alcohol. "You don't have a right to just barge in here and make demands—"

"The hell I don't. This is my fucking apartment too, you leech, and I'm sick of coming home to see my shit all over the place and listening to your bullshit excuses."

He stood up and got in my face. The whiskey smell made me even angrier with him. "'Leech?' You cocksucker. You know what *I'm* tired of? You and your fucking superiority complex. You thinking you're so much better than everybody else. Lou fucking Durham, savior of the fucking universe."

For a moment he really did look intimidating. Probably the only time in Grimey's life all the black clothes and chains made him look like he was really about to beat somebody ass. Too bad he wasn't sober enough to enjoy it. He looked like he was about ready to hit me, so I backed up a couple of steps.

"I'm not putting up with this. Go back to sleep, asshole, and fix the goddamn apartment when you don't look so fucking pathetic."

He pushed past me, mashing his shoulder into my chest, and went out into the hallway. I followed him, rubbing my clavicle. "Grimey? What are you doing?"

"I'm not gonna sit down and listen to your bullshit. I've got too much on my mind... I gotta think things through. I gotta figure out what I'm going to do about my mom. I'm going out."

"'Out?' Where? It's like, six in the morning. Where are you going to go?"

"I said *out*." He grabbed his keys and made for the door.

"Woah, Grimes, hold up, man," I said. "You're sauced, you're not driving anywhere."

"You're not my fucking mother," he said. I watched him from the front stoop as he got into his car and started it up. I rolled my eyes as he turned on the headlights and started to pull away. Asshole. I had no idea why I put up with him for so long, when he was nothing but a whiny momma's boy who didn't know the first thing about—

I heard a very loud crash and, completely on instinct, ran out the door. The sun was just starting to rise, bathing the neighborhood in a ghostly combination of violet ground and rusty sky. I rushed down the street in the direction of the noise. The elm tree in front of our

building had been knocked backwards, its roots still clinging to the earth, and wrapped around the trunk of the tree was the grille to Grimey's hearse.

## VI

The nurse was drawing blood from Grimey when I found his room. I looked away; I didn't want to see his fluids. It felt like catching him masturbating. The nurse must have noticed, because when she finished, she called to me. "All done," she said, in that sort of high, flighty voice they develop from working with children and those who regress into children at the sight of a needle. "You can come on in."

"Thanks," I said. I walked into a room the color of sterility and fluorescence and took a look at him. He was pale, even for Grimey. Practically exsanguinated. I'm sure the color would have appealed to him. Two black eyes, one of his legs elevated and wrapped. A neckbrace. The chart on his bed listed some of the injuries: concussion, two black eyes, a number of broken bones. Internal bleeding. And, almost an afterthought, whiplash.

The nurse took the blood away and left us along in the room. We looked at each other for a moment before I finally summoned the nerve to talk. "Hey, buddy," I said, softly.

"Hey," he said.

"You going to be okay?"

He tried to shrug, but he winced on the way to it. "I guess. I'm not dead. They tell me that's something."

"You did a number on that tree. I'm pretty sure your hearse has seen the last of its days."

"That fucking hearse," he muttered. "Didn't even have fucking airbags. Cheap-ass morticians."

We looked at each other for a moment in silence. He looked as if he were waiting for me to say something.

"What?" I asked.

"Aren't you gonna say something? Ask what happened? Anything?"

"I didn't think you'd want me to." I took a breath. "Okay, so what happened?"

"My mom. I told her, and she... She started yelling at me, said she'd been turning a blind eye to the chains and the goth stuff for years, hoping it would just be a thing I grew out of, but that this witch shit was too much for her. Said I was just doing it to fuck with her... That she didn't deserve to be treated like that." He looked back at me, and his face – always too chubby to be properly dark and intriguing like he wanted – now looked grotesque, hollow, a choleric mask on a sanguine frame. "She said the only reason anybody calls themselves a witch is to hurt their parents."

"That's not true, Grimes," I whispered. "You know that's not true."

He was quiet for a long time. "Maybe you know it's not true, Lou. Me, I don't think I know anything right now." He took a drink from a sippy-cup on the counter next to him.

"She said I wasn't her son anymore, not until I got my life in order, not until I came back to God. And she doesn't pay tuition for other people's children." He sat the cup back down, and muttered, "Or their health insurance either, I'm guessing."

"I'm... Look, I'm sorry, Grimey. And I know that's about as lame as it gets, but... I'm sorry. I had a bad, bad night at work and when I got home, I took it out on you."

He didn't say it was okay, but I didn't really expect him to. "I don't know what the fuck I'm going to do, man. When I get out of here, I mean."

"You'll be okay. Don't freak out. That's just the morphine talking."

"Shit," he said. "The morphine's been the only good part."

\* \* \*

I didn't go to class for two days. My work week had ended (maybe forever) on Sunday morning, so I didn't have that to do either. I spent the time sitting around the apartment, waiting for a telephone to ring and tell me that either Jimmy or Grimey were finally heading home. I didn't get any calls. Two days of sitting on the couch, the floor, the bed, standing in the corner, standing with my head against the door. Two days barely eating, never sleeping.

Nine AM on Wednesday, I realized that my internal monologue had shut off. The little life-script I wrote as I went along through my day, the voice that reassured me of my presence in my own brain, it just hadn't been on. I had been staring at walls and feeling nothing, thinking nothing. Blank screen. I remember feeling completely lost at the moment I figured that out. The past week had forced me off the goddamn air. I didn't even get to go into reruns.

About noon that day, the phone finally rang. I jumped on it like it was a sleepy gazelle. "Hello?"

"Lou?" Dana. "Hey. How are you?"

"I'm..." Fucked up? Not sleeping? Worried that Jimmy is dead and Grimey is never going to be the same? Wishing I could afford a liver transplant to accommodate the bender I want to go on? "I'm fine. What's up?"

"Not much has changed," she said. "We think Mrs. Everett might have gone down to Macon or Moberly. The police are keeping in touch, but she must have been planning this for a while..."

"I wouldn't have expected it out of her."

"Makes two of us." She hesitated. Come on, Dana, just get it out. Was I fired? Was I being arraigned? "My boss wants to have a hearing with us. Make sure that you didn't do anything to agitate Jimmy. Make sure we aren't liable for anything."

"How could we be liable for anything? I mean, his mom kidnapped him. Who could sue us?"

"Jimmy's sister in La Plata could... She's the legal guardian. I don't know if she will, but you know how people are. If she sees the opportunity to bilk us for a few grand, she'll take it."

"But I followed the rules," I said. "I did what I was supposed to do..."

"I'm sure you did. It's just a hearing. Don't let it worry you too much."

I looked at the white wall of the apartment. "Fine. When?"

"Friday afternoon. Is that okay?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm guessing I don't need to show up to work until then."

She didn't answer at first, but I could picture her slow nod. "Right. Yes."

"Okay."

"I'll call you if we hear anything else about Jimmy. I'll see you Friday." And she hung up.

I held the phone for a long time and stared at the wall. Outside I could hear somebody's dog barking. No other sounds. When the dog stopped, I found myself unsure as to whether it had really been there, or if I'd hallucinated it.

Hallucinations. I've heard that it doesn't take long without sleep before that starts to happen to you...

I flipped through my list of numbers and came to Lucy's name. I needed to talk to someone – needed to get my head back on straight. Needed somebody to convince me to go to bed. I called her and listened for the rings.

One, two, three, four rings. Five. Click.

*"Hi! You have reached the voicemail of Lucy Walstead. I'm probably in class at the moment, but if you leave me a message I'll get back to you. Blessed be!"* Beep.

Fuck.

"Luce, it's Lou. Could you call me back when you get this? It's important. A lot of shit has happened over the past couple of days and... Look, I just really need to talk to you. Please." I paused, wondered whether it would be best to give her a summary of Shit That Had Gone Wrong Since Saturday. No, probably not. Better to just lay it out once than have to explain it again when she called. "Thanks in advance. Bye." Click.

I put my phone back in my pocket and made myself a grilled cheese sandwich. I was surprised I had the hand-eye coordination for it. I took a bite and realized the middle was still stone cold, but I ate it anyway.

It only took another hour of blank staring before I finally went to bed. I closed the blinds in my room and undressed and fell on the mattress. Like clockwork, the phone rang

just as I pulled the blanket over my body. I fumbled into my pants pocket and grabbed the phone, almost missing the call. (I knew because David Bowie had almost gotten to the second "*Alright!*" in the chorus to *Young Americans*.) "Lucy?"

"Ah, no, I'm afraid not, Lou." Of course not. The ring hadn't been *Sweet Jane*, had it? The voice on the other end was an older man. He sounded authoritative, but soft.

"Sorry. Uh, who is this, then?"

"It's Dr. Eccleston. Is this a bad time?"

Eccleston? How the fuck did he get my phone number? (*From the student directory, dumbass.*) "No, no, professor, this isn't a bad time. What is it?"

"I noticed you weren't in class yesterday, and, well, I'd heard about Herman. He's your roommate, isn't he?"

"Yes, sir."

"Lou, you know you don't have to call me sir..." *Trust me. Trust me. I'm your friend.* "Would you be willing to come by my office today? I want to talk to you about some things."

"Does it need to be today? I was just about to take a nap – I haven't really slept well in the past few days."

"Of course, of course," he said, in his kind old uncle voice. "I understand. The past few days must have been hard on you. Tomorrow, maybe?"

"Sure. Tomorrow. What time?"

"Whenever works for you, Lou."

"Alright. After the usual class time? Is that okay?"

"That's fine. Get some rest, Lou."

"Thank you, professor."

We hung up, and I dropped the phone on the floor next to my bed. I found myself staring up at the ceiling, completely unable to shut my eyes.

He *would* be the one to call, wouldn't he?

\* \* \*

Dr. Eccleston looked itchy. Probably the sweater. White today, big cables of wool. The office lights glinted off his bald pate and I found myself thinking of the cheesy lighting in *Attack of the Mutant-Space Peeps*. He had the shade down on his window, so even though it was early in the afternoon, no natural light filtered into the room. He shuffled around some papers, not really looking at them. I guess he didn't really want to have this conversation either, but it was too important to his Protestant ethics to let it go.

"So, Lou. Obviously the situation with Herman must be on your mind..." He looked at me with a sad, embarrassed smile. "That's such a silly thing for me to say. 'Obviously...' Having a roommate in that situation. I can only imagine the difficulty." He turned around and took a coffee pot from a Mr. Coffee on his shelf. "Can I offer you a cup?"

"Thanks," I said. He poured me a mug and gave me two sugars and half-and-half. I took a drink before I thought to see what the mug said. *Corpus Christi Baptist Church*. Of course. Eccleston drank out of a white-and-purple Truman State mug, himself. The coffee was good, at least.

"Are you and Herman close?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I mean, we've lived together for years now. We'd have to be."

"I..." Eccleston held his coffee mug with both hands and considered. "I heard that he had tried to hurt himself. That he hit the tree on purpose. Did he say anything to you about that?"

"Professor, with all due respect," – which is what, exactly? – "that's kind of personal, isn't it? I mean, Gri—Herman has a right to his privacy."

He nodded and sat his cup down. "Well, yes, of course. I just wanted to know because... Well, you know as well as I do. Herman is a member of my church, beyond being a former student. I feel somewhat responsible for his well-being."

A member of your church? One of your flock? And you, the dutiful shepherd, looking after his health. How sweet. "Right." He didn't say anything. I guess he expected that I would volunteer more information. I stared into the darkness of his coffee and frowned.

"Professor, who told you that? About Grimey wanting to hurt himself."

"Grimey?" he asked with a frown. "Is that his nickname?"

"Yeah," I said. "Short for Grimalkin."

The frown didn't disappear, but Eccleston didn't press the issue. "I called Herman's mother when I heard he was in the hospital. When she went to school here, she went to my church too. We've kept in touch, off and on, through the years. She said that he had been having some problems, things he wouldn't talk to her about. Which led her to believe he might have been willing to hurt himself." He shrugged. "You know how things are. We thought perhaps Herman had shared things with you he wouldn't share with us. We just want to help him."

*You want me to be an informant, I thought. You want me to trust the mother and the preacher. You hope maybe I'll be the one who helps him back to you. Back to Jesus.*

"I'm sorry, Dr. Eccleston. I just don't think it would be right to talk about this without Grimey knowing. If he was having problems, those are his to address, not mine."

He looked disappointed, but he nodded. "Well, perhaps, though if he is a danger to himself..." He sighed. "But I understand your position, of course. Perhaps once he gets out of the hospital you can talk to him about it."

"In the meantime, though, I wanted to talk to you about our class..." Really? He was bringing up schoolwork after that? He sat up straighter, subtly stretched his neck. Shifted from Kindly Preacher to Understanding Professor. "Well, having something like this happen to a friend is an awful experience. When I was a young man, I remember hearing about an old girlfriend who had tried to swallow a bottle of sleeping pills... Terrible." He shook his head in that way everybody does when they're trying to demonstrate that they understand your pain when they really don't.

"Anyway. I know you're in distress right now, and when Herman comes home, you will probably be helping him recover. I understand that is a lot to go through, and I just want you to know that ultimately, my class is just not all that important by comparison." He took a drink from his Truman State mug and leaned back. "Take as much time as you need on the paper, or on anything, really. For that matter, I'd be happy to give you an incomplete and let you finish the work over the holidays or in the spring, if you think it would help you."

I took another drink of the coffee and thought about it. There's a tradition all over the world that sharing drinks implies a connection between people. When something great has

happened, you drink to it; when something terrible has happened, you drink in mourning. Drinking is a ritual, like eating, like sex. Even at the festivals, there's that sacred moment when the chalice of consecrated wine circles around the congregants... *May you never hunger, may you never thirst.*

So was this supposed to be our connection, Professor? You and I, sharing this coffee, you asking me to tell you about Grimey, you offering your understanding and your sympathy. Was this supposed to be magic? Was I supposed to think of you as family? Were you trying to save me too?

I sat there, looking at the coffee, for a long time. Dr. Eccleston didn't say anything. Maybe he thought I was going to cry. Maybe he thought I was doing the Guy Version of crying, the stoic, emotionless torpor.

I remembered the dream I had, just before Grimey and I went to visit Eccleston's church. The feeling of boiling lead on my skin, the hot rods stabbed into my side. It's funny; I had never been much one for the dreamy, psychedelic part of paganism. I devoted myself to Thoth, to Hermes, to Athena, Odin; gods of reason, gods of analysis. I never put any stock into dreams or prophecy. But I remembered every sensation of that dream. Every moment on the rack. Every drip of burning lead...

How much easier it would be just to give over your scriptures. How much easier to renounce your heretical ways. You wouldn't have to die, or be persecuted, or have your parents disown you. You wouldn't have to worry about your children being taken from you, or your friends thinking you'll go to hell. You could cheer for Rosemary, boo the witches. Join the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Vote Republican. No need to fear, no need to hide

– you could even tell the triumphant story of how you left behind your wicked past and found the One True Way. They'd put you on talk shows. You'd be Born Again.

You'd be a hero – out of the darkness and into the light.

How much easier it would be, to be an apostate.

"Lou?" asked Dr. Eccleston. "Are you alright?"

"Professor," I said, at last, "do you know why Grimey and I went to your church that day?"

He shook his head. "No. Well, I assumed Herman just came for the service, as he does, sometimes. I imagined you were just curious."

"I guess that's one way of putting it." I sat his cup down. "I didn't believe Grimey at first when he said you were a pastor. I wanted to see what you said in your sermons, how different it was from the classroom."

He lowered his gaze, and his speech came slow and uncertain. "And?"

"And it isn't any different at all. In class, all you talk about is about the inexorable rise of Christianity – how we outgrew that old world and grew into a new one, like Western Civilization finally hit puberty. Julian the Apostate is as much of a passing cloud to you as he ever was to Athanasius. And you said the same thing in church that Sunday. People turn away from Christianity, and you told your people just to give them time – because eventually, Christ is going to win their hearts back. Because he has to. Because you can't escape Him.

"Grimey and I, we didn't go to your church because we wanted to hear about Jesus. We went because we wanted to know our enemies. Grimey's never been a member of your

church. He only went because his mom made him. Grimey's one of your apostates, professor. He doesn't belong to you. He belongs to the Goddess."

Eccleston's expression grew more and more bewildered as all of that spilled out of me. I didn't even know where it came from – I never would have thought to say it the moment before. "The 'goddess?'" he eventually said.

"Yes," I said. "He's a pagan. So am I."

"I didn't know," he said, carefully. "Neither did his mother, apparently."

"Of course not," I said. "When he told his mother, she disowned him. That's why he drove his car into the goddamn tree."

"That's horrible," said Dr. Eccleston. "Lou – Lou, if I had know about it, I would have—"

"What? Told him how wicked and sinful he was being, and tried to talk him into throwing away that pentagram and putting his cross back on?" I stood up, and Eccleston, perhaps unknowingly, shrunk back a little – I wonder if he thought I was going to attack him. No, no – I was angry, but not like that. But I was in the neighborhood. "I don't care what you think. You're not inevitable. You're not. I'm not going to be like you. Neither is Grimey. I don't need you to save my soul."

I grabbed the door handle and dashed into the hall. Behind me I heard Eccleston get up from his desk and start after me, but I didn't stop to look. "Lou, wait! Wait!" he called. I didn't. I walked out of the gaudy shadows of McClain Hall and out into the cold autumn daylight.

Dazed. Maybe that's the word to describe how I felt as I walked across the brick mall in front of McClain. Other students hustled to class, walked to the library, laughed or grumbled or threw the last Frisbee of the year. Early October. Halfway through the fall – a threshold of sorts. Soon it would be Samhain, when the old ghosts are close enough to touch...

I shook my head and turned away from the university, walked back toward McClain. I passed through the alley between that hall and the one next to it and stopped three quarters of the way through. I looked up and realized that the office above me – the one with the drawn shades – that was Dr. Eccleston's office. Somehow I'd never made thought of the geography of it before; the rooms inside weren't really connected, for some reason. But no, there was just this one little barrier between in there and out here. One thin, fragile pane of glass.

I looked around the alley. This was one of the university's neglected areas, mostly only seen by shortcutting students and maintenance men. (No wonder he kept the shade drawn.) No bricks, but I did find a nice fist-sized chunk of concrete. I picked it up, felt the weight of it in my hands, ran my fingers across the surface – took in all of the grooves and holes, the imperfections that would have driven Plato mad.

There's this narrative Plato used, and that all his descendents used too – Aristotle and Aquinas and the like, right down to Campbell and Frazer. People start out as savages, believing in savage gods – the primitive gods of the ignorant, who demand blood and superstition. Eventually we come to polytheism, but really, that's just savagery in disguise. The gods are flawed, imperfect, and cruel; they cheat on their wives, curse those who don't

cater to their vanity, argue and fight and love like people. People are fuck-ups – why would you want to worship someone who acts like a person? Better to believe in the One God, the perfect God, the God that exists above and beyond all that human bullshit. People grow into that. That, or they just stay savages, and you either kill them or convert them – one often leading to the other.

The point being, they know that the beautiful, eternal truth of their God is the natural evolution of human belief. It's where we're all going to end up eventually. And whether they wear chainmail and a sword like a crusader, or a smile and a purple sweater, like Dr. Eccleston, they know that if they just keep at it, one day, you'll break down and let yourself be saved. But their One True God didn't so a goddamn thing for Jimmy or for Grimey. And I'll be damned before I let Him do a thing for me.

I stood there with the rock in my hand, thinking long and hard about what I was going to do. There was something I had to put in order first. With my other hand I reached into my pocket and took out my phone. I dialed her number and let it ring.

"Hello? Lou?" Lucy said.

"Hey, Luce," I said, quietly.

"What's going on? I'm sorry, I lost my charger, I only just got your message this morning..."

"That's alright. It doesn't really matter now," I said. "I just need to tell you something."

"Is it about the other weekend? I wanted to talk to you about it too, but..."

"No, it's not about that." I swallowed. "Look, I need to be quick about this. It might be a while before you see me again. I'm not sure what I'm going to be like the next time you do. Just trust me. I'm calling you to tell you that this was the right thing to do."

"That *what* is the right thing to do? I don't understand."

I held that rock in my hand, that imperfect rock, that imperfect hand. People were going to talk about this afterwards, and nobody would understand. Dr. Eccleston was such a kind man, gentle, patient. Such a nice man. They would never understand how that only made it worse.

My arm swung back, and then the rock was gone. Things went slowly then. I could see the chunk of concrete, see it darting upward, see gravity pull it into that inexorable falling arc. Nothing to be done about it anymore; it was out of my hands. Sometimes you make a decision, and you don't know exactly what's going to happen, but you know it's too late to do anything but wait for the consequences. Sometimes it feels like my whole life has been that way.

The glass shattered under the impact of the rock. The frame buckled, and each shard of glass crashed away, like frenzied windchimes. The sunlight danced in the cracks of the remaining glass, and within seconds, everything was still and silent once more.

"Lou? Lou, what the fuck was that?" Lucy cried into the phone.

"A choice," I said. "Bye Lucy. I love you."

"Wait, what? Lou, you son of a bitch, don't—"

And I hung up.

Soon, there would be yelling, and chases, and handcuffs. I was sure of that. Kirksville was too small a town to get away with anything. But they would have to catch me first. I walked out of the alley, back into the sunlight. The sun caught on something shining, silver, at my feet. I picked it up: a U.S. quarter, minted in 1976.

The quarter hit the sidewalk with a clink, and I ran until I heard the sirens.

## OVER THE RAINBOW

Dottie's mother's hair, once black as the Wicked Witch's habit, had been sprouting gray strands for forty-nine days. They swallowed her head like lichen. The silver patches betrayed Kate's constant harried smile, as did the new creases magnified by her eyeglasses and the tiny weariness that had crept into her steps. Little things, things most people wouldn't notice, but Dottie did. Dottie noticed everything.

She and her mother hadn't spoken since they got on the highway nearly an hour before, when the sun had just crested over the horizon and cast the road and the river beside it in pomegranate orange. The radio was set to NPR: Krista Tippit's "Speaking of Faith," which Kate tried to listen to every week. The subject was a Latin American fashion show that used the Virgin Mary as its central motif. The Catholic Church had immediately condemned it. Kate stared through the murky windshield and glanced at the defroster, considering whether to renew the struggle between the cold air outside and the uncomfortable heat inside. Dottie, for her part, held on to the pecan pie in her lap and ran her brown finger across the window pane, tracing runes in the fog.

"Honey... Thank you for coming," Kate said. "It would have meant a lot to Linda, I know it would."

"You don't have to thank me. Why wouldn't I come? She was practically my second mother."

"I know, but...." Her mother hesitated. On the radio, somebody mentioned that the sexuality of the Virgin Mary models had grounding in medieval virgin imagery. "Well. I just know it's awkward for you, lately, especially since Andy's going to be there. And this might seem a little silly."

Dottie shook her head. "No," she said. "We're saying goodbye. There's nothing silly about that at all."

She was lying — at least a little. She understood that her mother was grieving, but they had already held a funeral, nearly two months back. They held it in the field outside Linda and her husband Peter's home. She'd watched as Peter set up the altar, listened as the Walstead family called in the elements. She'd been there when their little tribe said their goodbyes, spread the ashes, and closed the circle. It had been the biggest gathering of their family of pagans in years, perhaps decades. Dottie was sure it would remain the biggest until death brought the lost tribes out of exile again.

They said goodbye with red balloons. Each person at the funeral had one, lighter than air, with a white string hanging down. As the sun set, the family went back out to the altar and shared a round of Linda's persimmon mead. She finished bottling it the week after Yule, a week before her death. In a year's time, it would have been a fine thing to drink; then, it was sour, and too pungent. But they passed the bottle and took a drink, even Dottie, who never drank alcohol. They drank it and they pretended to love it, because they had loved her.

When the bottle came back empty to Peter, he sat it on the ground and then looked up at the rusty gradient of the sky. He swallowed and spoke. His voice was a shaky tenor. "The quality of a heart," he said, "is not judged by how much we love, but by how much we are

loved by others.' It's just like the wizard said. And if that's right... Well, look around you, and judge the quality of this heart." He raised his balloon high above his head with trembling fingers. "Goodbye, Linda." He let go of the balloon and it rose up, up, up into the sky, and then there were dozens trailing after it, an ocean of red that seemed like it might never end.

And then at last the balloons were just a red blotch in the sky, and soon, not even that. The balloons floated away into the summerlands, Linda Walstead floating with them.

It had been a nice enough funeral, Dottie thought, even if she did cringe at the reference to *The Wizard of Oz*. But it was over. Why go through it again? Why not let the dead lie?

Twenty minutes passed before her mother came to a farm bounded by a picket fence. An open gate led to a long driveway that curled up a hill through a copse of trees. Next to the gate was a sign on a pole:

THE WALSTEAD FAMILY  
WELCOMES YOU TO  
THE ELYSIAN FIELDS  
2917 Zimmerman Rd.

Above the words, a serene image of the sun with a human face stared out. She remembered the day they had put up that sign. Peter and Linda had lived in the city for all of Dottie's childhood, but they always wanted to move out to the country. They wanted to live "closer to the earth" than they could in south St. Louis. They could only afford it after a disaster: their house caught fire in the winter of 1994, burnt to the frame. They lost family photographs,

heirloom quilts, the coven banner with every member's name engraved on it. But they gained a very large insurance check.

Their housewarming party was the festival of Lughnasadh, the first of August. Over fifty people showed up, the biggest crowd a festival had ever attracted: the regulars came, the regulars' friends came, old coven members who had moved away for work or family came, all to celebrate the Sun King's feast and to make sure for themselves that Peter and Linda Walstead were still alive.

Peter let Andy, ten years old and already tall and lanky, drive the final nail into the sign outside the Elysian Fields. When it had been driven in all the way, the fifty pagans clapped and grabbed each others' hands and started to sing "Sumer Is Icumen In." Dottie had been among them, a little girl in a gingham dress, laughing and clapping and exulting in the thrill of something she could not yet name: the turning of the wheel, the fruit of living, the splendor of Wicca.

Dottie remembered the joys she once felt, and shuddered to think she had ever been so young.

Peter was outside the house smoking a cigarette when they pulled up. He looked across the Elysian Fields and took in one fiery breath, then breathed out. The morning sun blazed on the duck pond at the bottom of the hill. A thin film of water was starting to appear on the gray ice. Peter was looking at it when Kate turned the engine off, as though he did not notice them, but finally he turned and smiled. Dottie realized that his golden mustache, which she had known him to wear her entire life, had faded to white.

Kate squeezed her daughter's hand. "I love you, honey."

"I know, mom. I love you too."

Her mother opened her car door and clambered out, making the selection of little grunts of pain and stiffness that Dottie had come to associate with her parents' generation. Kate grabbed Peter into a matronly hug that lasted for over a minute by Dottie's count; she tried to ignore the sniffing.

"Hey, Kate, Dottie," said Peter. "Good to see you two here."

"It's always good to see you, Pete," said her mother, releasing him from her embrace. "We missed you at Candlemas."

"Oh, I know," he said. He dropped his cigarette to the concrete driveway and crushed it beneath the heel of his boot. "I tried to make it, but I just got caught up in things." Dottie knew he said it without any expectation of belief. He looked at Dottie and grinned. "C'mere, kiddo. It's been awhile since I've seen you."

Peter hugged her, as he had hugged her so many times before: every six weeks, a turn of the wheel, a long hug from Uncle Pete. The cigarette smoke that clung to his flannel shirt didn't make her cough or wrinkle her nose. Somehow, from him, it smelled comforting, safe. "Lucy and Andy are in the house," he said as he let her go. "Your mom and I will be up in a minute."

Dottie walked through a green door into the house's garage, where Andy's truck was parked; Peter's white Ford pickup sat outside. She could hear a knife chopping through vegetables, smelled ham in the oven. Three months ago, it would have been Linda in that kitchen, ready to kiss Dottie's cheek and put her to work peeling potatoes, but no more. The garage was dark, and when she flipped the garage's light switch, nothing happened.

"Hey! Your light bulb must be burnt out!" she called, and started towards the kitchen. Her footsteps murmured like ghosts on the creaky stairs.

"It's not the bulb," called a male voice. "The electric went out about seven A.M." Dottie came out of the stairwell and into the earthy tones of the Walstead kitchen. Andy, still tall, lanky, and blond, leaned on a stone countertop, eating a slice of green apple. "Figures that mom would bump into the power lines on her way out..."

"Yeah," said Dottie. *"This is my last meal on earth and you're going to do it right, goddammit! I don't want you microwaving anything, and if anyone even touches the television, gods help me I'll haunt you myself!"* she said in a nasal voice that she pictured as belonging to a warty hag. Andy didn't chuckle.

Dottie frowned when she looked at him. He looked bad, like he hadn't been sleeping. The word, she decided, was weary: bone-weary, world-weary, like he was tired and had been for weeks.

She paused, already out of words, and realized the frustrating silence between them had not faded since she last saw him, at the funeral. "How have you been holding up?" she asked, at last.

Andy swallowed the last bit of his apple slice. "Jesus, Dottie, how do you think I'm..."

"Dottie!" called a voice from the dining room. "Is that you?"

Lucy bounded into the kitchen, a tall pale girl the same age as Dottie who could have passed for a Valkyrie if she hadn't dyed her hair dark violet. Her long skirt swirled: every movement became a salsa dance. She kissed Dottie on the forehead.

"Hey, you," said Dottie. "What's up?"

"Not too much," said Lucy. "I got in about nine last night. My train got held up for like, seven hours. It was crazy."

"This wouldn't be a problem if you just stayed in St. Louis, like a normal person." If Dottie had been the sort of person who smirked when she teased people, she would have smirked then; but she wasn't, and didn't.

"And maybe if St. Louis had a half-decent linguistics program, I would have a reason to stay..."

"Too bad Lou isn't here, or it'd be a regular family reunion," Dottie said. Lucy blanched at the mention of his name. "What?" asked Dottie.

"Nothing. I just... I don't know, it feels weird to talk about him. I know he would have wanted to have been here for this."

"He'll be out of jail in a month or two," said Andy. "And I'll probably punch him in the jaw for being such a dumbass."

"Anyway, enough about him," said Dottie. "C'mon, I'm still setting up the table."

Lucy dragged Dottie through the doorway into the dining room. She caught one last look at Andy before being crossing the threshold: he lifted a spoonful of soup to his lips and tasted it. His face soured. "Something missing," he muttered, and started looking through the spice cabinet.

\* \* \*

The dining room was one enormous altar, from the statue of the Buddha atop the mantle to the chorus of deities who littered the room. A painting of the Kabbalistic Tree of

Life hung next to an image of Krishna playing the flute; a hundred holy symbols, all made of silver, hung from the chandelier. The walls were lined with bookshelves that stretched the height of the room. Every shelf was crammed: mythology, rituals, magickal practices, a small collection of early editions from Crowley, Gardner, Austin Spare. Hidden away on one of the shelves were three round, silver picture frames: one for the Wicked Witch of the West, one for Glinda the Good Witch, and between those, a smiling portrait of a woman in a green dress, her chestnut hair brushing against her shoulders. Dottie wondered whose idea it was to put Linda between the two witches. Probably Lucy; of all the members of their generation, she was the only one who really got the "Oz thing."

The dining room table, set with a sanguine cloth, had been filled by plates and dishes of food; they, too, were a part of the altar, the food of the sacrament, the gifts of the Goddess.

Dottie didn't quite know how to express how the room made her feel. She had spent a considerable amount of time in this house since she was a girl: a dozen sabbats, the occasional esbat, and of course, the long summers when she visited Lucy and Andy. It sort of felt like coming home after a long time away. But then again, she had been the one who turned away – never with a dramatic pronouncement or condemnation, but more quietly. She had not been to a festival for over a year, since the Candlemas she spent with Jeff. The last time she had done anything Wiccan at all was when she went to Andy's initiation. She had been the one who canceled her own initiation. So she felt at home, yes, but still like an intruder. She didn't know why they invited her to this in the first place.

The five of them sat around the table, with Peter at the head. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then reached for Kate and Lucy's hands. Lucy's fingers crept into Dottie's. She stretched her hand out to Andy: his grip was cold and formal.

"To the degree most pagans care about life after death, we mostly believe in some kind of reincarnation," Peter began, slowly. "Maybe the Summerlands. We don't get hung up on many specifics. But Wiccans are willing to steal just about anything that isn't nailed down from other religions, if it sounds good, and Linda and I always liked this one belief of the Tibetan Buddhists..."

"They believe that the end of life comes in stages," Peter continued. "There's the period of dying, when the person knows that this life is coming to an end, and they begin to see a bright light. Then the physical death. And then there's the stage just after that, when the soul is still present, has not yet shed its attachment to this world and lingers on. They believe that the soul can linger for forty-nine days before, at last, it passes on to whatever fate waits for it... The disintegration into the peace of Nirvana, or their reincarnation into this world, once more.

"The Buddhists hope for Nirvana, but I know Linda would have wanted to hop back on the wheel and go around again." Lucy sniffled. Dottie, not knowing what else to do, squeezed her friend's hand, and felt a squeeze back. "We're here today to say goodbye, one last time, as her soul makes its final survey of all that it knew while it was Linda, and then goes on to whatever fate awaits it." Peter opened his eyes and looked at his son. "Andy, would you start us off with the elements?"

"Sure, dad." Andy breathed in through his nose and held it. His hand loosened: it felt a little more like it had when Dottie held it years ago, back when she thought she was in love with him. For the first time since Linda died, he looked a little more like the Green Man, the simple, pure being he likened himself to when he was out in the woods. "Spirits of east, spirits of the air, we call you into our circle today. Breath of life, winged winds, carry mom's spirit to us now. So mote it be." Everyone else echoed him: "So mote it be."

Dottie watched him swallow and give Kate the faintest touch, which Dottie had learned as a little girl was the pagan way of expressing "go on, say something."

Kate, in the south, called in fire. She invoked the spirits, almost tripped over her words, asked them to see Linda through her phoenix-like rebirth. Lucy, in the west, called the spirits of water with an invocation that asked for her mother's swift passage across the Styx. It reminded Dottie of Yeats. After each of their invocations, the table resonated with repetition: "So mote it be."

Lucy squeezed her hand, and Dottie closed her eyes, wondering what to say. She chewed on her lip and pondered, but then Lucy flexed again: *Your turn. Didn't you feel me the first time?*

"Spirits of the north, spirits of the earth... Spirits of the ground, to whom we'll all return. We were made from your clay, will one day be again in your sacred womb. Be with us here today." She paused. "So mote it be."

"So mote it be," said the family.

She opened her eyes and saw Andy looking straight at her. He rolled his eyes and turned to look at his father. Peter gestured to the dishes. "Linda loved to cook, so we made as many of her favorite dishes as we could..."

"And we brought a pecan pie and some green salad," said Kate. "I remember that one Yule where we didn't bring a pecan pie, and Linda said we couldn't be friends anymore." She smiled at the memory.

They sat there for a moment, until Lucy poked Dottie in the shoulder. "Well, come on, then. Pass me some of that ham."

Dottie thought the food was a little odd for the occasion, more suited to Christmas at a grandparent's house than a Buddhist farewell ceremony. The Walsteads made ham, a vegetable stew, green beans with bacon slices, and lentils. Dottie realized, once she took a bite, that the lentils were made with Indian spices, which gave the meal a little more Buddhist credibility. They had another bottle of the persimmon mead, but Dottie stuck to lemonade. Kate and Peter did most of the talking: little anecdotes that they had both told many times before, but needed to hear out loud again. Lucy sometimes added a memory of her own, like the food fight Linda started one Midsummer when she was a girl, where Andy and his friend Lou, too young to know better, started throwing apples and pears and canned goods instead of mashed potatoes and ice cream. Kate told them about the first ritual she'd helped Linda write, Samhain when Dottie was seven years old, a ritual done by candlelight to the sonorous chiming of hand bells. Andy didn't say anything.

Dottie remembered every festival she had ever been to, right back to the Midsummer when she was four years old. She remembered every New Year's Eve and Mardi Gras party

at her mother's house. She remembered the three summers she and Lou spent with the Walsteads at the Elysian Fields, when she shared a bedroom with Lucy and they played as many pranks on the boys as they could get away with. But none of those memories were really about Linda; they were about Lucy, and Andy, and Lou, and that endless time when they were children together. Linda was always there, but in the background, an adult doing adult things. Even when Dottie grew up, into a teenager, into a woman, that was the case: their parents lived in a different world. Close, but never touching.

Their special world grew smaller as they grew older. Lou moved off to Kirksville to go to some tiny college Dottie had never heard of, and Lucy went off to the University of Chicago. Andy stayed, went to community college, dropped out and started working in a refrigerator factory. Dottie stayed too, going to UMSL and working at her uncle's bakery. The two of them were all that was left of the little world. Maybe that's why they clung to each other, for a while.

And then Dottie found a way to drive him off too, and then it was just her, wondering what was left to believe in.

Dottie's mother cut up the pecan pie and divvied the slices. They ate it silently. When Dottie chewed on the first bite of pecan and crust, she realized that this pie would be the final dish they would share with Linda's spirit before that knot of attachments and memories scattered itself forever. It must have been a powerful moment for the Walsteads.

When the pie was finished, the last bits of food eaten and the knives and forks laid to rest on the tablecloth, Lucy reached for her father and Dottie. Without words, the table joined hands again, and Lucy cleared her throat. "I think we should have a chant," she said.

"Yeah. One of mom's favorites," said Andy.

Everyone closed their eyes but Dottie, who watched her mother start to sing. "We all come from the goddess," Kate called, her alto voice more suited to stories than songs. Their voices joined hers, and they chanted for longer than they had in any ritual:

*We all come from the goddess*

*And to her we shall return*

*Like a drop of rain*

*Flowing to the ocean.*

The words faded away, became a tone-poem, an endless circle of notes that revolved throughout the dining room, each "*ocean*" drifting directly into the next "*we all come from the goddess.*" Each repetition was sung for fear of being the one to finally declare an ending, the one to, at last, say goodbye.

\* \* \*

She half-expected to find him with his legs crossed, chanting the names of the gods, but the Green Man was nowhere to be found. Instead, Dottie saw Andy in his black coat and blue jeans sitting on the edge of the duck pond, a burning cigarette clenched between his teeth. He looked out at the gray ice, growing thinner in the afternoon sunlight, and raised the cigarette to his lips again.

"When did you start smoking?" she asked.

"A little after I stopped working at the factory and started tending bar," he said. "It comes with the territory. If you're going to give me the safety lecture, spare me. Dad's already told me half a dozen times."

"I wasn't going to lecture you. You're a grown man, you do what you want." She sat down next to him on the bank. He didn't turn to look at her. "When did that happen?"

"Five months ago."

"I guess I hadn't heard."

"I didn't figure you'd care."

She sighed. "You're testy today."

He gave her a look like skunk spray and returned his focus to his cigarette. Dottie frowned and patted him on the back for a moment, to no response. "Come on," she said.

"Don't act this way."

"How would you prefer I act? Completely oblivious? You want me to smile and pretend like I'm happy? Fuck that." He flicked the ash from his fingers, watched it settle on the melting face of the pond and ripple outward. "I don't feel like hiding today."

Dottie swallowed. "Look, I'm sorry about your mom."

"Thanks," he said in a dead tone.

Crows cawed from the power lines outside the Elysian Fields. Dottie took her hand from Andy's shoulder. "Do you want me to leave you alone?"

"Doesn't matter," he said. He drew in one last drag and stubbed the cigarette out in the dead grass. "You're barely here to begin with."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He didn't answer; instead he went for his pocket, to pull out his pack of cigarettes again. Dottie swatted his arm. "No, I mean it. Answer my question."

"I mean, like usual, you're mixing up being *around* with being *here*. Mixing up actual sympathy with patting somebody on the back and telling him it'll all be okay." He finally got hold of his pack and shook another cigarette out. "You know you didn't even mention Mom when you invoked the earth? Her goddamn final goodbye and you didn't even mention her."

Dottie blinked. "Is that what you're mad about? I'm sorry that I messed up an invocation, but..."

"You didn't mess anything up, Dottie," he growled. "You said it perfectly. Would have gone over great at Full Moon. But this was supposed to be different. Supposed to be more than just some... Empty ceremony. That's why we only asked for the really close family to come."

Dottie paused, let that sink in.

"Real family? Mom and I count as 'real family?'"

He shrugged. "Supposed to be."

"Even after, you know... What happened?"

"What, you mean telling me after a pity-fuck that you were ditching me for some Catholic asshole? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes," she said.

"Like I give a damn," he said, and Dottie knew he didn't expect to be believed any more than his father had earlier.

"I know it wasn't just an empty ceremony. But neither are the others. You're just upset because—"

"Don't lecture me, miss I-won't-get-initiated-because-I-won't-fit-in," he growled. "At least I still fucking believe."

"I believe!"

"In what?"

She swallowed, changed the subject. "Andy, come on. If this is your mom's last day... Do you want to be like this for it?"

"Of course I don't want to be. But it's how I feel, isn't it?" He coughed, and sounded almost exactly like his father. "I just... Dottie, I hadn't cried in years. Years. Not when my grandparents died, not when my dog died. But fuck, I can't help it anymore." He rubbed at his eyes. "Heart condition. Completely unexpected fucking heart condition. Gave out on her with no notice, no nothing."

They heard a door shut, then the voices of their parents and Lucy. The voices were too quiet to make out. More stories, Dottie guessed; it seemed like their memories of Linda were black holes, no moment too small to escape. Andy looked up the hill, but didn't say anything. They got into Peter's truck and pulled off deeper into the Fields.

"I wonder what they're up to," said Dottie.

"Lucy hasn't had a chance to see the chickens yet since she got home. Expect they're going out to the coop." His breath swirled around his nose, a mixture of smoke and cold fog. "My dog," he said, softly. "You know, that's what I kept thinking about at the funeral. The day we had to put Jackson down. He had fallen down over in that field, and couldn't get up... Too big to put in the truck. We called the vet out, had him put under and then put down. I was sitting there beside him, petting him, while the vet put that needle in. Chanting under my

breath, *'hoof and horn, hoof and horn, all that dies will be reborn.'* Believing it. Needing to believe it.

"And when were standing out in that same field, watching those balloons fly away, I was saying the same thing... *'Vine and grain, vine and grain, all that's cut will rise again.'* Everything's a cycle. Everything that dies comes back. There's no bullshit eternity. No such thing as forever." He looked at the burning stub in his fingers and took another drag, then flicked it out into the duck pond. "And I didn't believe it, Dottie. It's a beautiful sentiment, but at the end of the day, my mom's gone, and she ain't coming back."

Andy looked at her then, looked directly at her. She saw lines in his face she'd never seen before, saw his hair starting to thin into a widow's peak. She saw his father's face hiding behind his own, a statue chipping its way into being. She saw tiny shakes, saw the mud on his work boots, saw the crimson cracks traced in his eyes.

She saw an eight-year-old boy in a white wooly sweater, chasing after his sister in her green dress and shiny new shoes. The girl was carrying a two-foot-tall red Power Ranger doll. She saw herself, a seven-year-old girl with latté-brown skin, standing next to the Yule Tree and laughing at the sight, not yet so stern as the woman she'd grow up to be. She saw the girl in the green dress run directly into her mother's legs, heard Linda scold her and make her give back the doll. She saw the boy stick his tongue out at her as soon as his mother vanished into the other room and mutter, "Thanks for the help, Dottie."

She saw a young man standing in circle at an August Full Moon and thought, for the first time, he was a pretty good-looking guy. She saw him sneak his arm around her waist as the coven watched *The Wicker Man* on Uncle Geddy's television, saw him outside in the

backyard as he leaned in, eyes closed, to put his mouth to hers for the first time. She felt something like the moon rising in the pit of her body.

She saw him naked, his thin, almost bony body lit up by a circle of mismatched candles, that weekend when her mother went to Chicago on business and together they performed the Great Rite. She saw their bodies moving in rhythm to some primal beat they had never heard before. She heard herself call him Pan, call him Kernunnos, call him Horned One; she heard him call her Isis, call her Venus, call her Goddess.

She saw him at his mother's funeral, a red balloon floating away from his fingers, mouthing words she only now understood.

And then she saw him again, Andy Walstead, Andy the Green man, Andy, who had always seemed to live so effortlessly, whose breath always seemed suffused with spirit. She saw this person, this old friend, this man she'd always thought invincible. Andy, who lived in the moment. Andy, who unlike her, had the capacity to forget. Andy, who was hurt, and lonely, and angry. Dottie saw him, then, maybe for the first time.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said. Dottie reached for Andy's hand. He took her hand hesitantly, but without complaint. His skin was cold, but so was hers. They sat like that for a moment, listened to the crows and the chickens and the sound of Peter's truck as it ferried his family around the farm. Dottie sat there, holding Andy's hand, and for the first time in a long time, she felt the Goddess around her, felt herself touching God.

"It's going to be okay," she said. For the first time in her life, she believed it.

## FAMILY TRADITIONS: A GLOSSARY

- Alexandrian – Alex Saunders had wanted to be a part of Gerald Gardner's original Wiccan movement, but Gardner did not like him and did not want him around. Then, oddly, Alex claimed he had been initiated by "full sexual rite" as a child, and produced a Book of Shadows full of Wiccan rituals that proved it. The story was almost certainly a fabrication, and the Book of Shadows was obviously just an unauthorized copy of Gardner's own book, but what could he do? Asserting that Alex's rituals were just Gardner's own works would reveal that the whole story of Old Dorothy and the unbroken line of Witches was a lie. Gardner grudgingly gave recognition to Saunders's path, and Alex Saunders went on to found the second school of Wicca – the Alexandrian school, which was, on the whole, much more willing to publish its rituals and share its information. Of the founding figures of Wicca, Alex Saunders was definitely the one touched by Loki.

Naturally, my family is Alexandrian.

- Apostate – A person who defects from his faith, either to join another or to simply abandon religion. Famously used as the superlative for the Roman Emperors Julian, the last of the pagan rulers of Rome. From the Greek "apostasia," literally, "to stand apart."
- Asatru – From the Icelandic: *asa*, the gods, and *troth*, a promise or a vow. Put it together and you have something that roughly means "true to the gods." A pagan religion based

around reconstructing the ancient Germanic religions, especially from Iceland and Norway. Typically, Asatruar are somewhat contemptuous of Wiccans, whom they see as inauthentic. Similar religious movements include Fyrn Sedu, which reconstructs the closely related Anglo-Saxon pagan religion, and Religio Romana, which tries to recreate ancient Roman religions. It's one of the state religions of Iceland, and gets part of the Church Tax there. See *reconstruction*.

- Aspect – See *invoke*.

- Athame - A ritual knife. Ceremonially, this represents maleness; the consecration of wine consists of dipping the athame into the chalice as a replication of the Great Rite. Most Wiccans have a special athame that has some special meaning to them. My first one was a Heartland souvenir from my parents, made of wood. It had an unfortunate hole carved through the base of the blade, shaped like a heart and just as easy to break.

- Baker's Dozen - See *coven*.

- Banish – To release something back into the universe. Mostly this is used at the end of a ritual to thank the elements for their presence and to send them back out into the world. See *hail and farewell*.

- Beltaine - Sometimes called Mayday, this festival takes place on May 1st. It is opposite of

Samhain. Beltaine is a spring festival, and represents the influx of life into the world; we can think of this as the day when the Sun God comes into maturity. Its most famous component is the Maypole, a large pole erected in the middle of the circle with ribbons attached. At the climactic moment of the ritual, people grab ribbons and weave in and out around each other with them in a spiral dance. If this all sounds rather phallic to you, well, it does to most Wiccans too. (Some grumps will tell you that, traditionally, the Maypole doesn't have anything to do with sex. Paganism requires a certain openness to grumps.)

- Book of Shadows – A magical diary, containing rituals, insights, and so on. I've never really had one, unless you count my Portable Hard Drive of Shadows.
- Brigid - Celtic fire goddess. Her festival day is Imbolg, or Candlemas, on February 2. Has a triple aspect. She lends Imbolg its usual epithet, "the fire in the belly."
- Candlemas - The English name for the festival that happens on the 2nd of February. As the name implies, it's the "candle mass." The ritual usually takes place inside, at night. At this point in the Wheel of the Year, the Sun God is supposed to be "in the belly" of the Goddess, waiting to be born. The Celtic name is Imbolg. Also the festival of the Celtic fire goddess, Brigid.
- Catholicism - I grew up in the South City neighborhood of St. Louis, Missouri, so the flavor of Christianity I was exposed to the most was Catholicism. In many ways Catholicism seems

like the Christian sect most opposed to Wicca, with the celibate priests and the imposing architecture and the emphasis on transgression and forgiveness. In other ways, it's the one I feel closest to: Catholics, after all, respect the Goddess (they call her the Virgin, but close enough) and have their own kind of polytheism (they call their tiny gods saints, but some of those saints were once called gods.)

- Chalice - Ceremonially, this represent femaleness, as a counterpart to the male aspect of the athame. After the wine is consecrated, the chalice is passed around the circle so that each member may drink from it. Yes, this has certain connotations, if you think about it long enough.

- Chant - Singing has a strong tradition in Wicca: I don't think I've ever been in a ritual that didn't involve chanting to some extent. Many rituals try to introduce new chants, but inevitably, somebody will start singing one of the old traditionals and the new chant will be lost to the mists. Some common ones, in my experience, are the *God* and *Goddess Chants*, *Hoof and Horn*, *We All Come From the Goddess*, and the *Elements chant*.

- Charon - Greek god, the ferryman of the River Styx. His fee is just two pennies and everything you've ever known.

- Christianity - The big unknown. Every day I feel surrounded by it, woven into every aspect of life. I don't feel much animosity toward the religion, but it does confuse the hell out of me.

For many pagans, though, Christianity is a source of immense hatred and frustration - many of them became pagans to escape it. That particular cultural division - the mystery of Christianity to the second generation pagans, compared to the anger and pain many first generation pagans feel - is one of the most interesting (and troubling) aspects of paganism to me.

- Circle - Usually more like an oval, or a strange rectangle. The basic unit of a ritual, the circle is made up of participants who enclose the altar. In a sense, where a church's ritual space is defined by its architecture, pagan ritual space is usually defined by the people standing in it. The priestess, in my coven, usually says this to cast the circle:

*This is the circle; this is the space between the worlds. Here be magic, here be love.  
So mote it be.*

*Let this circle be as a still and silent pool, with its love radiating outward in ever  
widening circles.*

*So mote it be.*

*Let this circle shine out like the constellation Pleiades, with each of us shining out  
with our own, individual lights.*

*So mote it be.*

- Coven - A Wiccan group. A coven gets together for the esbats and the sabbats and holds rituals. Sometimes more than one coven is affiliated with each other. I grew up in Saint Louis's Coven Pleiades, which was the offspring of Coven Watersmeet, which was founded by people who were initiated by Alex Sanders. (So we're within four steps of Gerald Gardner, which gives us a certain amount of street cred.) My coven was also affiliated with a few other covens, Watersshade and Hollyoak, in a loose organization called Sabbatsmeet. Traditionally, a coven is made of thirteen witches (a "baker's dozen,") but I've never known a

coven that actually had exactly thirteen people.

- Cowen - This sort of has two definitions. The first is simply "non-Wiccan," somebody who isn't a member of the religion. The second, and more contentious, is the process by which somebody is actually stripped of being a Wiccan - a sort of excommunication. Of course, given the anarchic nature of Wicca, being declared cowen just bans you from your old coven; it's entirely possible that you could go find a new one, or even start your own.

- Dionysus - Greek god of wine. Once he was described to me as being just like wine: a little of his presence civilizes people, and too much of it makes them mad. Nietzsche had a field day with him.

- Drawing down the moon – A ritual process in which the priestess invokes the Lunar Goddess into herself and speaks with the entity's voice. Although this is an extremely common practice among Wiccans – so common that Margot Adler's landmark survey of neopagan movements was titled *Drawing Down the Moon* after it – my own coven does not do this very often.

- Earth – The planet you live on, unless this text has been extraordinarily lucky. Paganism of all stripes tends to view the earth as a living entity, and usually frames the relationship between living creatures and the earth as that of a child and its mother. Pagan religions tend to emphasize environmental awareness as a result. Frequently, the earth is seen as the main

manifestation of the Goddess Herself.

- Eclectic – A term used about half the time as a criticism and half the time as a favorable description of one’s religious beliefs. In essence, it means a person’s practice isn’t limited to any one historical tradition, but rather is willing to borrow elements from anything that seems appealing. Wicca tends to be very eclectic, but eclecticism is frowned upon by pagans in reconstructed religions.

- Elder - A nebulous term, but here, generally means somebody of the third degree of initiation.

- Elements - The classical version, mapped to the directions. Wiccans invoke the elements to start a ritual and banish them to end. Starting in the East: Air - East, Fire - South, Water - West, North - Earth. Spirit is sometimes invoked as the culmination of all the elements.

- The Elements Chant - *Air I am, fire I am. Water, earth, and spirit I am.*

- Energy – Probably the vaguest term of them all, and the one most likely to set off my personal New Age Bullshit alarms. In a sense this is like the Chinese concept of *chi* – some kind of potential transmission between various elements of the universe. Ritual is meant to affect energy and use it to create some kind of action in the universe. Does it really exist? Sure – even if it’s just the confidence ritual inspires in participants to change the world on

their own.

- Esbat – The pagan calendar has a lunar path and a solar path. The lunar path results in esbats - monthly rituals held on the Full Moon. The rituals here are usually about the same every month: cast the circle, invoke the elements, invoke some aspects of the god and goddess, a chant, some wine and cakes, banish the elements, close the circle. This is about the closest equivalent Wiccans have to a regular church service. On the new moon, sometimes there are gatherings and discussions, but usually not a ritual.

- Families – You're usually born with one. The more I think about it, the more I realize that I was born with at least two. As much as they are working groups of Wiccans, covens are families, with all the love and drama and grudges that families entail.

- Family Tradition – A pagan tradition that claims to be the result of a long inherited family secret. The claimant probably claims to have learned it from his or her grandmother, who learned it from her grandmother in the old country. Theoretically, gives the claimant's practices greater validity, due to the ancestral connection to "native" rituals. Usually bullshit.

- Freyja - Norse goddess of beauty, love, and passion. The most popular goddess in Asatru. Famous for her necklace, the Brisingr, which she got by spending a few nights with the dwarves who forged it. Once, just after my girlfriend had left the country to spend a few years in the Peace Corps, I went to a little wooden gazebo in the Botanical Gardens in St.

Louis and meditated. I wasn't sure of myself, or what I was going to do, or how my relationship with my girlfriend would change. I felt Freyja there, with her hand on my shoulder. She said it would be alright, and, it turns out, it was.

- Gardnerian – Gerald Gardner was a British civil servant. He claims to have had a run-in with a woman named Old Dorothy, a witch with a direct line of succession between herself and the Stone Age. She was thus heir to an original pagan tradition that had survived all the persecutions and conversions of the Christian era. Gerald started a coven in order to, he claimed, preserve the religion. The whole story is probably lies and fakery, but that's something you can say about the claims of any founder of a religion, isn't it? He preferred doing rituals skyclad, if possible, leading some to claim the whole thing was just an excuse for his love of nudity.

- God – Your dad; Odin; your husband; your obnoxious brother-in-law; Kernunnos; that creepy guy in the wifebeater; the little boy crying in the sandpit; the Sun; the soldier; the poet. All that is male, searching, penetrating. Wiccans (and other pagans even moreso) argue vigorously over whether all male gods are aspects of the one Great God, whether there really "is" a Great God or if He is just the male principle of the human psyche, and whether He is equal to or subordinate to the Goddess. Usually, the classical god He is most closely identified with is Pan, the goat-legged, horned god of forests from Greek myth.

- The God Chant - *Pan, Woden, Baphomet, Kernunnos, Osiris*. Andy's favorite tune. Usually

sung by the men in the circle while women sing the Goddess Chant.

- Goddess – A little girl; a miserable old hag; the Virgin; Hera; a teenager buying a prom dress; your mother coming home from work; Isis; a tired woman looking out the window of the bus; a grieving widow; the planet Earth; a woman walking down the street on a rainy day; the caretaker; the valkyrie. All that is female, mysterious, generative. Just as with the Great God, Wiccans constantly argue about what Her "true nature" is; I think it's probably best to just wait and listen when She chooses to talk. Because Wicca, in many respects, is a religious outgrowth of feminist thought, and because many Wiccans came to the religion to escape the perceived tyranny of the monolithic male God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Goddess is typically emphasized more than the God. The Goddess is most commonly identified with the Greek goddess Gaia, and more broadly, as "Mother Nature." See also *Triple Goddess*.

- The Goddess Chant - *Isis, Astarte, Diana, Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Innana*. Usually sung by the women in the circle while men sing the Gods chant. There are noticeably seven goddesses to the five gods of the other chant, meaning the Goddess Chant tends to be sung at a faster tempo.

- Gods - Like obscenities: hard to define, but you know them when you see them.

- Great Rite - Sex. Occurs (at least by proxy) in every Wiccan ritual. The athame represents the phallus, and the chalice represents the yoni; "As the athame is to the male, so the chalice

is to the female, and their union is the creation of the world." Theoretically, the priest and priestess could literally perform the Great Rite, but for practical reasons (namely a desire for privacy, and the fact that frequently the priest and priestess are not a couple) it rarely happens – never, actually, in my experience.

- Hail and farewell - Traditional way to banish the elements. "Go if you must, stay if you will; hail, and farewell."

- Handfasting - A Wiccan wedding. So named because the ceremony involves tying the couple's hands together with a rope - their hands are fastened. Usually done twice, with the second ceremony done a year and a day later; it's not considered valid if the second ceremony isn't performed, which means if the marriage isn't working, there's an easy way out.

- Harvest - The fall season. Three of the festivals are based on harvests: Lammas is the harvest of fruit; Harvest Home is the harvest of grain; Samhain is the harvest of blood.

- Harvest Home (Mabon) - A festival, held on the Fall Equinox. This is the festival of grain, and involves corn imagery. A persistent theme is the burning of John Barleycorn, an effigy of the sacrificial king, in order to ensure a new good harvest.

- Heartland Pagan Festival - A festival held every year over Memorial Day weekend at Camp

Gaea, a pagan-owned campground about an hour outside of Kansas City. For the past few years I have been a member of the Heartland Spiritual Alliance, which puts on the festival.

- Holly King – See the combined entry, *Oak King and Holly King*.

- Hoof and Horn - A chant. *Hoof and horn, hoof and horn / all that dies shall be reborn / Vine and grain, vine and grain / all that's cut shall rise again*. My dad once told me that if you had to sum up all of Wicca, this chant would be a good way to do it.

- Horned God – See *god*.

- Imbolg - See *Candlemas*.

- Inanna – An ancient Babylonian goddess, famed for her beauty. Most statuary of her emphasizes her curvaceous figure, motherly but sensual. (Sometimes known as "Inanna of the Child-Bearing Hips" for this reason.)

- Initiation – Wiccan covens typically involve three stages of initiation. The first stage represents that the person has made a serious commitment to the group and wishes to remain with them on a permanent basis; the other degrees represent further accomplishments in magical knowledge and service. To be a high priest or priestess of a coven, you're supposed to be at least second degree.

- Invoke – To invite some sort of mystical presence – elements, spirits, gods – to enter into the ritual space, and possibly to take over the consciousness of a participant in the manner of the *vodun* spirits who "ride" their worshippers. Wiccan rituals generally invoke the elements to begin a ritual, and my coven's esbats usually involve invoking some kind of nature imagery as well. Two of the stories here involve Vision Quests (*Three Encounters with the Gods* and *I, Panda*); in both of them, the people on the trail are invoking gods. Sometimes, especially when referring to invoking a god, this is referred to as "aspecting."

- Isis – The chief goddess of ancient Egypt, who appeared in dozens of manifestations and myths. The wife of Osiris and the mother of Horus. Her appeal is persistent: once the most popular goddess in Egypt, her cult was later extremely widespread in ancient Rome and she is even now one of the most famous goddesses in pagan practice.

- John Barleycorn – An effigy, burned at Harvest Home. John Barleycorn is a corn doll, made so that you don't have to actually sacrifice somebody to ensure a good harvest, as people once did in ancient times. (And some not so ancient times, too. Ever read *The Lottery*? Same idea.)

- Kernunnos – A Celtic horned god. There is barely any actual evidence of who he was or what he was like that survived, but because Wicca is largely based off of Celtic roots and because Kernunnos is the most obvious Horned God in that tradition, he has become a

popular representation of God.

- K-mart Pagan – A term of derision used to describe shallow, materialistic pagans who focus more on accoutrements and props than on actually understand the religions they claim to belong to. Frequently (and often unfairly) slung at solitary practitioners, even though most of the K-mart pagans in existence desire to be seen publicly as much as possible. (What's the point of all those toys if nobody gets to see you play with them?) A related term is "paperback pagan," a pagan whose only experience of the religion comes from books and who has never actually done ritual work.

- Lady, the – See *goddess*.

- Lammas – See *Lughnasadh*.

- Litha – See *Midsummer*.

- Loki – Wagner made a linguistic error when he called Loki *Logë* in his *Ring Cycle*, thinking that the German word for Fire matched the Norse god's name. However, he got the spirit of the deity about right. In Norse myth, Loki is a trickster figure who routinely plays pranks on the other gods but manages to leave them better off in the end than they were before; Loki's jests result in the gods gaining most of their famous artifacts, for example. However, by the end of the cycle, Loki has led to the death of Balder, the god of Light, and

led the army of giants in destroying the world at Ragnarok. Loki is a complicated figure, both as a literary character and as a god; like fire, he brings civilization when controlled, but destruction when free. Many Asatruar are deeply divided on whether he should be worshipped with the other gods or not.

- Lord, the – See *god*.

- Lugh – The Sun King, he of the big right hand. Celtic mythology frequently places Lugh as something of a trickster god, but Wicca mainly regards him as a solar entity. Best described by one of my favorite chants: *This is the wake of Lugh the Sun King, who lost his life on solstice day. This is the wake of Lugh the Sun King: he steps into the darkness and he guides the way.*

- Lughnasadh – The festival of Lugh, the Sun King, which takes place on August 1. At this point, the Sun King is comfortable in his reign, and his powers are still very strong (as anyone who spends time outdoors in August in the Midwest knows.) However, he has already started his decline. The English name for the festival is Lammas. This is the first of the harvest festivals, celebrating the first bounty of fruit.

- Magick – Some people insist you should spell it with a K in order to emphasize the difference between religious or ceremonial magick and common stage magic. Other people

don't care much. A lot of things in paganism are like that. The "magick" school, incidentally, comes from Aleister Crowley.

- Midsummer – The summer solstice. At Midsummer, the Sun King is at his most potent, since it's the longest day of the year. This is balanced with a bit of sadness; since everybody knows this is the longest day of the year, it means every day afterwards will be shorter, until we come back to the darkness of winter. The Celtic name for the holiday is Litha.

Incidentally, also my birthday.

- Moon – Witches think the moon is a girl. Asatruar are pretty sure the moon is a boy. Maybe it's just because of how powerfully entwined femininity and the moon are in Wicca, but I can't see the moon as anything other than a Goddess. (The moon is, of course, also a genderless hunk of rock orbiting the Earth, too.) Frequently related to the Triple Goddess: the waxing moon is the Maiden, the Full Moon the Mother, and the waning moon the Crone.

- Neopaganism – See *paganism*.

- Oak King and Holly King – Dualistic deities who reign over half the year apiece. They clash at Midsummer and Yule; the Holly King wins at Midsummer, and the Oak King wins at Yule. Identified with a multitude of rival-brother gods from different mythologies; my favorite is Hodur and Baldur from Norse mythology.

- Odin – The one-eyed chief god of Norse myth, Odin is the god of kings, poetry, wisdom, and warfare. Most famous for hanging himself from the branches of the world tree, Yggdrasil, for nine days and nine nights, as a sacrifice of himself to himself, in order to gain knowledge. Odin is one of my favorite gods, full of complexity, trickery, and knowledge. Father of Thor, and blood brother to Loki.

- Osiris – Egyptian god of the dead. (Some may say, at this point, that they thought Anubis was the god of the dead. That's true. The Egyptians had a lot of gods for the dead.) Osiris's most famous story is his death. Osiris was the husband of Isis and a great king, but his brother Set murdered him and cut him to pieces. Isis pieced him back together and conceived a child with the body, resulting in Horus, who avenged his father. (Oddly enough, the Horus and Set rivalry is actually a much older story that got adapted into Osiris and Isis's myth.) Osiris thus represented the Pharaoh in death while his son represented the Pharaoh in life.

- Ostara – The spring equinox. The Sun King is born and begins to assume his power. Ostara is celebrated in much the same way other religions celebrate Easter (note the similarity of the names), with egg hunting and candy eating. And of course, rabbits are a powerful element here, too, fully recognized as symbols of fertility.

- O.T.O. – Ordo Templi Orientalis, a magickal organization based mostly around the work of Aleister Crowley. Not technically "paganism," as such – ceremonial magick is related, but

not the same thing – but many people who are interested in one are interested in the other. This is the group Dottie's parents did their "Thelemic ritual magick" with.

- Paganism – I never heard the term "neopagan" until I came to college; it was always just paganism to me, and most of the pagans I have talked to over the years don't use the "neo" either. In any case, paganism is a broad term that encompasses many different religions, of which Wicca is the most popular. They share a few traits in common: they are polytheistic (or at least duotheistic); they revere nature; and they are, generally speaking, based off of Western sources. (Many pagans study Hinduism or Vodun or the Navajo religion, but these are not truly "neopagan" religions.) That said, it's a flexible word. I have known people who had accepted Jesus Christ as a Lord and Savior who still felt pretty comfortable describing themselves as pagans.

- Pan – A little goatfooted balloon-man, but probably the most popular god in Wicca. Famous for his mixture of pastoral qualities and bawdiness (often both at once.) I often wonder if the reason we are so attracted to him is because of how obviously he was corrupted into the clichéd version of the Christian Devil, horns, goat legs and all.

- Pandas – A rare Chinese bear (not, as some people may still tell you, a very large type of raccoon.) Some people say I look like one. I don't know why.

- Pentagram (Pentacle) – A five pointed star. (A pentacle is when the pentagram is inscribed

within a circle, especially if it's a piece of jewelry.) In the same way that the cross represents Christianity and the Star of David represents Judaism, the pentagram represents Wicca. The five points represent the five elements, including Spirit.

- Phoenix Temple – My dad was a part of this organization early on in his magickal career. As he tells it, he and some of his friends wanted to be part of a legitimate Golden Dawn-style magickal group, but as best as they could tell, no such thing existed at the time, so they started their own. It turns out that there was one – it just happened to be in New Zealand.

- Priest and Priestess – Technically everybody in Wicca can be considered a priest; everybody has that authority. In ritual, these are the people who are conducting the ceremony; they probably also wrote the ritual themselves. Most covens have High Priests and Priestesses, meaning that they are the people nominally in charge of the coven. In practice, this just means they are the ones who usually hold the esbats.

- Reconstruction – Although Wicca draws upon many ancient elements, on the balance, the religion is less than a century old. Some pagans dislike this fact, and prefer to try and recreate the ancient religions of a certain group of people – usually their ancestors – as accurately as possible. This has limits, of course; no Asatru group would engage in things like human sacrifice, even though that was relatively common in ancient times. Wiccans often think reconstructionists are stodgy or humorless, and occasionally the movement gets labeled as racist. This is, by and large, not true, and the prominent organizations of reconstruction

paganism all denounce racism; unfortunately the label still tends to stick, thanks to fringe white supremacist Odin-cults and the like.

- Runes – Ancient alphabet for many Germanic languages, now mostly used for divination and other magical uses. The most common is the Elder Futhark, though the Icelandic (Younger) Futhark and the Anglo-Saxon Futhorc are both in use too. Odin hung himself on the World Tree for nine days and nights to learn them.

- Sabbat (Festival) – Wicca has eight major holidays, known as the sabbats (or, more colloquially, as festivals.) There are four "greater" festivals and four "lesser" festivals; the lesser festivals are tied to solar events like equinoxes and solstices, while the greater festivals are tied to other events. In practice, nobody really makes a difference between the greater and lesser sabbats, except to note that there is a difference. The way the calendar works out, a sabbat happens about once every six weeks. For more details, see the individual sabbat entries: *Samhain, Yule, Candlemas, Ostara, Beltaine, Midsummer, Lughnasadh, Harvest Home*.

- Sabbatsmeet – The federation of covens I grew up in. At one point Sabbatsmeet included covens as far away as Kansas City and Springfield, but it is mostly the St. Louis area these days. Still, it's one of the oldest still-functioning Wiccan groups in America, dating back more than thirty years.

- Sacred Space – The area of the circle after it is consecrated; the place where the magic happens. Then again, for an Earth-based religion, the whole planet is sort of a sacred space.
  
- Salt and water – At the beginning of every Wiccan ritual, the priest draws a pentagram in a bowl of salt, then another in a bowl of water, then mixes them and draws a spiral, widdershins, in the mixture. I never understood what this meant until I was about twenty, and my father explained it to me: the salt represents the primordial male and the water the primordial female. In a sense, this is the Great Rite on the scale of the Universe, which is why it happens at the beginning. Later on in the ritual, the Great Rite happens again in human terms with the chalice and the athame.
  
- Samhain – The holiest day of the year in Wicca, Samhain takes place on October 31. Yep, Halloween. Samhain is the other day (along with its complement, Beltaine) when the veil between the worlds is thin, which is why it's such a popular day for attempting to commune with the spirits of the dead. Ritual commonly involves remembering those who have died and putting to rest old burdens. Costume parties are also rather expected. It's pronounced "SOW-when," not "Sam-Hane."
  
- Skyclad - Another way to say "do this naked." Common in Gardnerian traditions, but in the Alexandrian style of Wicca I grew up in, people pretty much kept their clothes on. Initiation rituals have the person being initiated skyclad.

- So mote it be – "Let it be." This gets said all the time in ritual, and always is echoed by the whole circle: "Spirits of east, come and be with us tonight. So mote it be." "So mote it be!"
  
- Society for Creative Anachronism – An international society of people dedicated to researching and recreating the Middle Ages, from about 500 to 1500 AD. Though not associated with any religious group directly, many pagans are attracted to the SCA.
  
- Solitary Practitioner – A pagan who does not belong to a coven, and thus probably self-taught with the help of books. Often looked down upon by coven-based pagans as not being "legitimate." Dottie has sort of become one of these in her stories, which is part of the tension between herself and her family. See *K-Mart Pagan*.
  
- Summerland – The afterlife is not a big deal for most pagans; unlike Christianity, which is very focused on getting into the better world of Heaven (or avoiding the worse world of Hell), pagans tend to be pretty focused on the here and now. If pressed, many Wiccans will say they believe in reincarnation, but some believe in something called the Summerland – a Heaven where things are always green and nice, but otherwise, a lot like it is here on earth. Maybe Linda Walstead goes there in *Over the Rainbow*.
  
- Taoism – Not a neopagan religion, *per se*, both because it isn't technically a revival (Taoism has been around continuously for thousands of years) and because it is an Eastern

religion, where neopaganism is distinctively Western in origin. Still, Taoism has a lot of similarities with pagan religions, and concepts like energy, balance, and a respect for nature and playfulness are found in both religions.

- The Sun – Large ball of fiery plasma. Also the source of all life on Earth, and thus, kind of a natural thing to worship. The Sun is most often personified in Wiccan practice as the Sun King, whose life is played out in the eternal cycle of the Wheel of the Year. Germanic reconstructionist religions like Asatru think the Sun is a woman.

- Thor – Norse god of thunder, known for his prodigious strength, jolly nature, and his magical hammer, Mjolnir. Thor was the most popular god for the common man in the ancient times, since he generally was a great friend to mankind and brought the rains that allowed the crops to grow. His hammer is still the common symbol of Asatru and other Germanic religions. Although he is often portrayed as not being very bright, Thor is ultimately a wise god. He also protects Midgard – that's Earth – from the giants, who represents primal chaos.

- Triple Goddess (Maiden, Mother, Crone) – The Goddess is very often seen as having three aspects to her personality: the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone, corresponding, more or less, to different aspects of Her sexuality. Note that although "crone" is not the most appealing term for most of Western culture, it is not a denigrating term within Wicca; on the contrary, a crone is respected for her wisdom and experience.

- We All Come From the Goddess: A chant. *We all come from the goddess / and to her we shall return / like a drop of rain / flowing to the ocean.* There's a version for the Sun God, too, but nobody ever sings that one.

- Wheel of the Year – Euphemism for the Wiccan Solar calendar, also used fairly often in other pagan religious traditions. In Wicca, the year is seen as an eight-spoked wheel, with each festival corresponding to a spoke; when it's Candlemas, that "spoke" is on top. The wheel represents the cyclical nature of the time in Wiccan thought, as opposed to the linearity found in some traditions.

- Wicca – Everything is born and everything dies, you and me and the corn and the cows and the sun and the moon. Everything that happens has already happened, will happen again. The world is not an illusion, the world is not a dress rehearsal, the world is not a test. You and I and everything else are all together, all part of cycles within circles: the moon waxes and wanes, the sun shines bright in the summer and barely appears in the winter. Twenty holidays, twelve for the moon and eight for the sun, mark time's passing but never its end. We'll argue the finer points forever, but in the end, this is all it means: We are the air, the fire, the wind, the water, we are the squirrels and the monkeys and the cockroaches, we are God, we are Goddess, we are Everything.

- Widdershins – Counterclockwise. Traditionally the priest stirs the salt and water widdershins while beginning a circle. I always screw that up.
- Wine and cakes – Wicca, like most religions, has communion as a part of rituals. Usually, the priest and priestess consecrate the wine and cakes and then pass them around the circle; sometimes the priest or priestess will personally deliver the wine and cakes to each participant. After you've drunk, you pass the chalice to the person on your left and bless them: *May you never thirst*. Same thing with cakes: *May you never hunger*. The usual response to these blessings is "Thou art god/goddess," recognizing the divinity in everyone.
- Witch – In this context, the term for a practitioner of Wicca, of either sex. You might consider it a sort of reclamation after the famous witch burnings of history, but honestly, Wiccans don't have that much to do with those people. Sometimes people say they are Wiccans in order to avoid confusion with the fairy-tale villains, but witch is the older term.
- The Wizard of Oz – Did you know that in the book, the Emerald City really wasn't made of emeralds at all? Everyone had to wear green-tinted glasses all the time in order to see what they wanted to see. Sometimes religions are like that too.

Incidentally, my friend Megan, who gave a lot inspiration to the character Dottie, noticed one crucial difference between the two of them. "She didn't like the flying monkeys," she said, "but I was always worried about who would take care of them after Dorothy melted

the witch."

- Yule – The winter solstice, and the longest night of the year. Most of the celebrations are just like Christmas celebrations for everyone else. (Most Wiccans celebrate Christmas too.) The Sun King dies at Yule, but he's conceived again, so things turn out alright. This is also when the Oak King defeats the Holly King and ascends until Midsummer.

## APPENDIX

November 10, 2010

Dr. Christie Hodgen  
Department of English

Dear Dr. Hodgen:

Because his thesis consists primarily of creative writing, Eric Scott may depart somewhat from the campus standards for formatting his thesis. The following exceptions will be allowed:

1. Bibliographic references may be omitted.
2. No introductory text or narrative will be required beyond that included in his Abstract.

He must, however, meet all other formatting guidelines and include this letter authorizing the above exceptions as an appendix within his thesis.

Sincerely,



Ronald A. MacQuarrie  
Dean, School of Graduate Studies

RM:nh

## VITA

Eric O. Scott was born in Saint Louis, Missouri, in 1986. He was raised as a member of Coven Pleiades, a Wiccan coven in the Alexandrian tradition; this alternative religious upbringing has led to a lifelong fascination with matters of faith. His education has spanned all levels of the American public pedagogical experience: a poor inner-city elementary school, a magnet school in north Saint Louis, the top-ranked public high school in the state, and finally, college education at two state universities. He graduated in 2008 from Truman State University with a major in English and minors in Medieval Studies and Philosophy & Religion. (He was one class from a minor in Art History, as well.) He is a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and Media Arts candidate at the University of Missouri – Kansas City. In addition to writing, Eric has taught composition at UMKC and at Kansas City Academy, an alternative high school, and currently serves as the fiction editor of *Number One Magazine*. His writing recently appeared in *Ashé! Journal* and *Killing the Buddha*. In his spare time, he sings in a Taoist glam rock band called the Yellow Emperors and paints elaborate metaphysical diagrams on his bedroom wall.