
Witches the new inquiry 21

witches

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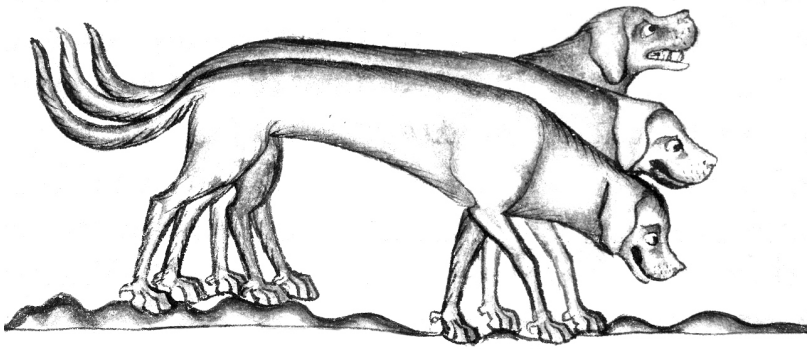
images

De Natura animalium, Cambrai ca. 1270
Lampadaire funéraire, Cabaret du Néant
Sergius Hruby, *Die Muskete,* 1933
Ellsworth Kelly, *Avocado,* 1967
Witchcraft '70, 1970
Blood on Satan's Claw, 1971
Night of Dark Shadows, 1971
Virgin Witch, 1972



editorial note

A FRENCH PAMPHLET called "The Rioter and the Witch," composed in the wake of the 2005 unrest, reminds us that "like every magic ritual, a riot is a fleeting moment of perception of the invisible." The opposite is equally true: Every magic ritual is a fleeting moment of perception of the invisible riot. Which is to say the witch is also an Amazon, a figure of female war.

The war continues. Silvia Federici, in *Caliban and the Witch,* pointed out the thread linking the witch and her sisters, "the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone, the *obeah* woman who poisoned the master's food and inspired the slaves to revolt," to the grand sorcerer, capital. Though the witching hour of history may have passed, there is always the promise of another midnight.

In a male-supremacist society, female power must logically appear illogical, mysterious, intimate, threatening. "Witch" stands for all those unnameable shadow acts of disappearance and withdrawal, self-cultivation and self-medication that elude the social and sexual order.

In serving as an effigy of everything that must burn, the witch takes on a dizzying number of meanings: She is action at a distance and she is an addict; she is ambition or enchantment but also incantation and melancholic attachment; she is both a Mercedes Elegance and artisanal production. She is beauty itself, and she is left over. She is resourceful, cunning, practical, and she stands for excess, obscenity, and repetition compulsion. She is female friendship and solidarity, but also inscrutable solitude, banishment, and exile. She is a succubus but a withered crone. She is such a woman that she isn't.

These days, of course, safely banished, the witch pops up again deep in domesticity: kitchen magic, beauty magic, bedroom magic, parenting magic. Autumn Whitefield-Madrano finds kinship with witchcraft in the word *glamour*, with its etymological links to both *grammar* and *grimoire,* and the rules beauty magazines lay down for the occult arts of physical charm. Durga Chew-Bose sees spells demoted to success recipes in Nicole Kidman's Hollywood witch vehicles, *Practical Magic* and *Bewitched*. Whether brazen or calculating, her witches pour their power into snagging men and modern housewares—on credit, no less.

Domesticity isn't solely the social control of women, though. Through the domestic, women can also assert control over the social. The hearth is her harp before even becoming hausfrau. Christine Baumgarthuber traces slumber-party covens back to virginal rites of man-trap baking in *Hex Before Marriage*. And Fiona Duncan collects an oral history of *The Craft,* and of our adolescent ardor for four outcast girls who transform the slights of high school into Wiccan supremacy. Moira Weigel watches women in China hunted and punished as *shengnü*, a name for "leftover women" that originated in horror stories of maidens melting into bone-white crones. Colin Dickey acquaints us with Montague Summers, the last great defender of Europe's witch hunts.

Black magic also now finds a home in the gray market. Witches in today's economy bill their clients for medical or financial consultation, albeit unlicensed and vernacular. Alireza Doostdar discovers that in Iran, nothing limits one upwardly aspirant Tehrani witch, whose penned grimoires take cues from self-help classic *The Secret* in order to satisfy government-backed dreams of social mobility. Nic Cavell writes of Witch House, the circa-2010 music genre that "made a subject of the Internet's emotional implications." And Karla Cornejo Villavicencio outlines how botanicas—the community pharmacies, repositories of syncretic Christianity, and primary-care facilities for some of the 50 million Latinos who live in the U.S.—will be impacted by Obamacare. Botanicas' popularity "points to the failure of the church to properly provide for its own, highlighting its postcolonial fractures," she writes.

Is magic a route to the radical imagination, or simply a shortcut to conventional acquisitions, commercial and domestic? What separates the witch's foretelling from the capitalist's risk analysis, her spellbinding from public relations? *"Are you a good witch, or a bad witch?"*

But ultimately it's beside the point to question the morality of a witch's existence. A witch summons hidden forces to castrate the social order, poison the hearth, and fly above her "natural" station. She presides over irrepressible antagonisms, drawing on the bottomless caldron of resistance. Her power is real. ■

Celluloid Coven

edited by FIONA DUNCAN

An oral history of watching the 1996 teen-witch movie The Craft

THE CRAFT HIT theatres in May 1996, summer blockbuster season. It was like many Hollywood youth movies of its time, the last teenage fin-de-siècle, only this one starred girl weirdos: sluts, cutters, orphans, white trash, and other marked bodies—a burn victim, a black girl. *The Craft* was a makeover movie, but more than the new-look montages, its makeover was spiritual.

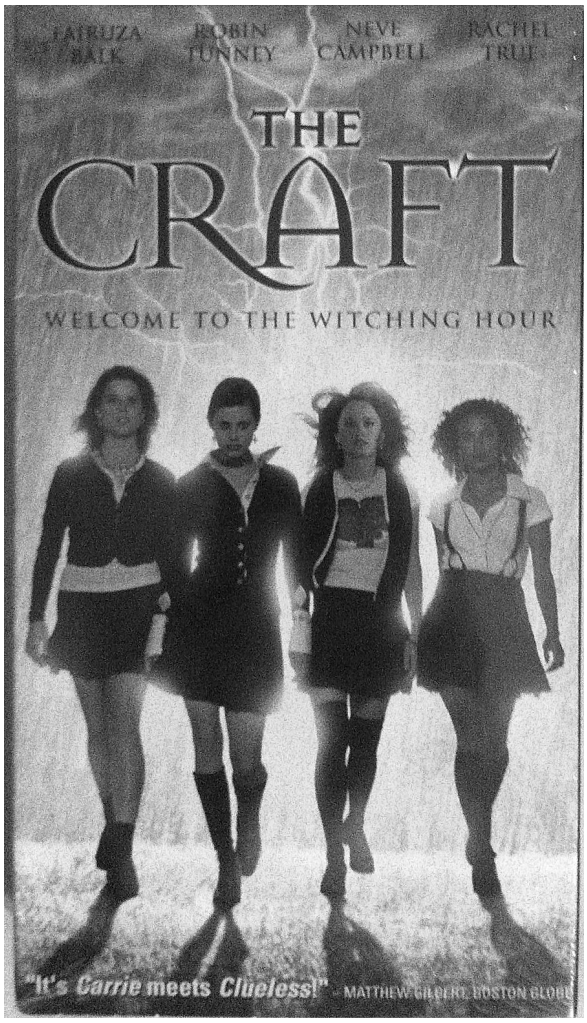
Like all makeover movies, *The Craft* was about accessing power. From *Funny Face* to *She's All That*, chick flicks have been teaching girls to wield power through good grooming and boys. *The Craft* offered an alternative point of access: through books, through nature, through one another. For girls who wanted more than boys' attention—who wanted learning, money, independence, and maybe other girls' attention—*The Craft* was a holy text.

Its heroine is Sarah (Robin Tunney), the new girl at a Catholic high school in suburban Los Angeles. On her first day, Sarah is befriended by three aspiring witches. These girls—Bonnie (Neve Campbell), Nancy (Fairuza Balk), and Rochelle (Rachel True)—are outcasts. They're not bad students but impious: They worship a different deity, Manon ("Man invented God, this is older than that"). With the arrival of Sarah, a "natural witch," the girls' coven is complete. They start practicing magic, casting spells to right wrongs they feel have been done to them: back-burned Bonnie casts a spell of beauty; Sarah puts a love spell on a

sleazy jock (Skeet Ulrich); Rochelle incants revenge against a racist, Marcia Brady–like bully; and Nancy, teen angst incarnate (poor, slut-shamed, abused by her alcoholic mother and leering stepfather), calls for all the power of Manon. At first, it's all games and giggles, but then "the power starts to go to their heads," and the good witch Sarah finds herself fighting against the evil of the other three.

An oral history of *The Craft* compels me because I've heard it already—in the whispers, Ouija magic, and love spells of inspired sleepovers. *The Craft* was a major pop phenomenon that trended, in a time before "online," through clothes, books, and other RL rituals. For well over a year, from 1997–98, my First Avenue Public School in Ottawa was filled with little witches. I suspect that girls all over North America experience *Craft*-catalyzed "witch phases," but the spell was atomized, the thousands of local histories held only in the minds of those who were bewitched.

Recently, I had a vision of a kind of *Magic: The Gathering*. I wanted to commune with the hemispheric coven. So I did my post-millennial research: I emailed, tweeted, and status-updated my way into the memories of friends and friends of friends. Seventeen years after its release, *The Craft* is coming of age. Here is its herstory.



IF THE CRAFT *came out in '96, I wouldn't have been able to see it until the following year, when it came out on VHS. I would have been a 10-year-old and newly confirmed, following the rites of passage of the Catholic Church while simultaneously in the process of defecting. This was my time to create a separate personality from my parents and form my own thoughts and opinions. Watching movies they would disapprove of was* the *way to rebel.* —Miranda King-Andrews, born 1987, raised in Ottawa

I, like most girls I knew, didn't see the film until the next year, when my local video store's new-release racks were decorated with handfuls of palm-size schoolgirls strutting in pleated skirts hemmed so short that, as my teacher Mme. Patridge used to say, "if you bend from the hips

instead of the knees, you won't be pleased." I begged my parents to let me take them home. —Fiona Duncan, born 1987, raised in Montreal and Ottawa

I was sure, with this inordinate self-confidence, that eventually I would find all of it. It confirmed what I had already experienced and knew—that groups of girls, good or not, were evil

I remember seeing the VHS box in the video store a million times before growing the balls to ask my parents if I could rent it. I remember that the front cover, with the four girls in schoolgirl outfits in a row, gave me that really particular tweeny feeling of being really confused by and attracted to sex and sexual bodies. —Tess Edmonson, born 1987, raised in Calgary

I can't say when exactly I saw it, but when I did it affirmed what I expected: There are cool girls out there in the world with their grungy floral dresses, awesomely layered hair, cool sunglasses, being independent—all that shit I wished I could find for myself, but assumed wasn't available to me. I was sure, though, like with this weird inordinate self-confidence, that eventually I would find all of it when I had left home. It also confirmed what I had already experienced and knew—that groups of girls, good or not, were evil. —Jackie Linton, b. 1985, raised in Kitchener, Ontario

The first time I saw The Craft*, I was probably 9 or 10. I was at a sleepover birthday party with girls that were one or two years older than me, which at that age means so much. I remember two of the gifts the birthday girl received: one was a create-your-own-perfume set from the Gap in "Dream" scent and the other was one of those metal jeweled chokers that stretched somehow. I was very jealous of these gifts and also embarrassed about mine. This was generally the feeling I had about the whole evening and about* The Craft*: being just a little bit younger and less experienced than everyone, feeling excited but uncertain of myself, full of yearning, covetous of the fashion, yearning to fuck, all of that.* —Rosa Aiello, born 1987, raised in Hamilton, Ontario

I remember watching The Craft *on one of my first sleepovers ever with my neighborhood BFF back in Woodbridge land. We pretended we were the characters and stayed up well into the night afterward acting it out. We went to the library after that and read "spell books" like we were the only ones who knew they existed and pretended not even the librarian knew about them. She was probs a witch though too.* —Lauren Festa, b. 1987, raised in Woodbridge, Ontario, and Salem, Massachusetts

Still from *The Craft* (1996)

The Craft *hit my schoolyard like the Spice Girls and Sailor Moon, the latest thing. Wikipedia calls the movie a "sleeper hit"; I'd amend that to sleepover. That's where we'd watch and rewatch the film's 101 minutes. I had four best friends at the time, and just as we'd assign each other Spices or Sailors to play, we'd assign each other characters from* The Craft. *I was a Nancy—scrawny with a big chip on my shoulder.* —Fiona Duncan

I did have friendships like in the movie, friendships based on being outcasts together or having one very specific thing in common. Friendships with girls like Nancy, who were usually justifiably warped by life and very mean, very into black-and-white concepts of justice, very unforgiving. I think that's a relationship that most teenage girls have, with a tiny dictator who wants to direct the world as they see fit. And it's appealing because then you don't really have to think about anything, someone else can decide who you hate or like, where you're going to direct your energy. I was always so consumed with doing the wrong thing that it was definitely a relief to have someone just tell me exactly who, where, and what I was supposed to be in order to be friends with her. —Haley Mlotek, born 1986, raised in North York, Ontario

Trampoline. Peacock Gap. 1999. I'm at my best friend's house with another friend from middle school. There are three of us, maybe four. We want

Still from *The Craft* (1996)

to be bad, we want to take some kind of risk that equals experience. But we only find ourselves in a rich suburb of San Francisco, in a house stocked with wholesome foods, and a beautiful garden backyard and hot tub. Our lives, in that moment, are not terribly dangerous. With a head full of The Craft *and some implicit knowledge that we are weird outsiders, we decide, dramatically, to drink each other's blood. (This, of course, being a recreation of the scene when Rochelle, Nancy, Sarah, and Bonnie take their "we are the weirdos" bus ride out into some pasture and drink each other's pinpricks of blood in a magnificent goblet of underage red wine.) I remember it being kind of gross. We didn't have wine, so my friends and I just watched how the blood coagulated in the water. It became something decidedly non-cinematic. But we sat on that trampoline and we tried to create a ritual that would bind us together in a way we couldn't consciously guarantee, being 13, 14, not yet having entered high school, not yet knowing who we'd become. On the trampoline, I guess we wanted, in some way, to belong to each other.* —Mary Borkowski, born 1986, raised in San Francisco

Trying to emulate the freedom and tenacity of the Craft *women, we would set off on Saturdays and Sundays with a spell book and random artifacts to use: our parent's wine, daggers, crystals,*

satchels, candles, matches. We were banking on windstorms and levitation, rising dead frogs, and moving things with our mind; after all, The Craft *is a true story, right? So we stabbed a couple water beetles, chanted in circles under little cement underpasses, and every now and again someone would imagine that they levitated. Was it true? Potentially, sure? We all cut each other's fingers, so I guess that means I have a lot of blood sisters, and we took vows with one another and the occult gods that have long since been broken and forgotten.* —Monique Palma Whittaker, born 1986, raised in Guelph, Ontario

After watching the movie four times in a row, I tried to take some books on Wicca and the occult at the North Shore Library, the Lynn Valley branch. However, they were in the reference section and could not be signed out. So I just alternated between reading them crossed legged on the floor and sneaking to the Adult Fiction section to read sexy bits from VC Andrews novels. I became obsessed with "love spells" despite the hard lesson learned by Sarah, and have continued to seek them out. Everything from old Russian spells of putting a coin into a piece of bread and reading some poetry out loud to the Sicilian practice of mixing in some of your period blood in pasta sauce to charm a man. —Sofia Gassieva, born 1983, raised in Vancouver

I had two girl groups in my youth, both completely centered around being horny and having "seances." The first group was called PTSCC (Preteen Sensation Club Club). In this club, you had to have read certain books and seen certain movies, including The Craft. *You also had to own some form of bra, but we would happily construct a bra out of an old undershirt for any members too frightened to ask their mothers. We mostly played Ouija, drew on each others' bodies, acted out very disturbing sex scenes with dolls, played with beads and candles, made slightly alcoholic drinks with cherry juice. Now that I'm answering these questions, I'm realizing that these girl groups coincided with my discovering masturbation for real, and with my first having serious sexual thoughts and urges, but those things are much too complex to trace.* —Rosa Aiello

My long-lost friend Miranda (also a Fairuza) tells me that I served her red wine in my parents' kitchen as a means of initiation in playtime cabal; I have no recollection of this. Listening to Miranda, I am hit with an image, a memory buried, of us and this girl Anna, the same cohort that would re-enact The Craft, *playing a game we called "lesbians," which involved rubbing up against each other fully clothed under the covers.* —Fiona Duncan

My friend got this black magic book, and there was this one chapter that piqued my interest most. It was about spells cast with the male witch's penis inside the woman witch's vagina. You would sit and rock back and forth while saying the spell in unison until the cast was completed. Then something magical happened. I don't recall what the spell was about, probably because I didn't care and I would've wanted to know what boning felt like more than what a spell could do, so in a way The Craft *led to my sexual curiosity. I began to see sex as a chemical equation; something that happened*

between two people which would result in new form of energy or existence. —Monique Palma Whittaker

I was a weird girl. I was the weird girl for most of my childhood. The thing I love the most about The Craft *is that it's about a group of girls who are leading very average, shitty, teenage girl lives, and they decide to do something about it. Why should a sixteen-year-old girl have to put up with a gross abusive step dad, or racism, or bad behavior from teenage boys, or feeling shitty about their bodies? This was a movie about girls who were experiencing very similar things as me and my friends, but instead of just waiting to grow out of it, these characters were doing something to make it better now. Instead of being ridiculed, they were feared; instead of being victims, they were sexual aggressors.* —Haley Mlotek

Watching the movie again at 26, I realized I had blocked the second half of it from my memory, the part where the girls get drunk on power and are punished for it. I remember how uncomfortable I'd been with this turn since my very earliest viewings. I remember wishing I could perform some magic so that the film ended at the middle, in laughter, wealth, and sisterhood, instead of with white magic versus black magic. The lesson of The Craft *should be like my favorite superhero Bildungsromans. But in '90s Hollywood, girls didn't get to be heroes. We could be enchanting, an object of dangerous allure, but never a subject who learns that with great power comes great responsibility. Given great power, we were taught we would fall.* —Fiona Duncan

One of the scenes I find disquieting, disturbing, along with the entire second half of the film really, is the invocation scene on the beach, when each girl brings her specific contribution and prayer to Manon. The scene is violent and ugly in unexpected ways. There's something ugly about each girl, under the guise of empowerment and some spiritual awakening, really just asking for some petty materialistic favor. It's the climax and also the anticlimax: when things "go too far" and after getting drunk with the spirit they communally invoked, they wake up the next morning, sand in their mouths, sun beating down on them. The movie changes after that. —Mary Borkowski

When I watch The Craft *now, the scenes I love the most are the ones where they're enjoying magic. As a child, it didn't really occur to how moralistic the whole story is—the girls are punished for experimenting with a force larger than themselves. I love the scenes where the magic is working for them, when they're taking pleasure in the power they get from scaring other people instead of being ashamed of it. I wish there was another way to end a movie geared at teenagers that didn't end with the girls seeing the error of their ways and going back to high school without powers, or locked up in a mental institution. Isn't there some option in between the two?* —Haley Mlotek

For me, The Craft *represents a tonal existence that I wish I could settle into more often, even today. It's dark yet elegant, it's dark yet feminine, it's dark but it's fucking hot, and I feel like it makes my dark-sidedness a little bit more sexy. I like the power these women take back.* —Monique Palma Whittaker ■

Why Witches Can't Have It All

by DURGA CHEW-BOSE

The Hollywood witch's real oath isn't to the goddess or Satan—it's to have and to hold

TWICE NOW, NICOLE Kidman has played a witch. First in Griffin Dunne's 1998 adaptation of Alice Hoffman's sister-sister toil-and-trouble novel, *Practical Magic*, and again in 2005, in Nora Ephron's meta-movie-update of the beloved '60s and '70s sitcom, *Bewitched*, co-written with her sister, Delia. Unwieldy, both films hinge on gimmick, wane at the halfway mark, and include just enough disposable scenes as if they were made to be shortened for TV and air in the afternoon on the Oxygen Network.

Practical Magic is "liable to work as escapism for anyone who thinks *Little Women* has too much grit," Janet Maslin wrote in her *New York Times* pan, categorizing it as a movie in which women discuss hand lotion. And *Bewitched* was the sort of big failure that gets footnoted as speedy sparring trivia in a *Gilmore Girls* episode. Still, with Kidman as their common denominator, these movies sketch a spectrum for Hollywood's fixation with witches: At one end there's the domestic witch wife who is proficient at brunch, screwball timing, and benign brouhaha. At the other end, the seductive sorceress misfit with a crew she considers her coven and an itch for revenge. One wears pink cardigans, paisley, and Lily Pulitzer; the other sees the world through oxblood-colored glasses. Ephron's

Bewitched and the '90s cult hit *The Craft* bookend the scale (coincidently they share a producer, Douglas Wick) while *The Witches of Eastwick*, *Practical Magic*, and *Hocus Pocus* rank in ascending order.

In Kidman's case, the disparities between her two roles—employing her powers to prank a man vs. to kill a man, for example—go on and on.

Bewitched is the story of Isabel Bigelow (Kidman), a witch who is desperate to quit the craft in favor of a normal life in Los Angeles. As it happens, she gets cast as Samantha (Elizabeth Montgomery's role in the original show) in a television remake of the fantasy sitcom—essentially, a vehicle for failed actor and solipsist Jack Wyatt (Will Ferrell) to jump-start his career. Isabel's charm—and spot-on Samantha nose twitch—outshines Jack, and soon the show belongs to her. The movie's main conceit has less to do with magic powers so much as a question Ephron poses in the DVD's directory commentary: "How powerful can you be in a relationship with a man and not lose his love?" In this case, the Hollywood workplace romantic comedy is appended: career, marriage, *and* coven. Witches too, struggle to have to all.

In this decidedly Ephron world, a meet-cute occurs in the Self-Help section of a bookstore, the men are for the most part total dolts, and L.A. landmarks are as adoringly mapped as the Upper West Side was in her 1998 rom-com *You've Got Mail*. Dipping and swooping on broom as we descend toward the city, *Bewitched* begins with an aerial grid that is distinctly L.A.: Hockney swimming pools and Ruscha parking lots. Later, we land on Isabel's white-picket-fenced cottage in the Valley. Spreading her thumb and index finger away from each other as if enlarging content on a touchscreen, Isabel places a FOR RENT sign outside the cottage, and just like that, it's hers.

But as Ephron notes, Isabel is an addict. Each materialized thing, like the FOR RENT sign or a beige VW bug that magically appears in Isabel's new garage, generates guilt. She pays for her purchases at Bed Bath & Beyond by swiping a tarot card instead of a credit card, immediately shaking her head and vowing *this is the last time*. As Roger Ebert wrote in his review of the movie, Isabel's one-last-time mien "makes witchcraft seem like a bad habit rather than a cosmic force."

It would be interesting to see a director like Todd Solondz (*Welcome to the Dollhouse*, *Palindromes*) approach the character of an "addict witch." In his world, comedy is an expression of darkness and suburban monotony is a façade for domestic disquiet. In a Solondz incarnation of *Bewitched*, Isabel's near counterfeit pep and puckish smile, and her preference for overstuffed couches and fresh flowers, would imply pretense and, later, sickness. However in Ephron's version, Isabel's persona and Kidman's performance of it seem entirely based on an *impression* of femininity. Witchcraft is a bag of hidden Oreos under the bed or that last cigarette. In one scene, dissatisfied at work, Isabel reassures her girlfriends that she is in fact, "Fine." She adds, as if satirizing rom-com heroines, "Last night I ate three burritos and smashed every dish in my house." In a Solondz film,

nothing is lampoon. We would witness Isabel eat every last bite of that burrito on a half-broken plate.

But that's a different movie. In this one, she quits witchcraft. First, she runs through a sudden rainstorm without summoning an umbrella—essentially, the cinematic mark of a free woman. Later at home, she continues her discovery of mere mortal life by popping a bag of popcorn. Nobody has ever looked more proud punching buttons on a microwave. Kidman's naïve witch is largely a Meg Ryan pantomime: that sort of smiling, clownish stomp that makes her look like an optimist walking at a steep incline.

Ephron, whose sharply funny essays often draw attention to the general upkeep and regimen women are expected to follow, was obviously awake to the movie's *Twilight Zone* tenor. "I want to have days when my hair is affected by the weather," Isabel laments to her father (Michael Caine). Famously known for having her hair professionally blow-dried twice weekly, Ephron once advocated—with her patently punch-line wit—that it was "cheaper by far than psychoanalysis and much more uplifting."

Positioned highest on Isabel's pyramid of so-called ordinary, everyday life is finding a man who "needs" her "because he is a complete and total mess." *Reformed Witch Seeking ~~Warlock~~ Man Who (as Isabel puts it) "Seems Very Sweet and Unkept and Troubled."* For her, nothing is more desirable than quotidian tasks and compromises, and normal is personified by the couple who wheels past her in the towel aisle at Bed Bath debating paint colors.

Though far less peachy, *Practical Magic* is similarly preoccupied with the idea of finding a perfect man. (He can flip pancakes; he has one blue eye and one green eye.) Sisters Sally and Gillian Owens (Sandra Bullock and Kidman) are women whose powers come with a curse—the men they fall in love with are destined to die. Witchcraft, as the title suggests, is used rationally and rarely to subvert.

Whereas the women in *Bewitched* are meant to appear otherworldly (in a glossy-sheen sense of the word), the women in *Practical Magic* seem rooted in something more earthly. Or maybe that's simply the effect of their home—an East Coast Victorian, picket-fenced no less, but overgrown and weather-worn. Sisters who whisper under bed sheets and ask questions like, "Do you forgive our mother?" are instinctively relatable.

Kidman as Gillian is the wild-child sorceress who climbs down trellises and runs away from home to live in California. She makes blood pacts, empties potions into cheap tequila, and likens falling in love to spinning really fast: *You can't see what's happening to the people around you. You can't see that you're about to fall*. She crashes Sally's PTA meeting in a crop top, no bra, and belly chain, and announces to the classroom of uptight moms, "That's right I'm back—hang on to your husbands, girls."

Gillian is Hollywood's Lilith Fair witch. She keeps her bedroom at a constant flickering glow, lighting candles as she sings along to Joni Mitchell or Stevie Nicks. (Isabel, of course, listens to Frank Sinatra's "Witchcraft.") Had *Practical Magic* been made in the

past few years, Florence Welch would have scored it, maybe even starred.

Barefoot in black jeans, Gillian perches herself on counters or windowsills. She is a cat who walks down stairs as if balancing one paw in front of the other, narrowing her eyes as if readied to purr. In *Bewitched,* Kidman's skin is fondant. In *Practical Magic*: porcelain. One witch's cookie jar is another witch's bell jar.

But more so, Gillian would never fall for a guy named Jack Wyatt. She would slice his name in two and pronounce it as if it were a question—*Why-It*? Instead, she meets Jimmy Angelov, whom she describes to Sally as having "this whole Dracula cowboy thing about him." But Jimmy is abusive, and Sally, in her witchy synchronistic sister way, can sense Gillian is in trouble. She rescues her and accidentally kills Jimmy. "You have the worst taste in men," Sally grumbles as they bury Jimmy's body.

Dissatisfaction ties these two Kidman witches together. In both cases, the craft is a short cut or a revenge ploy, while a normal relationship with a man is the ultimate goal. Domesticity means safety for both of Kidman's archetypal hetero witches. Neither one is *too* dangerous; one just chooses a Jimmy instead of a Jack. When Jimmy is killed, Gillian prays to God, begging his forgiveness. She promises to tame herself and have kids, and even attend PTA meetings. A woman's powers, it would seem, are only good for one thing. The proper use of witchcraft, like the proper use of a woman's sexuality, is to locate and snag the right guy.

In Ephron's essay about the 1972 Democratic Convention in Miami where the National Women's Political Caucus was purposed, as she puts it, to simply "put on a good show," she typifies the feud between Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan by rivaling them as good witch and bad witch. "It is probably too easy to go on about the two of them this way: Betty as Wicked Witch of the West, Gloria as Ozma, Glinda, Dorothy – take your pick," she says. "To talk this way ignores the subtleties, right? Gloria is not, after all, uninterested in power." If the spectrum of witchcraft fits between Steinem and Friedan, there's no wonder it collapses.

When the good witch and bad witch are one witch named Nicole, the moral coordinates take a back seat to the Hollywood narrative. The good witch shrewdly obtains what she wants, while shying away from too much power. (Isabel recoils when Jack—under the influence of hex—suggests to the network executives that she be promoted, "Make this woman a CEO of a multinational corporation!") Meanwhile the bad witch is represented as sensitive, steering through life in a slip dress and caressing a black cat when she's feeling extra vulnerable. Complexities do exist, but they serve only to shrink the witches down to size, small enough to fit in the home. Both movies end with images of domesticity: Gillian raking leaves and Isabel carrying boxes into her new house with her new hubby. Kidman's witches aren't humanized, they're womanized. Any oath to goddess or devil is just training for the oath to have and to hold. ■

Devils in Red Dress

by MOIRA WEIGEL

Though males vastly outnumber females in China, shengnü—"leftover women"—haunt the country's imagination

"As soon as a man has money, he turns bad;
as soon as a woman turns bad, she has money."

AUGUST 13, 2013: on the steps of the subway station near where I have been living all summer, a hawker has appeared selling bouquets of miniature teddy bears. It is Qixi Festival, Chinese Valentine's Day, and the state-programmed television screens in my train car report that 35,000 single people have showed up for a speed-dating event organized by a municipal committee. One male speed dater is shown grinning as he lifts his cell phone to take data from a barcode sticker affixed to a woman's sleeve. She, in turn, bats a smile back.

Love seems to be in the air. But the Chinese BBC podcast that I listen to during my commute is focused on a grimmer subject: a demographic that the host warns is swarming Chinese cities. *Shengnü*, "leftover women."

The preoccupation with leftover women has been around for a while. In 2007, the feminist organization of the Communist Party issued a proclamation on the growing numbers of women delaying or foregoing marriage in favor of focusing on their education and careers. They coined a term, and the Ministry of Education added it to their official lexicon:

> *Leftover women are modern urban women, most of whom have high education, high income, and high IQ. They are nice-looking, but they are relatively demanding in choosing spouses, so they haven't found ideal partners for marriage.*

The Ministry further explains that "the majority of leftover women are not unwilling to marry; rather, they cannot marry. They have diligently perfected themselves, they have made every effort to improve, but in the end these efforts have turned into a golden collar, because they do not put [women] in an advantageous position on the marriage market." The online dictionary of Xinhua, the state news agency, notes that *leftover* word here, *sheng*, is the same word used for spoiled food (*shengcai*), for the adjective *superfluous* (*shengyu*), and for the expression *canshan-shengshui*, which roughly translates as "damaged mountains, remnants of water" and describes lands ravaged by war.

By the first time I went to China, alone, in the spring of 2012, the *shengnü* had become a national obsession. Every other cabdriver with whom I struck up a halting conversation ribbed me that I was on the verge. One of my teachers at Tsinghua University, where I returned for a few months this past summer, reassured me that if you have a nice boyfriend, as I now do, you do not need to worry until 30. Their remarks send a quiver through my stomach. I felt silly for feeling it.

Xinhua says we spoil sooner. In 2010 the agency published a questionnaire called "See What Category of Leftover You Belong To." The youngest category into which a girl might fall is 25 to 27 years old. The oldest, at 35, "has a luxury apartment, private car, and a company, so why did she become a leftover woman?" As a foreigner, what I want to know is, Why has she become such a fixation? And why has this proved such a compelling story to Americans?

IT IS NOT immediately obvious why, or how, anyone becomes a leftover woman in China. There are many more young men than young women, thanks to the family planning laws Deng Xiaoping's government introduced in the late 1970s and the persistence of the traditional preference for sons, which has led to mass selective abortion and abandonment of female children. The 2010 national census suggested that there were 12 million bachelors between the ages 30 to 39, for only 6 million bachelorettes. In 2012, 118 boys were born for every 100 girls.

Women who move to China's boom cities are taking advantage of unprecedented educational and career opportunities, which you'd think would make them more desirable than ever. Yet the traditional bias that women must "marry up in four ways"—height, age, education level, and income—has persisted. If the Chinese New Woman is not too old to be desired by the time she has earned her graduate degree, that degree and the earning potential that it gives her price her out of the market.

The *shengnü* has been exploited as a rich source of entertainment. In 2010, CCTV-8 created a sitcom about a family trying to marry off their 30-year-old. The title, *Danü dang jia*, could be translated either *My Eldest Daughter Should Marry* or *Aging Women Should Marry*. In 2012, the Taiwanese network GTV created a weekly show also broadcast on the mainland that puns on the character *sheng*, "leftover,"

with another character *sheng* that sounds identical and means "victorious": *The Price of Being a Victorious (Leftover) Woman*.

Clearly, the term sells. And something about it sticks, even when its speaker purports to be speaking up for this maligned group. Baihe, China's largest dating website (which promises help at the same time that it stands to profit from their nerves) claims that there are more than 500,000 women who identify as "leftovers" in Beijing alone.

BEFORE THE CPC made *shengnü shengnü,* women who had gone bad were called *baigujing*, "white bone spirits," after a demoness from the classic 16th century novel *Journey to the West*. When the hero, Monkey King, meets Baigujing on the road, she has assumed a youthful appearance. After he realizes that she is playing tricks, he knocks her out with a cudgel and she reverts to her true form:

> *With temples white as withered snow…*
> *Her face was like a withered leaf of cabbage…*
> *Her face was like a pleated bag.*

Whether or not she is a *baigujing*, the New Chinese Woman also seems to shape-shift. Blink and the naive striver who went bad while she was too busy getting her doctorate to notice turns into another kind of bad girl, who is apparently just as ubiquitous: the gold digger. Shortly after the *shengnü* campaign, the CPC began a push to reform her too.

It started with a real woman named Ma Nuo. In April 2010, Ma, then in her early 20s and working as a model for a few regional magazines, appeared on a reality dating show on Jiangsu Satellite TV called *If You Are the One*. Featuring one man and 24 women whom he tries to win over, the show was one of the most popular of the about two dozen of its kind.

When a contestant asked Ma on a date riding his bicycle she quipped that she would "rather cry in the back of a BMW than laugh on the back of a bicycle," and flipped on her *No thanks* switch. The comment went viral on Weibo, and Ma became infamous. The Shanghai edition of the official party newspaper, *People's Daily,* reported in June:

> *There's a popular saying among young Chinese women who are seeking Mr. Right: "I'd rather cry in a BMW than laugh on a bicycle."*
>
> *These words also swirl about on the Internet, show up on T-shirts and on TV dating shows where they stir controversy about today's grasping, material girls.*

After describing the Ma brouhaha, *Shanghai Daily* notes that "netizens were generally enraged, heaping scorn on her, labeling her the 'BMW Lady,' and saying she shamed the post-1980s generation. Ma quit the show in discomfort. But," it continues acidly, "that's all okay. Now she's a star. Her modeling career took off and she's a hot item on TV talk shows and entertainment programs. On a Star TV talk show, Ma repeated her requirements for a man and also talked openly about her first sexual encounter."

The BMW Lady became shorthand for the selfishness and loose morals of the generation that has grown up since Tiananmen—with no memory of either Maoism or the heroic struggles of the 1980s, depending on who's

doing the criticizing. So, troubled by her apparent influence, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, the department of the Ministry of Propaganda that oversees those media, resolved to cut the BMW ladies off from their platform. SARFT enacted one of the most dramatic media crackdowns in decades, halving the number of "entertainment shows" on the air and taking stricter control over their content. The agency also mandated that each satellite network in China develop at least one show that specifically promotes "socialist values" and that women appearing on all programs wear at least knee-length skirts.

Around the same time, official media conducted and began aggressively publicizing a study. The results proclaimed that materialistic women made too high demands on their potential partners: supposedly, 70 percent of Chinese women surveyed would not consider dating a man who did not own his own car and apartment. In 2012, a second study on the subject claimed that the real figure was 75 percent.

The Chinese Supreme Court made a ruling ostensibly targeted at such gold diggers. The new law stated that after a divorce, the person whose name is on the deed to the family home owns it solely. In China, that is almost always the man. The BMW—or at least, the garage that it stood in—would henceforth be safe from scrabbling hands.

IN BEIJING, I keep hearing urban legends about BMW Ladies—mostly repeated by male expats set on dating Chinese women, or female ones who profess frustration that none of the foreign men they meet have any interest in dating them.

A former Navy officer tells me about an Ivy League graduate with a Master's degree who disappeared from their dinner date to take a call from work. When she returned, she said her boss needed her back in the office. But when she asked him to pass her her Céline bag, it fell open, spilling lingerie and a copy of her résumé onto their table.

An affable thirtyish year old in bedraggled plaid shorts who studies at Tsinghua shows me the text messages from another student whom he took out for two cuddly tea dates. A contact saved as Misty Plum indeed is joking-not-joking over WeChat about when she will get her green card.

A female friend of a friend reports that the large American corporation that she works at makes married male employees sign contracts when they relocate to Beijing, promising that if they abandon their families for a Chinese colleague, they will not hold the company financially responsible for moving their wives and children back to the U.S.: It has paid too much already packing such victims of Asian femmes fatales back home.

A soft-spoken consultant recalls how a girl with whom he thought he was having a one-off hookup showed up at his front door the next day, suitcase in hand, and screamed until he let her move in, rent-free.

A banker guffaws. The girls at his favorite club are "dry cleaners: just looking to pick up suits!"

Such anecdotes resonate with legends about cunning Oriental women at least as old

as Cleopatra. But what starts to sound suspicious is how so many Chinese women could conform to two archetypes that so directly contradict each other. Where the *shengnü* is hapless, the BMW Lady is ruthless. Where the pitiable *shengnü* fails to adapt to the new realities of capitalist China (recall: "gold collared leftovers" fail to recognize that their attainments "have no value on the marriage market"), her wicked stepsister the gold digger must be restrained from leveraging her sexual capital *too well*.

THERE MAY OR may not have ever been an actual example of either one of these women. What both reflect, as cultural types, is the unevenness of China's development. People talking about them seek to explain and, insofar as the terms may sway real women, manage contradictions that threaten the Chinese experiment in maintaining the fastest growing markets in history without undergoing significant political liberalization.

The Communist Party has good reasons to worry about the love lives of its people. In the decades since they introduced the "one family, one child" law, shifts in the age and gender of the Chinese population has created what the Health and Population Ministry calls "unprecedented pressures." Birth rates in the richest cities have declined to Western European levels. At the same time, improved nutrition and health care have increased life expectancy. Developed countries may be able to bear this kind of "graying." But it threatens to devastate an emerging economy that still depends largely on its inexpensive labor force to drive growth—and on young family members to provide social services to the grandparents who now outnumber them four to one.

Then there are the leftover men. While one in three Chinese women from the ages of 25 to 40 is unmarried, one in two of her male counterparts is; in the countryside, these numbers are higher. Census projections suggest that by 2020, 20 percent of Chinese men will not be able to find a spouse. The rise of a large class of sexually frustrated and humiliated young men—an increasing number of whom cannot find work, or work commensurate with their levels of education—would worry any government. It particularly worries a party mindful that rural rebellions by masses of young men brought down every previous Chinese regime from the Ming Dynasty to the KMT.

In a series of articles for the *New York Times*, *Dissent*, and *Ms. Magazine*, the American sociologist Leta Hong Fincher has distilled brilliantly what the party's *shengnü* campaign is about: terrorizing educated, upwardly mobile women into helping solve this bundle of problems by settling down. At the same time, the specter of the BMW Lady has served as a pretext to roll back equal property rights granted to married women during the Mao era.

It stands to reason that if a country needs to improve what the Family Planning Bureau calls its "population quality" (*renkou suzhi*)—to make sure that the right kind of people have the right number of kids at the right time—convincing rich women that they need to hurry up and breed is a good tactic. Threatening to leave a bad wife without anywhere to live in cities with skyrocketing real estate prices

offers further insurance against her defecting if she becomes unhappy. She might. A recent international study by the PR firm Fleishman and Hillard suggests that Chinese wives are the least contented in the world: only 37 percent of the 600 women surveyed agreed with the statement "I am fortunate to have my spouse/partner in my life."

The campaigns against both kinds of bad women both share one purpose, then. Both aim to manipulate women into sacrificing their interests in order to preserve the stability of a society that first Communism and then economic liberalization shattered—and to do their part to make sure that the growth on which party rule depends continues. The question of what would happen if enough Chinese women truly went bad and had money is one that the Communist Party cannot afford to countenance. A good woman's work is to ensure that the existing order can reproduce itself.

IN RECENT YEARS, the American press has extensively, even obsessively, covered both the *shengnü* and the gold digger. Starting around 2010, a stream of articles in English reiterated official statistics and stereotypes about greedy Chinese women.

In November, the *New York Times* reported that "In China, Money Often Can Buy Love." "Money really can buy you love in China," it opens. "Or at least that seems to be a common belief in this increasingly materialistic country. Many personal stories seem to confirm that the ideal mate is the one who can deliver a home and a car, among other things; sentiment is secondary."

Several months later, a follow-up piece reported that "For Many Chinese Men, No Deed Means No Date." It opens with a vignette of a sympathetic young man:

> In the realm of eligible bachelors, Wang Lin has a lot to recommend him. A 28-year-old college-educated insurance salesman, Mr. Wang has a flawless set of white teeth, a tolerable karaoke voice, and a three-year-old Nissan with furry blue seat covers.
>
> "My friends tell me I'm quite handsome," he said in confident English one recent evening, fingering his car keys as if they were a talisman.
>
> But by the exacting standards of single Chinese women, it seems, Mr. Wang lacks that bankable attribute known as real property.

"China's New Wealth Spurs a Market for Mistresses." "Dating in China is Largely a Commercial Transaction." "The Price of Marriage in China." This is just the *New York Times*. Stories in *Time*, *Foreign Affairs*, NPR, the *Economist*, the *Telegraph*, extensively poached from and reblogged, ensconced the BMW Lady as fact. They offer the same half-prurient, half-moralizing thrill as the urban legends of girls leaving nice dates to screw their supervisors. (Like them, they also tend to lean heavily on hard-to-verify anecdotes and conversations carried out in English.)

Though somewhat more slowly, the *shengnü* also started showing up in American publications. Googling, now, I find that just in August the *Los Angeles Times* has reported that "China's *shengnü*, or 'leftover women,' face intense pressure to marry," Reuters concurs that "China's Leftover Women Face Tough

Choices Looking for Love." CNN's "On China" show has talked about leftover women for a whole week. "Chinese Women Caught in 'Epic Clash.'" "Chinese Women Fight to Shake Off the Leftover Label." "Chinese Women Choosing to Stay Single."

In general, American coverage has tended to be less misogynistic than the Communist Party propaganda. In April, the *New York Times* published Leta Hong Fincher's article, "Rejecting the Leftover Women Label," the facts of which Jezebel reprised with a funnier headline, "Chinese 'Leftover' Women Fight Bullshit With Humor." In the same month, Joy Chen, a Chinese American, published a bilingual self-help manifesto, *Do Not Marry Until You Are Thirty*, and it quickly became a best seller.

But even as they offer affirmation, it is hard for feminists to avoid playing to the same fears that the Communist Party propaganda mongers. When ABC invited Joy Chen on *Good Morning America* to speak about her campaign to empower Chinese women, they ran the story with the headline CHINA'S 'LEFTOVER WOMEN' DESPERATE TO FIND 'MR. RIGHT.' As it happens, reporting on this Chinese problem is compatible with one of the most time-tested methods of selling things in America: Tell women that something they did not know was wrong with them is wrong with them, then tell them that for a small price, they can know the cure.

EVERY ARTICLE THAT I have read in English treats the leftovers and gold diggers as peculiarly Chinese phenomena, characterizing China roughly as Chinese propaganda characterizes women: as either hapless or ruthless. The "marriage markets" that have sprung up across the country seem like proof of native backwardness. Parents and children frankly considering material questions before marriage appear old fashioned, signs of a lag in the march toward modernity that economic liberalization started. At the same time, extreme cases like the BMW Lady evoke a frighteningly liberated future, where the last protocols tying sex to permanent commitment, via romance, have disappeared along with the last soft-hearted protections against inequality, environmental crisis, food contamination, etc.

In fact, Chinese women fascinate American editors and readers not because they are foreign, but because their story sounds familiar. For *New York Times* readers, the only sexier click-bait than sex may be the idea that everything is measurable, a market, and China is the biggest of all. Few stories seem more most-emailable, therefore, than those about the peculiar mating habits of newly rich Chinese.

> *Dozens of high-end matchmaking services have sprung up in China in the last five years, charging big fees to find and to vet prospective spouses for wealthy clients. Their methods can turn into gaudy spectacle. One firm transported 200 would-be trophy wives to a resort town in southwestern China for the perusal of one powerful magnate. Another organized a caravan of BMWs for rich businessmen to find young wives in Sichuan Province. Diamond Love, among the largest love-hunting services, sponsored a matchmaking event in 2009 where 21 men each paid a $15,000 entrance fee.*

Such prose allows the Western reader vicariously to enjoy the thrills of rising Asian wealth while also continuing to feel morally superior to its owners. Although any reader must respect China as an economic might (its "high end," "big fees," "caravan of BMWs," etc.), vacuous diction makes it sound soulless. Chinese love looks like love only inasmuch as Baidu looks like Google. Chinese feelings are knock-off Chanel.

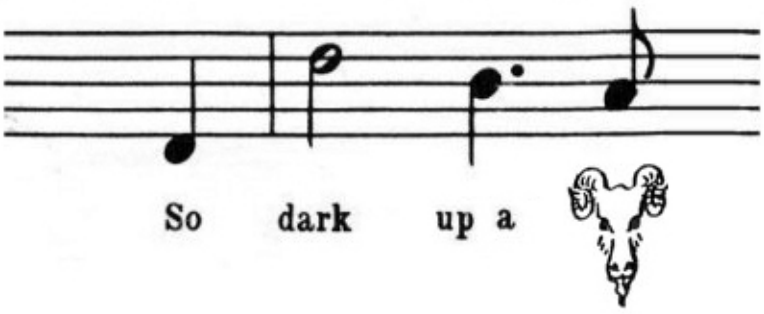
Bad Chinese women provide a way to turn statistics about the Chinese market into a narrative. I recall a long *New York* magazine article about the growth of Chinese retail that opened with an anecdote about a mistress whisking her boyfriend into the Louis Vuitton flagship in Beijing Sanlitun three minutes before closing to snap up handbags. Kevin Kwan's recent novel, *Crazy Rich Asians*, extends this conceit for 400 pages.

It has an appealing premise. A wholesome Chinese-American professor innocently accompanies her boyfriend, whom she did not realize was "crazy rich," home to Singapore, only to find herself besieged by status-obsessed aunties and bitches determined to steal her man. (One leaves a gutted fish in the heroine's private hut at a Malaysian resort where they have flown for the weekend in a private jet outfitted with a heated-floor yoga studio.) Kwan's set pieces are as addictive as an old-school society rag. Every few pages burst out another litany of luxury brand names. Yet, he keeps up an arch tone that lets the reader have it both ways. In the end, we are glad that the nice girl wins and that marriage will make her, too, a crazy rich Asian.

What the dazzle of such stories deflects is the vague apprehension that rising Asia is outdoing us at practices that we pioneered. Mass consumerism is nothing new. Are the aims of Chinese mass matchmaking markets so different from those of OkCupid? Chinese reality shows like the one that Ma Nuo, BMW Lady, appeared on frankly copy the format of American successes like *The Bachelor.* The American stories on *shengnü* take up forms of sexism that are all too familiar to educated women here and dress them up in a red pantsuit.

In China, American readers see what they fear about themselves made strange. The problems that the *shengnü* and the BMW Lady are used to highlight are extreme. Everything in China is. China is a country of extremes that all point to the final superlative: its scale.

The mirroring and misapprehension that make the *shengnü* and BMW Lady seem exotic are typical of how the two 21st century superpowers misperceive each other. In Beijing, I often hear people talk about the *zhongguomeng*, or "Chinese dream." The word, which entered the official lexicon after Xi Jinping used it in his inauguration speech last November, simply substitutes "Chinese" for "American" to conjure a future of limitless personal and national progress whose time has come. For Americans anxious to maintain their global supremacy, and nervous that the rival whose exploited labor has allowed them to live so flush so long will soon call in our debts, the ultimate bad woman may be China herself. ■


So dark up a

Haunted House

by NIC CAVELL

The short-lived electronic subgenre witch house lingered in the emotional crawlspace beneath contemporary pop

IT'S BEEN CALLED "drag," because it relies heavily on attenuated beats and rhythm. After that it was "haunted house." The songs, though electronically produced, don't recall techno but qualities bewitchingly human—as if the tracks themselves are haunted. And then, in 2009, two artists—Travis Egedy of Pictureplane and Jonathan Coward of Shams—branded themselves as "Witch House" artists. Egedy's music was covered in Pitchfork, and the term acquired social currency. Someone went around to various music sites to tag a group of bands under the same moniker, including Salem, White Ring, and Chris Greenspan's act, oOoOO.

From the beginning, witch house as a scene was beleaguered. Its chief artists, though collected under labels like Disaro Records in Houston, were atomized geographically and divergently inspired. All were technically in thrall to hip-hop's "chopped and screwed" rhythms, and the same stream of adjectives—"dusky," "slinky," "overdosed"—flowed to describe them on the scene's music blogs like XXJFG (20 Jazz Funk Greats, which eventually morphed into its own music label). But the bands tooled with different subject matter: White Ring and Salem with fatalism and obscure, occult mythologies, and oOoOO with distorted pop music. Each

artist responded to the others' music online, but when asked, they chafed at the name witch house. Still, they cohered to shine for a brief moment in 2010.

By March of that year, the gnats and flies were already buzzing. Live performances, reliant upon dark atmosphere, smoke screens, and extensive vocal modification, were a sham. Not even Jack Donoghue's hair could save Salem, by then the most publicly visible of the witch-house bands, from being booed off the SXSW stage. The music, in party terms, was not good. Witch house slunk back underground.

But if these are the facts, there is another history of the subgenre that remembers why anyone liked it in the first place. It points to the most interesting acts—the subterranean ones who linger with pop and hip-hop tracks to shade in the longing gathered beneath their slick surfaces. Far from seeing witch-house artists' reliance on the Internet as an obstacle, this alternate history highlights the acts who have made a subject of the Internet's emotional implications.

Witch house may belong in the lineage of similarly moody, involved electronic subgenres. If syrup was the backdrop for "chopped and screwed" in the early '90s, and rave culture was the backdrop for movements like ambient house—then specters of information-age sex and relationships are that for witch house, and Greenspan's oOoOO in particular. The name *witch house* has stuck to these artists because their tracks are impossible to imagine without the starved female vocals that bespeak loss and give the music its tone. They are impossible to untie from questions of gender.

Consider, for instance, Nocera's "Summertime, Summertime" and Greenspan's mix of the track side by side. The original is a freestyle pop tune. Its cardiac beats are relentless, its electronic brass buoyant, and Nocera's blistering vocals shine and pirouette on pointe. The word *summertime* is used maybe a hundred times. On the cover of *Over the Rainbow*, the album on which the song appears, Nocera smiles coyly in a sailor's cap and red patent-leather jacket. "Take me to the water," she intones, and you can already see it sparkling.

Greenspan's version ("NoSummr4u") slows the track considerably, and Nocera's vocals—buried in a heavy admixture of synth—shrug the weight of sunshine they carried in the first mix. But the sunshine isn't abandoned; instead it's mottled, recycled, and diffused through a synthesizer, which adds a scale of twinkling notes that rise and fall in pitch and places lingering emphasis on words like "maybe." At its best, the effect creates a new space for those powerful vocals that, under Greenspan's touch, would not only speak slower but say something different about "summertime."

In "Summertime, Summertime," Nocera sings:

> I listen to the rain outside
> Please come and take me for a ride
> I really want you to come and take me far away
> I want to say…

She passes from reflection ("I listen") to

entreaty ("Please come and take me") to repeated emphasis ("I really want you to come and take me") without missing a beat. In moments, she freewheels into more of the chorus ("Take me to the water") and the song presses on.

In Greenspan's take, the vocals stutter and each line echoes for effect:

> I listen to the rain outside
> Feel like I almost have to die—
> I really want you [pause] to come and take me far away
> I want to say…

In the revision, reflection threatens to halt the singer's voice at each juncture. When she reaches for what she "wants to say," the words aren't at hand. As she misses her cue, mottled sun pours through the synthesizer, and it's nearly 20 seconds before she rejoins. And when she does, instead of a beach, she seeks a nowhere—anywhere—somewhere outside the grid spelled out in the earlier pop song: "Let's go away, let's get away…."

In daily life, feelings of alienation like those displayed here might be assuaged by pop music's empowered female sexuality—by Beyoncé and Kylie Minogue, who Greenspan, in an interview with the French magazine *Wow*, described as "like a magical thread running through the banality of life on community college campuses and at freeway off-ramps in Toyota Corollas. Like slave songs for a world where everyone thinks slavery is abolished but the people don't know they're slaves."

But pop music, with its emotional sensationalism, is a shallow vessel for memory. It lives in a continuous present, making it difficult to recall the shape of the loss deplored in so many songs of breakup and pursuit, whether it be Nocera's summer romance or Lady Gaga's poker hand. To drag, to edit—to haunt, to linger—these are witch house's tools. Their aim is not to sear pop's sentiment with intellectual insight but to read into that emotion slowly.

Witchy tools can be applied to more than just pop music. In the original version of Three 6 Mafia's "Late Night Tip," the rap crew's only woman, Gangsta Boo, is cast in two roles. In the first, she's the female foil on hand to pout, "I need a Coach bag … I need my hair done," so DJ Paul can throw back "Playas like me can't be savin' you rags." But in a later verse that involves hard liquor, Victoria's Secret, and a reference to Ginuwine's "Pony," Boo plainly embarrasses Paul and the others' insistence that they're "not the type that get involved in long relationships."

Greenspan's usual trick is to blur empowerment so it blends explicitly with longing, but here it would seem that Boo—with full intentionality or not—has already joined the two in the first take. Instead of shifting the personality of Boo's two vocal tracks, then, Greenspan's "CoachBagg" lays them side by side in the same dreamscape of attenuated beats. Twinned like this and absent their male counterparts, they paint a hazy picture of duplicity. But more important, that both can be sewed into one song gestures at the depth Greenspan threads across his repertoire.

This depth is evident in Greenspan's wider influences. Take "Mouchette," for instance—so named for the French director Robert Bresson's 1967 film about a girl who comes of age in a rural French village. *Mouchette*, traced in black and white, proceeds from encounters with an abusive father to those with an abusive piano teacher, from a flirtatious round of bumper cars to a slap from said father who won't let her pursue another man when she's out at the carnival.

After her rape, the death of her mother, and her own suicide, you can feel Mouchette's pain bodily, in your ribs and in your shoulder blades—or you might, if it weren't for Bresson's deflationary film techniques. The scene where Mouchette takes her life is typical: Clutching a torn white dress, she rolls down a hill and out of the frame, then into another shot and out of that one. We hear her splash in the pond, but the camera doesn't shift until she's beneath the surface, and then, it's conspicuously stationary. Monteverdi plays. Mouchette is a symbol.

Greenspan's track collapses this distance, bringing it back to the body. His "Mouchette" announces itself with strong elements of percussion that don't land but pulse—they aren't isolated so much as suffused through more inscrutable female vocals, which might belong to a child. And while it responds to Bresson's deflations, it also responds to conceptions of the subgenre. If witch house is easily described as ghostly, the percussion of "Mouchette" is an attempt to reconstitute its parts so they seem more present. While Greenspan's songs can be said to linger in case after case, "Mouchette" also seems to make a choice—to *invest* in Mouchette's political, physical, and ghostly identity over Bresson's.

The percussion is also lined with what sounds like mouse clicks. Ticking restlessly as they do, they recall tropes of the internet, of online relationships and their representation. "Mouchette," French for "little fly," is the same name used by Martine Neddam for her internet art project, Mouchette.org, where themes of sex and death spin from the dark fantasies of a girl who, since the site's creation in 1996, has been "nearly 13 years old." A number of forms littered across the Web page ask for an email address, to which "Mouchette" might send solicitous messages. Taken as a whole, it's a strangely compelling gallery of provocations that seems to cross the thin line between information-age loss and hysteria—a reminder of what the identification Greenspan proposes with his song can easily turn into.

In "Crossed Wires," Greenspan flies free of the bass lines that sustain his most characteristic tracks, and it's here—on the edge of his repertoire—that things get the most "witchy." A single female vocal sweeps back and forth, picking through bars of static before it is joined by the rich hum of entire populations of mismatched conversations. Stark piano chords prick the hum with loneliness, and the trail of the original vocal, bereft, remains.

There's something similar in a movie script by Marguerite Duras called *Le Navire Night*. When the female narrator's phone line accidentally crosses with that of an unknown

man, a romance ensues over a series of similar "crossed wires." She has a voice to which one loves to listen, he says. And then one day, he is gone and she is wounded.

The emotional universe of Greenspan's music has a particular gravity, a particular grief that refuses to evaporate like the object of its loss has. Witch house lingers with that loss as it congeals into a place—somewhere to return to at 2 a.m., alone in front of a laptop, searching for things to relate to after a long day of alienation in an emotionless workspace.

But as witch house lingers, that loss also congeals into a gender. Beyoncé will always be the soundtrack for Friday night: friends and roommates getting together for drinks, picking out clothes for the night, and so on. Witch house suggests how to navigate the feelings sewn in between. ■

Portrait of an Iranian Witch

by ALIREZA DOOSTDAR

The aspiration for middle-class life in Tehran can become an occult pursuit

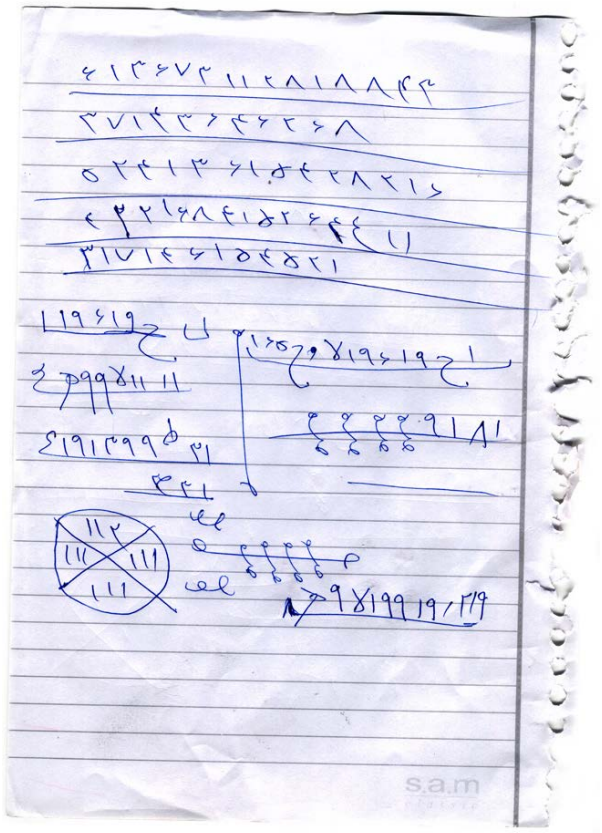
IN NOVEMBER 2008, I received a lesson in witchcraft. At a hole-in-the-wall café in Ariashahr, a young and populous district in western Tehran, my tutor, a 24-year-old woman named Mersedeh, sat with me at a table near the window, not far from two men smoking and playing backgammon. I peered over the pricey menu while she lit a candle and told me mournfully of her breakup with her boyfriend, a former national footballer and aspiring pop star. Then she edged her chair closer to mine, leaned forward with a pen in her hand, and we resumed discussing the symbols of Islamic talismanic magic.

This was my second time meeting Mersedeh there in as many months. Café management had changed, but she still liked to meet her customers there to read their coffee grounds, interpret their tarot cards, and perhaps schedule an appointment at her suite for further work. After she made a remark about the proper place of the *bismillah* (the Muslim incantation, "In the Name of God") on magic squares, I asked if she had written any new spells to win back her boyfriend. Last time, we had written one together on a piece of paper torn out of my field notebook, setting it aflame inside the bathroom of her suite. She said she had not tried anything new, but she *had* teased the ex-beau about

the possibility: A few days earlier, she had sent him a text message claiming she was digging around in the graveyard of a local saint's shrine, about to unearth some locks she had buried to "bind" him. Then she texted him again to say she could not find them.

Over the next hour of our lesson, Mersedeh explained, among other things, the numerological procedure for determining compatibility between two lovers, the effect of ingested prayers on dogs, and some historical accounts drawn from a Persian translation of Kurt Seligman's 1948 *The History of Magic*. Interspersed between the teachings were anecdotes of her own magical practice and reflections on her development as a fortune-teller and witch. As an anthropologist researching Iranians' encounters with the supernatural, I was especially interested in these. She told me of her business advice and relationship counseling, of love magic and break-up magic, and of training to control jinn and ordering hits on adversaries. More than anything, she told me of her strategies—both magical and ordinary—for winning the hearts of wealthy men and for acquiring expensive cars.

Then, as if struck by an epiphany, Mersedeh turned to me with an amused grin: "You know what? You and I are a witchcraft couple. If we have a son together, he will need eyeglasses like you, and he'll have my kind of hair. He will be Harry Potter!"



Above: Copy of a talisman Mersedeh and the author burned. The spell was meant to create financial problems for her boyfriend and render him unattractive to other women. This copy omits a crucial initializing incantation that would have been written across the top.

Cover page: A brass amulet to render its bearer more attractive and help her capture and subdue a lover. The lover is symbolized here as a beast of burden.

AS A CONVERSATION topic, witchcraft can elicit all sorts of reactions in Iran: incredulity, fascination, humor, dread, ridicule, curiosity, indignation, and a full gamut of metaphysical, psychological, and sociological explanations. For public intellectuals worried about a resurgence of superstition, witchcraft has been explicable in terms of everything from the failure of modernization to ignorant attempts at assuaging economic anxieties and social uncertainties, to governmental indoctrination, to foreign schemes for corrupting public piety. More often than not, these

accounts are gendered, identifying "gullible women and girls" as the hapless victims of charlatans, sexual predators, and drug dealers who sell them chimerical dreams for the price of their wealth, health, and chastity. Rare is the analysis that places modern witchcraft in the context of individualistic aspiration, set against more than two decades of economic privatization and the increasing valorization of personal responsibility and agency.

In the course of my research, I found this issue of individual aspiration—often barely concealed economic ambition—to be fundamental to understanding the allure that witchcraft commands among some members of the middle classes. The centuries-old storehouse of Islamic occult science and folk practices of healing and magic now furnish techniques, modulated by pop-psychology seminars, self-help literature, and a heavy dose of New Age spirituality, for the attainment of consumerist desires and dreams of social mobility.

MERSEDEH WAS THE youngest, most educated, and most self-consciously stylish of the occult specialists I met in Iran. Before I got to know her, I was used to meeting middle-aged and elderly men who operated out of cluttered, ramshackle quarters on the city's fringes. One of these older men, a so-called Arab-Pakistani from a notorious family of prayer writers and exorcists, looked every bit a worn-out opium addict—or, I preferred to imagine, a defeated Saruman after the fall of Isengard: hair dirty and disheveled, cheeks hollowed, jaws missing a few rotted teeth. The old wizard's house was rundown and dirty, its only memorable feature a larger-than-life portrait of himself that he kept in his small audience chamber, as if to double his menacing presence.

By contrast, Mersedeh worked out of a gleaming suite decorated in bright and garish pinks and yellows: a heart-shaped pillow here, a lip-shaped telephone there. ("I have a strange taste, don't I?" she asked me playfully.) Her state-of-the-art stereo system pulsated with the soulful nostalgia of Lady Hayedeh, a prerevolutionary diva. She kept a bamboo plant and a bowl full of miniature Singapore turtles on a bed of yellow pebbles. She cleaned the tiny reptiles every day, she assured me, with water and antifungal medicine applied with an eyedropper.

Mersedeh's appearance was also strikingly different from anyone else I had encountered in her line of work. She was of medium height, with a round face and large brown eyes accentuated by a heavy layer of mascara and smoky eye shadow that extended to her temples. She wore light-pink lip gloss, orange blush, and red nail polish. Her hair was cut short, dyed a light shade of brown, and hairsprayed straight. The two times I met her in public, she had draped a thin, black shawl over her head, its ends hanging loosely down the sides of her face and over her chest. Her manteau, also black, looked a size too small, most likely a deliberate choice to show off her figure. When I met her at her suite for our first lesson, she was wearing the same amount of makeup but far fewer articles of clothing, settling for a low-cut tank top and very short denim shorts.

Mersedeh had told me that her decora-

The witch's suite. On the floor is a copy of the Jaami' al-Fawaa'id, an occult manual she used to write the talisman pictured earlier

tive choices in her suite were deliberately "strange": She wanted to emphasize a chic modern style but was not afraid to express a sense of youthful mischief and—this is my interpretation—sexual energy. This "strangeness," as Mersedeh explained, was crucial in creating an air of charisma around her persona as a witch, much in the same way that the Arab-Pakistani exorcist's harrowing features and dilapidated quarters would have helped convince clients that he knew what he was doing. To me, Mersedeh's carefully-crafted personal appearance was likewise intended to signal a propensity for sexual-cum-metaphysical mischief that had the power to unleash terrible forces.

If this charisma could instill confidence in her customers, it could also fill them with dread. My research assistant, a male sociology student, told me that he felt the sting of Mersedeh's "Satanic" eyes and that I should avoid seeing her alone, lest she create problems for me later on (and here he was ambiguous as to whether these "problems" would be caused by witchcraft or something like a sexual scandal, although his tone hinted at both). But Mersedeh's appearance may not have been threatening merely because she was a woman with too much makeup. It was threatening because she was a lower-middle class woman with too much ambition.

Understood in this way, Mersedeh was a true denizen of Ariashahr, a largely residential district where middle-class migrants from other cities and southern neighborhoods of Tehran have settled over the past two decades as business opportunities expanded in the capital. A young uptown Tehrani may have judged her, based solely on appearance, to be a *daaf-e ariashahri*, an "Ariashahri chick." Such "chicks" (and their male counterparts) are distinguished negatively from other youth by their overzealous—and therefore unsuccessful—attempts to meet the ever-shifting standards of style upheld and judged by Tehran's hippest denizens.

Too exhaustive a makeup application, too exaggerated a coiffure, two short (or bright or tight or transparent) a manteau—the "too much" here measured against the hip "just right"—are enough to invite critical scrutiny. This is fundamentally an expression of class privilege, or, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, an articulation of a gap in cultural capital. The one who "tries too hard," as the Ariashahri chick invariably does, aims to climb the social ladder by accumulating cultural points along with other advantages—like moving to Tehran and starting a business—but fails to fully claim these points because she lacks the virtuosity of the Tehrani natives who embody their capital through extended socialization.

"I realized soon that the time I was devoting to talking to this guy on the phone, and going out with him so that he'd support me, I could have used that time to work myself. Why shouldn't I do that?"

Living in Ariashahr, like applying too much makeup, may signify to the Ariashahri that she has "arrived" in Tehran, but to the uptown Tehrani native they are telltale signs of cultural inferiority worthy of snobbish dismissal. Mix in the intrepidness of a figure like Mersedeh the witch, however, and the uptown Tehrani may no longer sneer at the Ariashahri but tremble.

FOR MERSEDEH, WITCHCRAFT was a vehicle for arriving at multiple destinations. With her parents living 20 miles west of the capital in Karaj, it was the means for financial independence in Tehran. It was a tool for seducing and maintaining desirable high-status men. It secured some prestige for her among friends and strangers alike as a problem solver and healer. It shielded her from the ill will of others by functioning as a warning sign. It even seemed to have brought her small bits of cultural capital in the form of knowledge and learning; for example, she told me that she had learned to read and understand the Koran not in public school (where she horsed around during Koran class) but through her education in witchcraft.

If witchcraft was all these things for Mersedeh, its condition of possibility lay in particular economic circumstances and a specific cultural and intellectual milieu. By 2008, Iranian society had undergone almost 20 years of haphazard economic liberalization, as well as progressive commercialization of various aspects of urban life, all initiated at the end of the 1980–88 war with Iraq. Mirroring the state's attempts to strengthen private enterprise was the emerging "success" industry, which marketed mostly translated self-help and prosperity literature and seminars. Some

of the most popular authors and motivational speakers were those who blended business and financial advice with a spiritual cum mystical ethos inspired by American speakers like Wayne Dyer, whose translated works are widely available.

The spirit of this moment was most brilliantly captured by Rhonda Byrne's 2006 film *The Secret* and the series of books that it spawned, all of which found an eager audience among an Iranian middle class looking to tie together their desire for business success and consumer goods with their more spiritual yearnings. In Mersedeh's apt if idiosyncratic formulation, *The Secret* was the foundation of prayer and witchcraft: "To explain it in very simple terms," she said, "all the world around us is energy. Witchcraft and prayer writing and talismans are all energies. Even the body consists of compressed energy." The energies that humans emit can be either positive or negative. And they remain in the world forever.

Every prayer, every wish and desire, every feeling, has its own frequency. "Say you want a Mercedes Elegance. There is a wavelength to your desire that wells up from within you. This is what the cosmos hears." These are frequencies that already exist in the cosmos. Yet by making a wish, expressing a desire, feeling a certain way, we make the relevant frequencies resonate. When a certain prayer has resonated frequently enough through a specific channel—a word, a written sign, or an image like those talismanic symbols we had been discussing—it becomes all the more likely for that particular channel to materialize the specific prayer or wish. Sometimes this is a matter of what Byrne calls "creative visualization." Mersedeh offered, "If you stare at a picture of a Mercedes Elegance long enough and imagine that it belongs to you, you emit the proper kinds of frequencies to the cosmos, and the cosmos will eventually give you the car."

Repetition is crucial for the efficacy of such images and symbols. "Whenever something is repeated," she went on, "its power increases in the cosmos. It's like if, from afar, I keep saying 'Alireza I love you, I do I do I do.' This eventually affects your heart. Now, the more I say this, the more it infiltrates your unconscious."

Mersedeh knows a thing or two about the unconscious: At the time of our interview, she was a master's student in clinical psychology at Azad University. When she was not writing spells, reading tarot cards, or performing Reiki, she sometimes counseled families and young people at a community center nearby. The two lines of work shared a concern with helping people succeed and heal, but also, for Mersedeh, an emphasis on generating confidence to serve their efficacy—except that prayer writing was more successful. She illustrated her argument with an example:

> On any given day a girl might come to counseling and say: "I want to slash my wrist, I feel awful." This person's mind is a collection of negative frequencies and thoughts. Now I tell her, look, don't think negatively, your life will be fixed up, go do this or that. I offer her some strategies. But these words won't change her beliefs. She'll try to think as I tell her, but it won't work.
>
> Now for the same person, I do counseling and I also do prayer writing. But my prayer writing is much more successful than my counseling. Because even though the girl comes in and gets counseling, she doesn't come to believe. From her point of view, I've

> shown her a strategy. But sometimes I'll say, I know how to do prayers, and I'm telling you: Go off, and take this prayer with you, and do this or that to it for 40 days, and this issue of yours will be sorted out. The person leaves, and holding fast to the belief that it will work, she discards all those negative thoughts, and all those negative frequencies go away and her soul is purified. And during this time, either her lover returns to her, or her issue is sorted out, or she gets some money, or some new opportunity presents itself to her and her life changes for the better.

The self-confidence that came with faith in the magical power of creative visualization had, perhaps unexpectedly, strengthened Mersedeh's avowedly feminist perspectives on love and work. Love often got in the way of work, she told me, and it jeopardized women's independence:

> One time a client asked me, why don't you try to gain the financial support of a man? I said, you're right! Let me try to do that. I have the looks, so why don't I get a man to support me, rather than supporting myself all the time. So I got a boyfriend. I looked for a super rich person. And it doesn't take me that long to find someone. I wanted to find someone with a Mercedes Elegance. I asked some friends who worked in a car dealership to let me know if they ever had a young customer who wanted to buy an expensive, recent model Mercedes Elegance, so that I could get him. They did, and I got him. But I realized soon that the time I was devoting to talking to this guy on the phone, and going out with him so that he'd support me, I could have used that time to work myself. Why shouldn't I do that?

Living in Ariashahr, wearing a lot of make-up, and practicing witchcraft were three things that had helped make Mersedeh a Tehrani. But all were signs to uptown Tehrani "natives" that she is not up to the capital's lofty standards. Although the uptown Tehrani might—with fear and trembling—visit a practicing witch like Mersedeh in secret to help solve a problem of love, health, or wealth, she would prefer to keep witchcraft at arm's length, something better appreciated for its aesthetic value rather than its metaphysical efficacy: as literature (the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez and Paulo Coelho) or as jewelry (talismanic motifs have recently come into vogue).

Mersedeh, I sensed, was painfully aware of this difference. She went to great lengths to distinguish the "physics, chemistry, psychology, and metaphysics" of witchcraft from the superstitions of illiterates and junkies like the aforementioned Arab-Pakistani. Her zeal for witchcraft was, in her own estimation, a matter of youthful mischief. It had served her well in business, in love, and in her own peculiar spiritual journey. Still, it could take her only so far. At this point in her life, nothing could go further, as she starkly put it, than her own confident voice and hard currency in her pocket. "Maybe witchcraft belonged to a time," she told me, "when, if someone wouldn't come to me, I would have had to resort to it to bring him toward me somehow. But right now there are telephones. For every person there's a point, a word, a need, or a weak spot that you can use to tame them, calm them. If you put your finger on that and use it to get to them, it's the best witchcraft. When I know that everything is only one step away from my grasp, and that we ourselves are the greatest power, why do I need to waste my time with this sort of thing?" ■

The Dark Art of Glamour

by AUTUMN WHITEFIELD-MADRANO

Looking your best is never just about you.
Glamour is a spell and a grammar

GLAMOUR IS AN illusion, and an allusion too. Glamour is a performance, a creation, a recipe, but one with give. Glamour is elegance minus restraint, romance plus distance, sparkle sans naivete. Glamour is Grace Kelly, Harlow, Jean (picture of a beauty queen). Glamour is $3.99 on U.S. newsstands, $4.99 Canada. Glamour is artifice. Glamour is red lipstick, Marcel waves, a pause before speaking, and artfully placed yet seemingly casual references to time spent in Capri. Glamour is—let's face it—a cigarette. Glamour is Jessica Rabbitt, and it's Miss Piggy too. Glamour is adult. Glamour cannot be purchased, but it can't be created out of thin air either. Glamour is both postmodern and yesterday. Glamour is an accomplishment. Glamour is magic.

In fact, glamour began quite literally with magic. Growing from the Scottish *gramarye* around 1720, *glamer* was a sort of spell that would affect the eyesight of those afflicted, so that objects appear different than they actually are. Sir Walter Scott anglicized the word and brought it into popular use in his poems ("You may bethink you of the spell / Of that sly urchin page / This to his lord did impart / And made him seem, by glamour art / A knight from Hermitage"); not long after his death in 1832 the word began to be used to

describe the metaphoric spell we cast upon one another by being particularly beautiful or fascinating. It wasn't necessarily a compliment ("There was little doubt that he meant to bring his magnetism and his glamour, and all his other diabolical properties, to market here," from an 1878 novel) but by the 1920s—not coincidentally, the time women started developing the styles that we now recognize as glamorous—the meaning had shed much of its air of suspicion.

Not that we're wholly unsuspicious of glamour. Female villains in films are often impossibly glamorous, for as fascinated as we are with the artifice of glamour, we're also a tad wary of it. Glamour keeps its holder at a distance, and it needs that distance in order to work; watch the magician's hands too closely and you'll spoil the trick. It's unkind to glamour to call it strictly a trick, but neither is it inaccurate: On a person, glamour is a series of reference points that form its illusory quality. We perceive red lipstick and hair cascading over one shoulder as glamorous because we understand it's referencing something we've collectively decided is glamorous. The same is true of glamorous looks with less direct artifice—say, a world traveler in a pith helmet and white linen—but in becoming a reference point, anything we code as glamour *becomes* artifice, even if it's not about smoke and mirrors. It's not hard to get glamour "right," but since glamour is a set of references—a creation instead of a state of being—you *do* have to get it right in order to be seen as glamorous as opposed to pretty, polished, or chic. We don't stumble into glamour; we create it, even if we don't realize that's what we're doing. Call glamour a performance if you wish. It's equally accurate to call it an accomplishment.

In 1939, glamour—rather, Glamour—took on an additional definition. In 1932, publishing company Condé Nast launched a new series of sewing pattern books featuring cheaper garments more readily accessible to the downtrodden seamstresses of the Depression; its more elite *Vogue* pattern line hadn't been doing well. Seven years later, Condé Nast spun off a magazine from this *Hollywood Pattern Book* called *Glamour of Hollywood*, which promised readers the "Hollywood way to fashion, beauty, and charm." By 1941 it had shed "of Hollywood" and had already toned down its coverage of Hollywood in order to focus on the life of the newfound career girl; by 1949 its subtitle was "For the girl with a job." That is, *Glamour* wasn't about film or Hollywood or unattainable ideals; *Glamour* was about you. That ethos continues to this day: Glamour might have a $12,000 bracelet on its cover but will have a $19 miniskirt inside, and its editorial tone squarely targets plucky but thoughtful young women who want to "have it all."

Glamour isn't downmarket any longer; it's more aimed at the middle market—or, as a marketing poster once floating around the office read, "masstige." It's all too fitting that the once-downmarket sister of *Vogue* is titled *Glamour*. To the eyes of a nation emerging from a depression, the concept of glamour might have seemed faraway—but it also seemed accessible in ways that the

gilt-edged *Vogue* wasn't. The "girl with a job" knew that with the right sleight-of-hand, she could purchase aspects of glamour found on the magazine's pages, pick up a tip or two about home economy (if one must be bothered with the terribly unglamorous domestic life, why not make it economical?), and find out how to enchant her suitors or husband—and she wouldn't necessarily need money or social status to do any of those things. She just needed the know-how of glamour. *Glamour* magazine doesn't target the highest end of the market, nor does it assume that its readers have the cultural capital of the modern-day gentry ("How to do Anything Better" is one of its more popular features; readers might learn how to make a proper introduction or throw a dinner party). At first glance this might seem counterintuitive to the spirit of its namesake, yet it's anything but: With these specific moves, *Glamour* reinforces the notion of glamour as something actionable. In knowing that most of its readers, however stylish, aren't among the cultural illuminati, *Glamour* acknowledges that maybe they have need of casting the occasional spell—which, of course, *Glamour* is happy to supply.

I should say here that I worked for *Glamour* magazine for several years as a copy editor. I share that not only to disclose my relationship with the magazine, but also because my specific post there—as a professional grammarian—was tethered to the concept of glamour more than I realized. For *gramarye*, the root word of *glamour*, also gave birth to the word *grammar*. Given the dual etymology, I think it's only fair to declare all *Glamour* grammarians to be sorceresses. The route is fairly straightforward: Gramarye at one time simply meant learning, including learning of the occult, and it's this variant that went on to be glamour. Grammar stayed magic-free and pertained to the rules of learning, eventually becoming particular to the rules of language. But the two are linked more than just etymologically: Both grammar and glamour function as a set of rules that help people articulate themselves and allow us to understand one another. I understand you are telling me of the future by the use of words like *will* and *going to*; I understand you are telling me about your vision of yourself with red lipstick and a wiggle dress.

Some may argue that the rules and articulations of glamour are confining. They can be, when taken as feminine dictates, but they also make glamour democratic. It's easy to aim for class or sophistication and miss the mark, for there are so many ways we can make unknowing missteps. But because glamour relies upon references and images, with a bit of thought and creativity almost anyone can conjure its magic—and unlike fashion, glamour doesn't go in and out of style, so you needn't reinvest every season. You can be fat and glamorous, bald and glamorous, poor and glamorous, short and glamorous, nerdy and glamorous, a man and glamorous. Perhaps most important, you can be old and glamorous. In fact, age helps. (Children are never glamorous; neither are the naive.) Glamour's illusion doesn't make old people look younger; it makes them look exactly their age, without apology. Glamour

can channel the things we may attribute to youth—sex appeal, flirtation, vitality—but it also requires things that come more easily with age, like mystery and a past. Think of the trappings of adult femininity little girls reach for in play: not bras and sanitary pads, but high heels and lipstick, those two most glamorous things whose entire point is to create an illusion. A five-year-old knows that with womanhood can come glamour, if she wishes. She also knows it's not yet hers to assume.

In case it's not yet clear: I am a champion of glamour. That's not to say I'm always glamorous; few can be, and certainly I'm not one of them. I like comfort far too much to be consistently glamorous. But I'm firmly in glamour's thrall. When I am walking down the street (particularly 44th Street, in the general direction of an excellent martini) in something I feel glamorous in—say, a certain navy-blue bias-cut polka-dot dress with a draped neckline, clip-clip heels, a small hat, and the reddest lipstick I own—I feel a variety of confidence that I can't channel using any other means. It's not a confidence that's superior to other forms of assurance, but it's inherently different. It's the feeling of prettiness, yes, and femininity and looking appropriate for the occasion. It's all of those things, but the overriding feeling is this: When I am feeling and looking glamorous, I am slipping into an inchoate yet immensely satisfying spot between the public and private spheres. You see me in my polka-dotted '40s-style dress, small hat, and lipstick, and you may think I look glamorous—which is the goal. But here's the trick of glamour: You see me, and yet you don't. That is, you see the nods to the past, and you see how they look on my particular form; you see what I bring to the image, or how I create my own. Yet because I'm not necessarily attempting to show you my authentic self—whatever *that* might be—but rather a highly coded self, I control how much you're actually witness to.

Both grammar and glamour function as a set of rules that help people articulate themselves and understand one another

Now, that's part of the whole problem we feminists have with the visual construction of femininity: The codes speak for us and we have to fight all that much harder to have our words heard over the din our appearance creates. But within those codes also lies a potential for relief, for our own construction, for play, for casting our own little spells. That's true of all fashion and beauty, but it's particularly true of the magic of glamour.

I promise not to play tricks on anyone. But forgive me if, every so often, I might want to use a little magic. ■

Hex Before Marriage

by CHRISTINE BAUMGARTHUBER

Turning on the charm used to mean something quite different

WHATEVER LONELINESS OR boredom the workers of Salzburg's famous salt mines endured they eased with an unusual pastime. They would find a tree branch, strip away its leaves, and toss it in an unused pit. Two or three months later they would haul it out and delight in its transformation. Every one of its twigs bejeweled with salt crystals, it appeared more a scepter of some elf king than any piece of forest litter. It and others like it the miners would hand to tourists, who marveled at the splendid gifts.

When in the summer of 1818 the French writer Stendhal visited the mines he too was captivated. That so ordinary an object could achieve such exquisite beauty fascinated him. Ever an astute and imaginative observer of life, he came to regard it as a metaphor for love's mysterious processes. "By the mechanism of the diamond-covered bough in the Salzburg," he concluded, "everything which is beautiful and sublime in the world forms part of the person we love."

Like the diamond-covered bough, the beloved never fails to delight. "It is as though by some strange freak of the heart," Stendhal writes, "the woman one loves communicates more charms than she herself possesses." Everything occasions thoughts of her exquisite, enduring perfection—the way she bites

Illustrations from *The First Nantucket Tea Party* (1907).

an apple (those eye-teeth!), the way her her cheek reddens, the way her chin dimples. But where passion grows, so does risk. The beloved threatens always to withdraw, to leave her lover adrift. What then for the heart seized by crystallized affection? "Apart from ridicule," Stendhal warns, "love is always haunted by the despair of being abandoned by the beloved and of being left nothing but a *dead blank* for the remainder of life."

It comes as no surprise then that against such devastating abandonment lovers took certain measures. History tells of love charms and philters, all promising to corral wayward objects of affection. Kings and queens used them, as did scullery maids and postal clerks. These charms were uniformly bizarre, involving apple pips pasted to foreheads and garters tied in knots as the wearer sang light verse while mincing freshly killed turtle doves and toads for stuffing in sheepskin. Hopeful admirers hid daisy roots under pillows and hung shoes out of windows. They danced under full moons and hid trinkets in the sand. They summoned spirits, skinned bats, and pounded teeth and bone to powder. No incantation, elixir or ritual went untried if it promised success.

Trying these charms often required great fortitude. On St. Valentine's Eve, 1754, a young

servant girl hard-boiled an egg, scooped out the yolk, and filled the hollow with salt before eating it, shell and all. Another girl, just as love-struck, carried in her coat pocket all day the peels of two lemons. At sunset she used them to polish her bed's four posts in hope that the object of her affection might appear in her dreams as altogether more willing than he showed himself in waking life.

When virginal young ladies of northern England wished to dream of love they gathered on moonlit nights in groups of three to bake a cake from batter consisting of flour, salt and spring water. This confection they divided in three, and each third again in nine. They pushed these bits through the wedding ring of a woman who had been married exactly seven years. Then they slipped off their clothes, ate the cake, and cried out: "O', good St. Faith, be kind tonight, and bring to me my future husband view, and be my visions chaste and true!" Satisfied they had done all they could to win their swains, they went to sleep, all in the same bed.

Even kale, that vegetable today beloved of the diet-minded, had a place in the romantic's arsenal of charms. When the young women of Craven found themselves enamored they would perch upon a rock, holding a pot of kale soup, and sing:

> Hot kale, or cold kale, I drink thee,
> If ever I marry a man, or a man marry me,
> I wish this night I may him see, to-morrow may him ken
> In church, fair, or market above all other men.

They would then sip this broth nine times, walk backward to bed, and go to sleep.

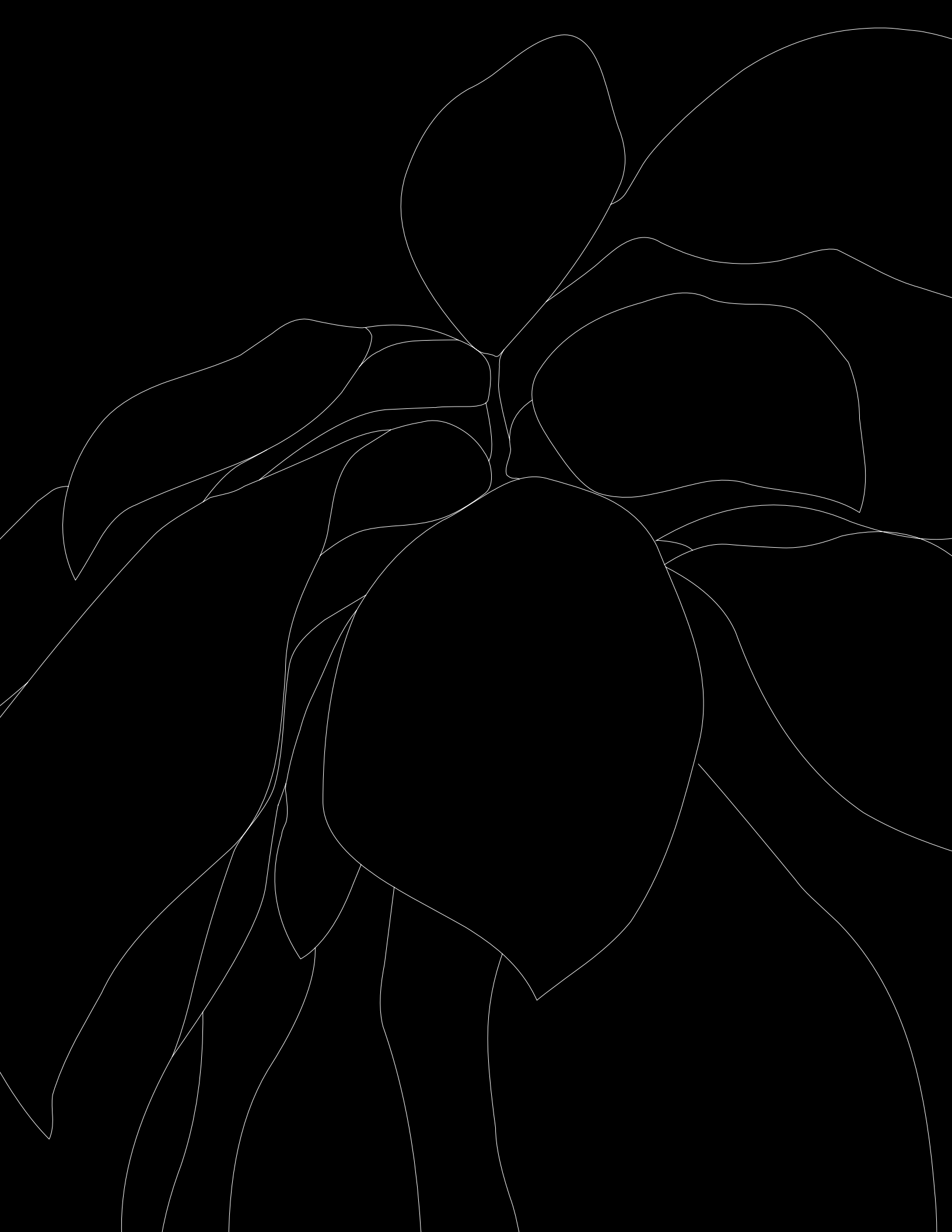
Darker charms existed for those who would punish inconstancy. An embittered suitor might wake at midnight to plunge pins into a bird's heart or wrap a lump of dragon's blood (a resin aromatic and crimson-colored) in paper for burning along with a hastily stitched effigy of his beloved. This immolation he hoped would cause her pain—or at least a pang of regret.

Such elaborate gestures could be said to belong more to the category of ritual than charm. Indeed, love charms were as often as not small, unassuming things—necklaces and rings and small vials of unfamiliar powders. Many people favored love packets, which they could easily fashion and secret away. The Irish adorned theirs with suns and moons and magic squares. Into them they stuffed toenail pairings and underwear fragments. Amorous Turks similarly fashioned pouches to stuff with even stranger items: a man's molar and a particular bone in the left wing of a hoopoe (the bird sent by Solomon to the Queen of Sheba), among other things. Under the pillows of pretty women these parcels would go, put there in the hope of stoking passion for the bearer.

Any increase in attraction as a consequence of such doo-dads likely owed more to common belief than occult forces. The objects of such charms and rituals certainly did complain of falling under their influence, blaming them for everything from disappointing marriages to illegitimate children. A dalliance had as its cause a strand of hair left on a pillow; an unexpected pregnancy, a lavender sachet. Such hexes people saw as matter-of-fact events. To disbelieve them they thought unwise.

An embittered suitor might wake at midnight to plunge pins into a bird's heart or wrap a lump of "dragon's blood" in paper for burning along with an effigy of his beloved

Reports of love magic now occasion only laughter. And the charms themselves seem much ado about nothing. Why bother prying a molar loose from an unsuspecting mans's jaw when innumerable lovers lie a mere mouse-click away? Instead of the crystallized bough, it's the liquid crystal display that serves as the vehicle for romantic metaphors. And that "dead blank" that struck fear in Stendhal's heart? It's just another failed page load in a browser. ■



Storefront Supernatural

by KARLA CORNEJO VILLAVICENCIO

The popularity of botanicas point to the failures of the Catholic Church to properly provide for its own

BEFORE I MIGRATED to the United States, meaning shortly before I turned five years old, my father's sister decided I had been given the evil eye and needed a cleansing. She took me to see a healer who ran a small botanica out of her home in Cotopaxi, Ecuador. My aunt was fervently Catholic at the time, but she walked into the botanica like it was a church, and looked on stoically as the healer rubbed a live guinea pig all over my body and spit alcohol into my face to ward off evil spirits.

Botanica means *botany* or *botanist*, so named for the medicinal herbs sold inside the shops that also stock oils, soaps, sprays, washes, statues, rosaries, amulets, books, and animal skulls. The shops vary in size and content, but they're everywhere in immigrant neighborhoods. The Bronx, for example, is home to Original Products Co., reportedly the largest botanica in the Northeast. Formerly an A&P supermarket, it is the size of a warehouse but has the intimate feel of a small head shop. Upstairs, rent-free, is The Pagan Center, run by a lesbian Wiccan couple. Lady Rhea, a high priestess, and Lady Zoradia have their own small section in the store called the Magickal Realms Enchanted Candle shop. There are books (*Cunningham's Encyclopedia of Magical Herbs*) and oils (Better Business Oil, Break Up Oil). I searched for something

to do with long-distance relationships but found only the Mile and Distance Oil, which promises to keep my enemies far away. The powder version comes in one-ounce, half-pound and one-pound packages.

A portion of the store is dedicated to Santería, an oft-misunderstood religion that dates back centuries and has its roots among the Yoruba people in what is now Nigeria. For centuries, thousands of Yoruba were trafficked to the New World. When the Iberians forced them to convert to Catholicism, many found a way to continue practicing their rituals by combining them with Catholic customs. They assigned each Catholic saint a corresponding *orisha*, or natural spirit, and worshipped them as they normally would according to their customs. There are some 2 million practicing Santería followers today, 50,000 of them in the U.S. alone. Some have rejected the syncretic nature of Santería's development, tracing and returning to its West African roots; others navigate a happy medium by belonging to the Catholic Church while still practicing Santería.

My aunt, who took me to the botanica in Cotopaxi, eventually joined an evangelical church after becoming disillusioned with her local church and began to deny my "healing" ever took place. Her new church cautioned against spiritism and false idols—guinea pigs included. But although she stopped going to the shops, some remainders of her formerly syncretic Catholicism lingered—rosaries, holy water, red string bracelets to protect us against the evil eye.

Mainstream Catholicism does not openly condone Santería but typically adopts a laissez-faire attitude toward the varied influences that have seeped into local practices of Catholicism in Latin American countries, especially ones with large Afro-Caribbean populations. Protestant groups, even evangelical ones, are much more aggressive in their denouncement of idolatry (the statues, the candles, the prayers) and the occult, so they openly frown upon places like botanicas. But like my aunt, who kept both the holy water and the red thread bracelets, many newly converted evangelicals keep vestiges of their past syncretic worship. Some continue to frequent the botanicas even as they continue to worship in their disapproving churches. The historical syncretism of Latin American Catholicism as it is practiced by millions carves out a space of casual permissibility if not outright approval of churchgoers' extracurricular spiritual activities. Frequenting botanicas is a complementary aspect to many people's spirituality, not a replacement for it.

Catholic converts bring with them this worshipping framework to their new evangelical churches: 68 percent of Latinos in the U.S. identify as Roman Catholic, but many are leaving the church in favor of evangelical faiths. Four-fifths of practicing evangelicals are former Catholics. There are doctrinal differences that explain the conversions, but driving the shift is also a broader socioeconomic issue: Evangelical churches provide a social safety net that is especially attractive to immigrants who lack the support systems and networks they had in their home countries. And botanicas, too, serve

as spaces of support and community for immigrants who would otherwise have limited social networks to rely on when faced with unemployment or the need to find the best dance hall in which to throw a baby shower.

Botanicas thus recreate and satisfy the same needs of the new evangelical churches, many of them popping up in storefronts and former factories, offering charismatic pastors, services that encourage audience participation, song and dance, books and pamphlets, preaching and canvassing, movies and books, concerts. Because of immigration, a third of Catholics in the U.S. are now Latino, a coalition that brings with it the syncretic nature of Afro-Caribbean and Mesoamerican homeland practices, convergences that have found a welcoming space outside churches and inside the botanicas of their new home.

One study found that 33 percent of undocumented immigrants used the botanica as their primary health-care source

It is difficult to know how many botanicas there are in the U.S. because they are commonly registered as religious or herbal stores and are thus not subject to the staunch regulations that would apply should they be registered as anything clinical. Some botanicas have healers or Santeria priests on-site, and others refer clients to healers outside the practice. But since botanicas are not registered as medical practices, they toe a careful line on what healers can and cannot promise or sell, lest they face the wrath of medical-licensing laws. The potential danger of botanicas becoming the only or primary health care source for Latinos in the U.S. is very real. Latino unemployment is two points above the national average and a quarter of the 50 million Latinos in the U.S. currently live in poverty. Historically poor access to health care has led many Latinos, many of them undocumented immigrants, in dire straits and many resort to botanicas for serious medical treatment.

Undocumented immigrants are routinely villainized in the U.S. as burdens on the national healthcare system because it is assumed that they cannot pay for their care. Studies have found, however, that they are actually less likely to seek health-care professionals than their documented counterparts or other Americans. A small recent study found that while some immigrants used the botanica as a complementary treatment alongside biomedical care, others—33 percent of their study sample—were using it as a primary source of health care. They weren't only seeking care for folk illnesses either: 71 percent of study participants sought care for somatic ailments like asthma, cough, digestive problems, swollen legs, and nervous system problems. Typical obstacles to obtaining health-care for Latinos such as

language, transportation, legal status, lack of insurance, and inconvenient operating hours are overcome in the botanicas. People can receive treatment in Spanish, they are open later and on weekends, health insurance doesn't matter, and legal status is immaterial.

But botanicas are not merely as independent shops that sell good luck charms and love potion oils, but as places through which to access other goods and services, like medical information and referrals, that perhaps would not have reached clients. In Lawrence, Massachusetts, botanica owners were paid to take an HIV/AIDS workshop where they learned basic information about protection, transmission, and testing. After the workshop, one store owner referred nine out of 53 high-risk individuals tested within three months of initial training, which was deemed a success.

The reliance on botanicas for medical treatment can be dangerous. A lag in diagnosing and treating communicable diseases may lead to an outbreak, delaying the visit to an emergency room can be fatal, and the unsupervised dispensation of antibiotics can lead to unusually resistant strains of bacteria. Powders used in treatment of infant colic have been found to contain high quantities of lead. Studies have shown newly arrived Latin American immigrants to slowly develop the same kinds of illnesses endemic in the U.S. such as obesity, diabetes, asthma, and high cholesterol, all conditions meriting medical treatment, yet one in six undocumented male immigrants have never seen a doctor.

This will be only get worse under the Affordable Care Act, which calls for U.S. citizens or permanent residents to purchase insurance while excluding undocumented immigrants from non-emergency programs. The repercussions could be devastating to immigrant communities that already have a fraught relationship with healthcare. Further alienation from conventional medical coverage may push Latino immigrants to rely more on alternative medicine that's offered in places like the botanica, which is able to access a segment of the population that is not easily reached by typical biomedical channels because of patients' fear, positions of precarity, and lack of awareness.

The popularity of botanicas today thus points to the failures of the church to properly provide for its own, highlighting its postcolonial fracture, the failed missions of conversion, and its inability to keep believers from converting and leaving. It also points to neoliberalism's inability to care for its most vulnerable populations.

For many disenfranchised groups, the botanica serves as safety net and important social network, a destination and a portal for services offered both in this world and the next, and above all a space of casual dissent, where religious men and women openly and publicly reject the counsel from the pulpit that warns against the occult and Santería. The space of dissent embodies these significant protests against church and state while still making room for the occasional love potion or enemy dispeller—a sense of safety, home, and God, dispensed in powder form, in one-ounce, half-pound and one-pound quantities. ■

The Last Witch Hunter

by COLIN DICKEY

In his History of Witchcraft and Demonology*, Montague Summers uses history to try to deny the evolution of human morality*

IN THE 1920s, two very different histories of witchcraft appeared: the 1922 Danish film *Häxan: Witchcraft Through the Ages*, and the Reverend Montague Summers's *History of Witchcraft and Demonology*, published in England in 1926. Both were instant sensations and instantly controversial. Benjamin Christensen's film, which included nudity and scenes of torture, was a scathing critique of Catholicism, arguing that those accused of witchcraft had perhaps been sufferers of "modern" diseases like hysteria and kleptomania. On its release the film caused riots: By one account, 8,000 Catholic women stormed the streets of Paris in protest, incensed that modern Catholicism be compared to a barbaric episode of its past that it had largely forgotten.

Summers, on the other hand, neither criticized nor apologized for Christianity's persecution of witches—he embraced it. He believed that the church was infallible and that men and women were capable of knowingly giving themselves to Satan: "There has invariably been an open avowal of intentional evil-doing on the part of the devotees of the witch-cult," he wrote with fervent orthodoxy. Critics found the book

compulsively readable, but were aghast at Summers's argument that the Catholic Church had been just and right in trying and executing untold thousands of witches. In Summers's mind, the church had been if anything too lenient: "The Church dealt very gently with the rebel and the heretic, whom she might have executed wholesale with the greatest ease."

THE EARLY 20TH century saw a renewed interest in the history of witchcraft, after years of neglect and denial by historians who preferred not to engage with such a disgraceful episode. In many ways, the Reverend Montague Summers was the perfect avatar for this resurgence. A cartoonish figure with a broad, moon-shaped face, a black shovel hat, and a flowing cape, he seemed to come from some other era. He had a high-pitched voice and a strange chuckle; friends and colleagues wondered if he was, in fact, in league with the devil, or had participated in a Black Mass; one family who moved into a residence previously owned by Summers complained that he'd left it haunted and went so far as to perform an exorcism.

Born in 1880, son of a banker and the youngest of seven children, Summers grew up surrounded by the well-educated and the literary. He was educated at Trinity College, Oxford, and in 1907, shortly after he graduated with honors, he published a "distinctly decadent book of verse," *Antinous and Other Poems*. The poetry featured sexual innuendo buried beneath layers of Roman and Greek mythological allusions. One reviewer labeled it "the nadir of corrupt and corrupting literature"; friends noted that any corrupting influence was somewhat mitigated by its obtuse tone and low quality. The book faded into obscurity.

Summers's early life was marked by an oscillation between two opposing poles: an appetite for controversy and taboo at one end, and for religious orthodoxy at the other. In 1908, he abruptly entered the seminary: That year he was ordained as an Anglican deacon, first in Bath, then in the Bristol suburb of Bitton, where he spent his days studying Satanism. It was during this time that he became convinced that his church was haunted, exhibiting, according to one friend, "a morbid fascination with evil which, even if partly a pose, was shocking in a clergyman."

His life as an Anglican deacon was short-lived, however, and he left pursued not by ghosts or devils, but by accusations of homosexuality. In 1910 Summers and another clergyman were accused of pederasty, and though they were ultimately acquitted of the charges, Summers quickly left both Bristol and the faith. Within a few years, he had converted to Catholicism. In later years Summers would claim that he'd been ordained as a priest and wear corresponding vestments, but there is no record of the ordainment.

Summers never headed a parish, nor did he enter a religious order. In lieu of a religious occupation, he turned back to writing, and in the years after the war he became known as a scholar of Restoration Theater. A few years later, he was contacted by publisher C. K. Ogden, who was at the time editing

a multivolume history of civilization. Ogden had been hoping Summers would offer something about English drama, but Summers responded instead with a proposal for a study of witchcraft.

SUMMERS ULTIMATELY PRODUCED two separate books: *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* and, a year later, a companion volume, *The Geography of Witchcraft*. In them he presented testimonies, trials, verdicts, confessions, and other primary documents describing the witch persecutions of the Middle Ages—many of them appearing for the first time in English.

The primary documents accounted for much of the *History's* success. For too long, even serious historians had tended to gloss over this tragic aspect of Europe's maturation, treating it as an aberration best ignored. Summers recognized that witch trials were at the very heart of European history, and that a "history of civilization" such as Ogden had envisioned required not just its triumphs, but also its horrors. History, Summers saw, consists not only in what is done by great men but also what is done by midlevel bureaucrats and illiterate midwives.

Perhaps the best example of this was the trial of the servant girl Gellis Duncan in Scotland in 1590. As Summers relays, Duncan's employer became suspicious when he discovered her sneaking out at night, and in short order she was accused of witchcraft, tried, and tortured. During her torture, she confessed and implicated half a dozen other individuals, many of whom in turn were tortured into confession and then executed.

What is noteworthy about Duncan's trial is that news of it soon found its way to the King of Scotland, soon to be king of England, James I. James was terrified of political assassination by witchcraft, and, having recently sailed through a storm that he was sure had been engineered by magic, he took an active interest in the trials surrounding Duncan, going so far as to personally interview one of the accused, a midwife named Agnes Sampson. James's fear wasn't entirely paranoia; real plots *were* afoot, including one concocted by his cousin Francis Stewart, who himself blurred the line between the real and imaginary threat, employing curses and wax dolls as well as swords and armies.

In laying the occult alongside the political, Summers's account of these events helps to remind us that history—even royal history—doesn't happen in a vacuum, and that even a local witch trial of a poor servant girl can reverberate throughout a kingdom. His contemporary readers were reminded that for centuries the witch persecutions had been central to Europe's cultural and economic landscape.

But the book was singular for another reason: Summers believed with every fiber of his being that witchcraft was real. "Faith, the Bible, actual experience," he writes in *A History*, "all taught that witchcraft had existed and existed still. There could be and there is no sort of doubt concerning this." Summers found support for his conviction in the views of the great men of history, from popes to scholars. He also argued

strenuously for the power and efficacy of bureaucracy itself. His book's strength, he contended, lay in its demonstration "by a number of citations how in the past this enormous wickedness had been impartially investigated, had been argued, and proven by the keenest minds of the centuries."

Deluded as to the nature of evil, he was similarly deluded as to the nature of his own success, which he took as proof of the correctness of his attitude. *The History* was popular, he explained, because it alerted people "to the danger still energizing and active in their midst": "The evil which many had hardly suspected, deeming it either a mere historical question, long dead and gone, of no interest save to the antiquarian, or else altogether fabled, was shown to be very much alive, potent in politics, potent in society, corrupting the arts, a festering, leprous disease and decay."

Summers believed in the power of the written word and in the historical record. His work is the 20th century's last gasp of a sort of history that refused to recognize the evolution of human character, morality, and thought. His rhetoric at times struggles to accommodate modern psychology ("It is not denied that in some cases hallucination and self-deception played a large part"), but repeatedly falls back on the infallibility of the church ("such examples are comparatively few in number, and these, moreover, were carefully investigated and most frequently recognized by the judges and divines"), and his own surprisingly anachronistic views ("The silly body, the blind, the dumb, the idiot, were, as often as not, afflicted by demons; the raving maniac was assuredly possessed").

For all its fidelity to history, Summers's work is a confrontation with the various elements of modern life he'd come to detest. He had, as one reviewer later noted, "a flatteringly poor opinion of anthropologists," and he saw anarchists and Communists (groups he regularly conflated) as direct descendents from the witches of the Medieval world. Witches were "avowed enemies of law and order, red-hot anarchists who would stop at nothing to gain their ends." When his patron, Lady Cunard, introduced him to her husband, Lord Balfour—who expressed disbelief in the existence of people who craved evil for evil's sake—Summers produced a political analogy: "Well, Lord Balfour, you have only to think of the views of some of your opponents." Liberals, socialists, and anarchists, he told Balfour, all bore "the witch philosophy."

Scholars and critics immediately attacked him for this kind of hysteria. Theodore Hornberger disparaged Summers's "alarmist themes": "It is just about time, thinks Mr. Summers, for legislation, a bit more severe, if possible, than the famous statute of James I. The political implications of this logic are indeed alarming, but perhaps not always with the effect intended by the author." In a similarly scathing review, H. G. Wells noted that Summers "hates witches as soundly and sincerely as the British county families hate the 'Reds.'" Wells, anticipating Shirley Jackson's story "The Lottery," saw in Summers's work a "standing need" of mankind "for somebody to

tar, feather, and burn. Perhaps if there was no devil, men would have to invent one. In a more perfect world we may have to draw lots to find who shall be the witch or the 'Red,' or the heretic or the nigger, in order that one may suffer for the people."

Other reviewers castigated Summers for not "judging between different kinds of evidence," and for his "odd mixture of learning and almost childish credulity." But Summers maintained that a religion cannot on the one hand assert an unbroken line of pious infallibility, while, on the other, offer the kind of apologetic backtracking that characterized 20th century Church thought. The 1914 entry on witchcraft in the Catholic Encyclopedia (written by Herbert Thurston), attempting to thread the needle between the church's past and its future, is reduced to equivocations: "In the face of Holy Scripture and the teaching of the Fathers and theologians the abstract possibility of a pact with the Devil and of a diabolical interference in human affairs can hardly be denied, but no one can

read the literature of the subject without realizing the awful cruelties to which this belief and without being convinced that in 99 cases out of 100 the allegations rest upon nothing better than pure delusion."

Summers's attitude was vile, perhaps indefensible, but at least it was consistent. As the Church lumbered towards Vatican II, it found itself caught between the demands of a tradition and a need for modernization. Despite what apologists like Thurston might have you believe, exorcism was then (and is still today) a sacrament; Summers's work brought this history out of the Latin and into the light.

IN THE EIGHTY years since its release, *Häxan* has entered the annals of film history, a major milestone that remains celebrated despite (or perhaps because of) its salubrious content and suspect diagnoses. As a history of witchcraft it is dubious, but as a cinematic experience it remains arresting. Something similar can be said of Summers's work: Taken as history, it is flawed at best—yet his books on witchcraft remain milestones in their own right, and continue to offer a compelling (if unsettling) reading experience.

And yet the years have not been kind to either Summers or his work. After *The History*'s popular success and critical dismissal, Summers continued to present himself as a serious scholar, producing in 1928 the first English translation of the *Malleus Malefaricum* ("The Hammer of Witches," the notorious medieval manual for investigating and trying witches), but as he delved further into the supernatural—churning out books on vampires, ghosts, and werewolves—his work became increasingly sensational and marred by increasingly sloppy scholarship. Gradually he faded into obscurity, and, horrified by the savageries of World War II—the Blitz, the atrocities in mainland Europe, Hiroshima, Nagasaki—he retreated to the English countryside and died in 1948.

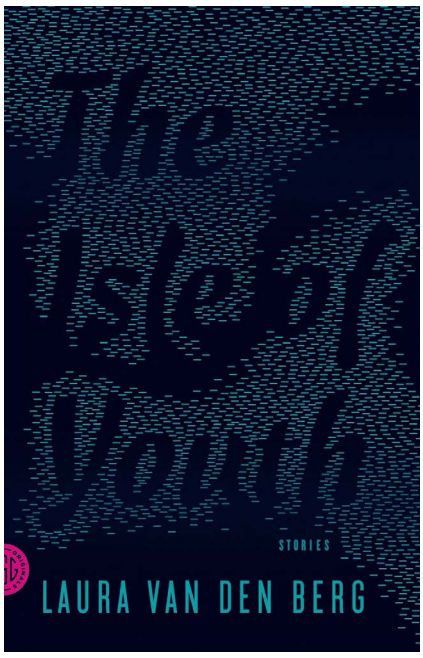
Just as historians for decades tried to ignore the history of witchcraft, preferring to minimize the impact of such a blight on Europe's cultural history, historians these days have preferred to downplay Summers himself. Because he was never a formally trained scholar, it was easy for academic historians to write him out of the historiography of witchcraft—even though his translation of the *Malleus Malefaricum* remained the only English edition until 2006.

By necessity a figure of contradiction, he managed to be, according to one friend, "both near-blasphemous and obscene in his conversation" while at the same time being "a genuine believer, with a sincere desire to serve the Church." The strange triumph of his writing on witchcraft writings is in their synthesis of the two halves of his personality, the devout and the unconventional. These impulses had once been distinctly at odds, but as the landscape around him changed, and modern culture began to abandon the church, being as religious as he was became itself irregular. Emphatically ill-fitted for the 20th century, Summers was yet its inevitable by-product: an unstable atom spun loose by cultural fission. ■

News From Nowhere

By STEPHANIE BERNHARD

Van den Berg's intricately plotted stories are narrative nonplaces, glutted with information and drift



Laura van den Berg
The Isle of Youth
FSG Originals, 256 pages

RICHMOND INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT was a horrible place to start reading Laura van den Berg's second collection, *The Isle of Youth*, whose opening story begins: "The first thing that went wrong was the emergency landing." I am a nervous flyer and almost closed the book in an act of self-mercy. But the sign at the gate was already posting a one-hour delay, and waiting with a terrifying distraction was better than no distraction at all. Besides, I wanted to know the second thing that went wrong, and the third. Van den Berg drew me in.

As daylight faded and the one-hour delay stretched to three, I began to appreciate the airport as an ideal atmosphere for reading *The Isle of Youth*. The terminal's jittery mood matched the book's, and not just because many of van den Berg's stories take place on airplanes, in hotel rooms, in cars, in convenience stores, those transitory "sleas" of contemporary life, as the French anthropologist Marc Augé calls them, but because van den Berg's stories are, in a sense, narrative nonplaces. They spin tense, elaborate plots but end before they reach a destination, before it is possible for us to make meaning of them. When this narrative malaise isn't paired with sufficient intricacy, it can feel unearned, but in van den Berg's best and most complexly plotted stories, this evasive strategy beautifully

exposes the difficulty of sustaining connection in an era when it is bizarrely easy to place several thousand miles between ourselves and our spouses, our siblings, our homes.

Van den Berg excels at complexity, eccentricity, maximalism of plot. Some incredible, massive books require only a sentence of plot summary: "A man wanders around Dublin for a day;" "A crazed captain seeks a white whale." Their ingeniousness emerges in the telling of the story, in the lushness of their prose. Van den Berg's best stories don't work like this. Her prose is bare, not lush; what subtlety she achieves is inherent in her stories' finely wrought structures. The more words required to describe one, the better it is. Her emphases on elaborate plot and intentional loose ends are a refreshing departure from the contemporary taste for tidy, minimal plot paired with maximal voices.

Van den Berg's prose is not maximal, not gorgeous—nor does it want to be. The stories studiously avoid beauty, and when it appears uninvited, as in Patagonia and Paris, it is just another concept whose meaning eludes characters. Cities and landscapes are described most often by visitors seeing them for the first time, by people who don't know enough to interpret them adequately or aren't happy enough to appreciate their beauty. Even the "places" here act like nonplaces: Cruddy apartments and dim houses are occupied by characters who want to be elsewhere, who use their homes as steppingstones to futures unlikely to arrive, who want to escape a present suddenly gone sour.

But the characters themselves resemble nonplaces most of all. The inhabitants of Augé's nonplaces are too inundated with information to perceive their surroundings coherently; van den Berg's characters are too full of their own histories to perceive themselves coherently. They do not seem to associate their actions with their consciousness; they move through their days expecting the world's illusion to fade and their real lives to start; they cannot holistically integrate the fragments of event and observation that nonetheless shape them.

The book's epigraph is a sentence from Yoko Tawada's *Naked Eye*: "I felt I was playing a part in a movie with a plot unknown to me." In "I Looked for You, I Called Your Name," the narrator feels always "half-present and half-absent" due to the death of her twin sister in infancy. The main character of the eponymous last story agrees to switch identities with her (living) twin sister because she is desperate to escape her own life. These young (or relatively young) women lack self-knowledge, and it makes them disastrously unhappy. But they tend to ask few questions of themselves. Instead, to learn about their own lives, they seek meaning by questioning the painful presence (and even more painful absences) of the people who matter to them.

In the traits they share, these narrators are rather typical of contemporary American fictional characters. They perform boldness and moxie to mask a lack of self-identity and assurance. They turn to crime—some petty, some grand—to achieve the emotional highs that are missing from the rest of their lives. At times, van den Berg's dips into the lacuna of

lost identity freshen her prose and illuminate her characters; at other times, they nudge her to the brink of cliché. Stories start just before the characters hit their lowest of low points and end before they've had a chance to pick themselves up again. And their lives can be *so* bleak, *so* unrelentingly miserable—due to internal or external circumstance—that they are hard to believe. Even the worst depressive, we feel, occasionally stumbles into hope. These characters don't. On the rare occasion they dare conceive of future happiness—a teenage girl imagines attending magic school, for example—their dreams are quickly, brutally quashed. These stories make readers reluctant voyeurs, if not masochists.

This bizarre bleakness stems primarily from the characters' inability to communicate with others. Their relationships are destroyed, or en route to destruction, or at least incredibly damaged. Husbands misunderstand wives, and vice versa; fathers skip town; mothers keep coldly aloof from their affection-starved daughters. Even siblings—who seem to share the strongest bonds—betray and abandon and ignore each other. The various iterations of dysfunction read less like an encyclopedia of antisociality, which might provide an interesting commentary on human behavior, than dull repetition with an occasional difference.

But the two strongest stories display a careful attention to character development. The voices of these stories' unnamed narrators don't differ much: van den Berg writes characters from many areas of the country and diverse social classes but doesn't mark their speech with traces of regional or class-based dialect—again, she doesn't want her prose to shine—but in this case the similarity of voice highlights the fundamental difference in the narrators' mode of relating to others. I suppose I am saying that van den Berg's work would not lose much in translation. For in a way, van den Berg has already translated her characters by giving words to thoughts that they would never verbalize in speech or writing. (She does not write writers.)

In the excellent "I Looked for You, I Called Your Name," we meet a youngish, newlywed lawyer trudging through her not-so-happy honeymoon in Patagonia (the plane makes its emergency landing in South America). Uncomfortable in her new marriage, the bride has reservations about her attentive but cartoonishly boorish husband that swell into full-fledged doubts. She describes her feelings for him as an "attachment certainly": "though I was never sure it was love. But what did it mean to be in love? Maybe all the things people said about falling in love, about the initial torrent of joy, were a lie."

I underlined these words. I remember thinking them, too often, in every romantic relationship I had—until I finally fell in love. It is a relief to see them so plainly in print.

The following story, "Opa-Locka," is told by a youngish, recently divorced, probably lower-middle-class private investigator living with her sister in southern Florida, van den Berg's native territory. The narrator of "Opa-Locka" describes her relationship with her ex-husband very differently: "I met my husband while working at a watch store in Pinecrest. He brought a Swiss Army in for repair. He'd

had it for a decade; he said he liked to hold on to things. We married a year later, in the Miami courthouse. I loved him, but I didn't always understand how to be honest." The first woman spends the better part of a page failing to understand what love is and the whole story realizing she doesn't love her husband. The second one tosses off the declaration "I loved him" without a second thought.

The first story depicts a universe in which romantic relationships are troubled because the emotions associated with them are nebulous, unstable, and mysterious. The second story jolts us into another subjective world altogether, in which emotions like love can be concrete and nameable but in which other factors (like the inability to be honest) can still destroy relationships.

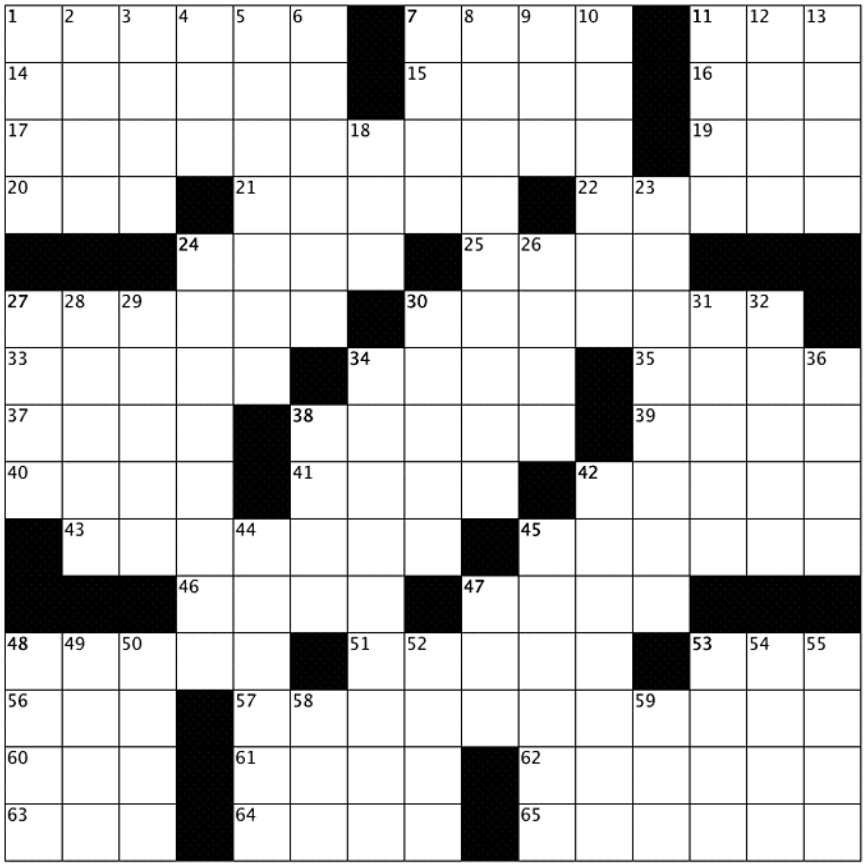
There is even a neat symmetrical structure to the arrangement of *The Isle of Youth*. The first and last stories involve twin sisters; but in the first the sister is absent, whereas in the last she appears. The second and sixth stories deal with sleazy missing fathers: In one he lives too long; in the other he dies too soon. The third and fifth stories trace a sister's love for her brother: In one, the brother is about to be lost at the story's end; in the other, he is lost just before the story starts. In the fourth and central story, the narrator is left all alone in a foreign city. Beyond noting the emphasis on sisterly love in "Lessons," I can summarize it adequately with the sentence "Runaway teenaged cousins rob banks." I can't do the same for the better stories, for which a summary would require exactly as many words as the stories themselves.

"Opa-Locka," one of the missing father stories, ends up taking a tack completely different from the one it promises. We think we are reading a story about two private investigators—sisters—searching for a man named Mr. Defonte who mysteriously vanishes, only to learn later that we are really reading a story about the sisters' vanished father. The father is not the same man as Mr. Defonte—that setup would be too convenient. And Mr. Defonte disappears as a character as soon as the story line involving the father becomes important; neither the readers nor the sisters learn what happens to him. It's a fascinating, true turn: Life really is unsatisfying in that particular way. "Acrobat" and "Antarctica," also good, don't leave so many questions unanswered but also get their narrative energy from unexpected plot turns.

After "Opa-Locka," it was hard to get excited about reading the other missing father story, "The Greatest Escape." By the time I started it, I had boarded my plane and was flying north over a black Atlantic, skirting a vivid line of thunderstorms—the cause of the delay—whose forked lightning occasionally brightened the windows on the left side of the plane. I read it again later, on the ground, to make sure that my sense of vague dread and looming disaster couldn't be attributed to a fear of stormy flying. It couldn't: Like most of van den Berg's work, the story makes you feel that something important and terrible is about to happen. In "The Greatest Escape" that something does happen. But it's exactly what I expected. ■

Exorcism

Crossword puzzle *by* JONATHAN ZALMAN

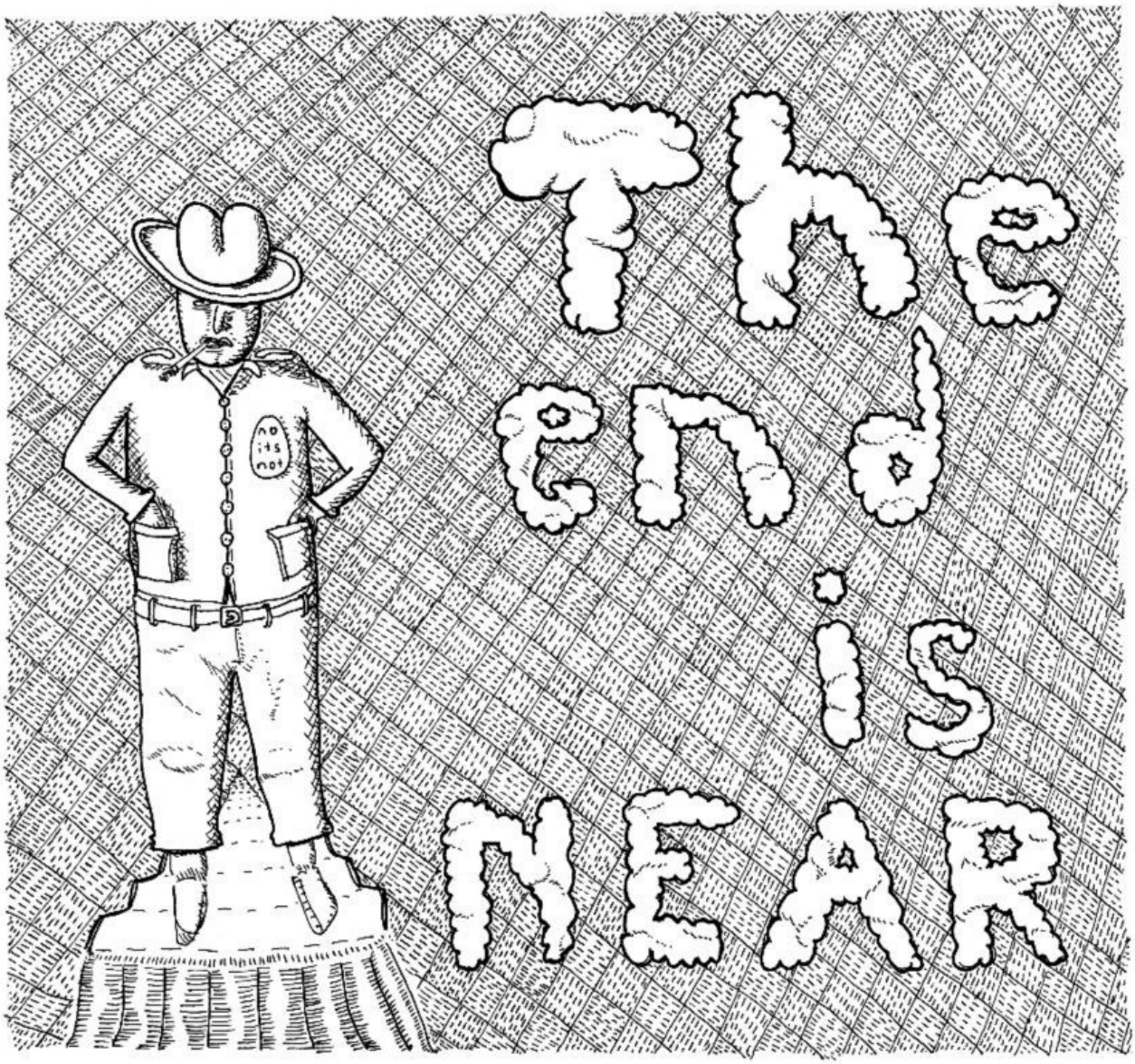


ACROSS

1. Glass cooties, say
7. Glasgow smile line
11. Elev.
14. First feminist bookstore in the U.S.
15. Only
16. Stocking option
17. Prepare the base of a garden, perhaps
19. Diamond stat
20. New Deal org.
21. "Predator" predator, twice
22. Bugs hunter
24. Hoary
25. "Rent" actor Diggs
27. Analyzed, as a sentence
30. Shepherded early birds?
33. Bank
34. Spanish Surrealist painter
35. Purina brand
37. Ellen, to Portia
38. Seals, say
39. _____ Lad, donut shop on "The Simpsons"
40. Like a sext in homeroom
41. Oklahoma city
42. Surrendered, as land
43. Marcia's room, to Jan?
45. Rick Ross, et al, lyrically
46. Lessen
47. Hall-of-Famer Boggs
48. Ecstacy
51. "I think, therefore I am," e.g.
53. Lyrical tribute
56. Clatter
57. Rabbit tail liquor
60. Bible knowledge?
61. "The Andy Griffith Show" boy
62. Rack of lamb, e.g.
63. OR workers
64. Marinates poolside
65. Body types

DOWN

1. Lip
2. Marshall prods.
3. Carmelo's better half
4. "Tha Streetz _____ Mutha" (1999 Kurupt album)
5. Long sails
6. Dropped a line?
7. _____ gin fizz
8. Returned hooks
9. Cape _____, Mass.
10. Serious coffee order
11. Cinema reprimand, perhaps
12. Woo
13. Lachryma
18. Lice treater
23. Barristerspeak
24. Yelps, in a way
26. Hubbubs
27. Bobby Fischer's frontman
28. Off
29. "Bananaphone" crooner
30. Fat
31. Showy flowers, for short
32. Wonka candy
34. Department store fixture
36. "_____ bodkins!"
38. Black and white, e.g.
42. "Lean" ingredient
44. Stock holders?
45. Washes off the day
47. "Holy moly!"
48. 60-across practice, for short
49. Wasn't straight
50. Band with the 1988 #1 hit "Need You Tonight"
52. Sporty trucks, briefly
53. Plant also called lady's-finger
54. Stoya's beau
55. Scans
58. Apple core?
59. Benchmark: abbr.



LET ME SAY right up front, black is the new black, and if I had my way, it would always be.

We live in a time that seems too aware of trending, and as a result we can easily become a victim of any societal shift coming around the corner. While I'm a big fan of remote-control television, I would have to say that most trends are not to be trusted.

We're hungry for whatever flavor of the month is being served, and it's so easy to swallow the wrong thing.

Politicians are especially vulnerable, as they are already poll-trained to jump on any bandwagon they can find a seat on. Recently, Democratic Senator Bob Menendez declared that after reading Vladimir Putin's op-ed piece about Syria in the *New York Times*, he "almost wanted to vomit." This proclivity to announce intentions to upchuck then crossed the aisle, when New Jersey's Republican Governor Chris Christie, upon hearing of the boardwalk burning down in Seaside Heights after

recently being rebuilt, said, "I feel like I want to throw up, and that's me."

But it's not just him: This fad has also entered the more cultured parts of our society. On a popular social networking site, an esteemed member of our intelligentsia remarked that after seeing the finale of *Breaking Bad*, "he was disgusted and might puke a little"—certainly a more thoughtful and tempered entry into this new communication style, but this doesn't bode well for a clear-headed end of times. I, for one, do not want a nausea-driven meme driving me through my life.

The little things we love will be ever so important as our days dwindle away. For me, radio is a necessary part of my life, and I like my radio public. I prefer my airwaves commercial free and not traveling in every new direction that groupthink takes us. Unfortunately, WNYC, my local station seems far too eager to follow. They have altered their programming, banishing less *au courant* shows while replaying Jian Ghomeshi interviewing Jad Abumrad about their mutual love for local host Soterios Johnson over and over again. Then we are invited to follow them on Twitter and visit them online to watch videos. It seems that attempting to follow the latest trends has ultimately led radio to become television.

We must be vigilant. It's a short road from selfies to selfabusies, and if our donuts can so easily become cronuts, then it won't be long before we're all eating blue-crystal-meth-frosted snacks. It's easy for the new to be groovy, but it's always more rewarding to do your own thing, I think Sly and the Family Stone said it best: "Thank you (falettinme be mice elf agin)."

If what they say is true, that everything old is new again, then it stands to reason that many of these fresh ideas will get stale. We don't want new directions if they take us to the wrong destination.

If you think I make too much of a fuss about the danger of these trends, I have one word for you: *dirndl*. The dirndl dress is now the fastest growing fashion craze in Munich. You know what they say: "Today the Rhineland, tomorrow the world." If we allow trends to go unchecked, it won't be long before a bevy of Bavarian-clad beauties are goose-stepping down the runways of the world. Dirndls are a gateway. Before long, blackshirts are the new black. ■