Five times Jonah slapped the steering wheel. “Ah, hell! Have it your way.”

“Pardon?”

“Turn the cameras on.” He nodded solemnly, said what Pappy always says: “Face your fears.”

I nodded. “Face your fears.” When I tapped my phone, the monitor displayed four boxes of visual distortion. I groaned. “It looks like there’s light in there.”

“What?”

“I started with night vision, but if there’s light, my night vision looks all snowy like this.” I changed the setting.

“Uh. Is this one of your internet jokes?”

“I… I don’t know what it is.” I scratched my head. “It’s inside the container back there. That is, they’re inside it.”

We saw into our cargo container from four corners, looking down on a procession of women floating with sticks between their legs. The one floating in front would go up a few inches then drop back down. One by one the movement happened on down the line. It looked that they were moving forward.

Jonah studied the rear perspectives more than me. “Those are brooms!”

“What?”  I changed to a single view of the line from behind. “They *are* brooms! Connected with a long rope.” I switched to displaying just one front camera, single unsplit screen. “These ladies dress up. The ones wearing jeans have nice shoes and what not. Tweren’t for the brooms, they would look norm… oh, look, so much for that. They have floating glow sticks for lighting. The lady in front has a crystal ball mounted on her broom handle.” As I said that, the woman with the glass globe waved a hand over it. An image of us appeared within, an image of us in the truck talking to each other in real time. I would have warned Jonah, cept something electronic about the crystal ball distracted me.

“Lands sake, these *are* real witches.” Jonah looked upward, shaking his head. “But they’re pretty fine, one in front’s hot even.” He laughed. “Hot Witches! Now there’s a movie title.” He was looking away from the dash-monitor, but a sudden movement on the screen caught his eye. “Uh oh.”

The lead witch untied the rope from her broom-handle and flew straight at the camera. The picture did a few shaky running through the woods movements before it flashed, and the dash monitor went dark, loud slam behind us.

I looked back. “What was that?”

“That.” Jonah pointed at the road ahead. The broom rider had already got far ahead of us, flying high. Through the rain sparkling in the moonlight, we saw her turn sharply, twisting her legs and leaning into a U-turn. “Whoa!” Jonah tapped the brakes and double clutched down the tree a few gears. I was watching. Jonah never touched the buttons. Our windows opened by their lonesome, and hail blew in.

“Who do you think you are, spying and passing perverted judgement on us?” She pulled up alongside his window, one hand on her broomstick, one poking a finger into Jonah’s face, riding sidesaddle backwards. For her age, she looked peach perfect. Her long silver hair flew about her like a halo. The moonlit hail around her lookin like a green-screen effect. Her eyes fairly flashed with fire. From where I sat, I could see her crystal ball replaying Jonah talkin hot witches – in his face.

My brother took off his hat, said: “I meant it as a compliment, ma’am,” all Shrek-like.

“Nobody calls me ma’am,” she snarled. “Unless I turn myself into the queen of England.” No doubt about it, this woman was mad – scary mad. “You never married, did you?”

“No.” The way he said it, Jonah’s voice sounded so unsure. “It’s because…”

“Because you’re a pig.”

“No I’m not.” He sounded better that time.

“You are now.” She uttered some prehistoric words and pointed her phone. It lit up, and my brother turned into a pig. It was weird, like transformers or evolution, right before my eyes. He had the same orangey red hair, curly turned crinkly and, being from the country, I automatically did the visual calculation. I reckoned he would dress out better’n two-hundred pounds. That was creepy, that I up and reckoned that.

Six brothers, you tussle but you get taught, and you respect the pecking order. I was the bonus baby. Darrin, my youngest brother has twelve years on me. Then we have an even age spacing up to Jonah, the oldest, who lived twenty-four years on this green Earth before my first breath. He started driving in the days of CB’s, radios and crank windows. This is how good a driver he was. Jonah could have worked down through all the gears, could have pulled our rig over driving from inside a pig just fine, thank you.

But he kept it going, sure and steady. That rain or sleet or snow stuff they say about mailmen. A good trucker like Jonah has that same determination to fulfill his mission. New problem, same solution, watch out for the tourists, the city drivers and the smokies. Keep it between the lines, even if you change species. Jonah had to be scared. I sure was. Cold and wet, rain warshing our sinful flesh.

“This will give you both the opportunity to meditate on how women are people, not sexual objects. Can you ever be real with a woman, treat her like she’s another human being, just like you are?” I jumped out of my skin. So busy looking at Jonah, I did not notice she had took to pacing my window.

“Yes ma…” I stopped myself.

“Yes what?”

“Yes… mah what a good opportunity for that.”

“Yeah right.” The way she looked at me, was she reading my mind? “I’ve got my eye on you.”

“Praise God!” Looking down respectfully, I saw the crystal ball up close. It looked that the branch the broom maker whittled the handle from had grown fingers around the crystal ball before the woodsman cut it from the tree, eldritch and arcane technologies I imagined. But the nearly invisible micro-camera at the edge of the glass sphere, that was the new stuff.

“Don’t forget to turn north on Interstate Ninety-Nine for our stop at the Altoona Hampton Inn.”

“Oh yeah.” I looked at Jonah, and he nodded.

“And keep your eyes on the road.” She looked off. “I mean, really, calling me hot!”

I accidentally said “Yes ma’am” (I grew up in the South) but it was okay. She was gone, leaving herbal brimstony scents. The container vent slammed.

The Eagles song that started it all ended. I turned off the music and got our GPS back on the dash-monitor, well along the Pennsylvania Turnpike. “Ninety-Nine’s about five miles up,” I muttered.

“Okay.”

“What a relief.”

“What?”

“You can talk.”

Jonah looked over at me, and his eyes did this thing I recognized, his sarcastic “Aren’t you the rocket surgeon” look.

I closed my window. “Can you reach your button?”

He looked at it there on his arm rest, leg rest that is. Then we both noticed, and I think we both felt a chilling respect for how that lady did magic. We missed it in the excitement, but the seat, the mirrors, everything must have changed adjustment at the same time, adjusted more than the manufacturer intended. Jonah held the wheel with one cloven hoof and pushed the window button with another two-toed front foot. He looked at me. He looked back at the road. “Y’all gotta turn the music back on. Play it quiet if you want.” He shook his head. “I need it baby brother. I need my tunes to make my mind right.”

I turned it on and got the volume where he liked it. “Are you good to drive?” I asked, certain he wasn’t.

“Here’s what I’m thinking. It is crazy to keep driving at a moment like this. But if we stop to switch seats…” They looked so different, but I could see it. He rolled his eyes. “Who knows what they’ll do?” Jonah did something with a front foot that passed for pointing back over his shoulder.

“We could…”

“Switch seats driving?”

“Yeah.” I leaned in, at the ready.

“You have got plenty good at it.”

“Thank you.”

“And I’ve still got the knack.”

“Yer the best. Let’s do it.” I looked at him, wondering how we would switch in this driving condition. Probably me going over him, what with his lower center of gravity and all.

“Thing is. This is my first night in a pig’s body, so stands to reason I might not have my usual deft timing.” He looked thoughtful. “I guess you go over me.”

“That’s what I think.”

Jonah shook his head. “Nope, nope, nope,” he said. Then he laughed. That got me laughing and stopped him. It was all grunts. When he laughed it sounded like happy grunts. This was his first night in a pig’s body. Happened so fast but I saw it, the fear that crossed Jonah’s face.

Then I saw him hang tough. My big brother, right then he amazed me so, I had to ask: “How can you be so calm?”

“Well.” He shook his head. “Thirty years as a trucker, I probably got this comin more’n most.”

“Seriously?”

He nodded. “Now and then I have acted like a pig. I know it.”

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Innocently at my hobby, I had an electronics podcast going back when he woke me, whappin at me. “Yer first load to California,” he chortled. “Getting there when the moon turns full on Friday the thirteenth and this comes on.” He’d pointed at one of the speakers, grinning like a fool. Some Fender bender guitar song warning about checking into California – about how you can never leave. “Du-reow. Duh, duh, duh, duh.” He patted the dashboard. “This is like an American one of your Harry Potter stories. It turned midnight when this song started.”

I yawned. “Now yer scarin’ me!” I put some fingertips to my teeth and ch-ch-chattered sarcastically. Taking my phone, I unrolled my cord and plugged it beneath the clock that still said midnight. “Good uh time as any to check the cameras, find out what kind of cargo we’re hauling.”

“No.” Jonah put a hand in front of the dash-monitor. “Let’s wait.”

“For what?”

“Well…” Jonah looked out and studied his mirror, smile fading. “For daytime. Let’s wait for daytime.”

His look set me thinking on the container that we picked up, the wash-up. The longshoreman said it come skimming along atop choppy water, tacking to the starboard so that tour boats and gentleman sailors had to turn left to yield the nautical right of way. Moving faster than any of them, painted black with touches of red, it looked tuff. By appearances just a corrugated steel box like any other, it charted past the Fort McHenry monument to Baltimore’s inner harbor, sidling to a stop pier-side so precisely, the crane crew immediately hooked it and lifted it onto the dock. Who knows why our outfit got hired?

Jonah disliked the bold print “DO NOT OPEN” come e-mailed with strict route instructions. I climbed up on the container and sneaked cameras through the oversized corner vents. I did it so Jonah could see inside, but I sensed something, something scared me like the kidest gruff billy-goat sneaking across the troll bridge. “Okay,” I said. “We kin wait.” Come to think of it, daytime *did* sound better, a lot better. But then Jonah just had to renege.

Left my headphones off for the drive to Altoona, just listened music with my brother. We didn’t talk much. But I made it a point to keep company, what with his new configuration and all. Together we tweened the lines. What he said had me thinking. I always admired the way Jonah could start a conversation with the happening along waitress or random nurse. Usually he sounded down-home, but sometimes it did feel like a pitch. Like, not real! Not human, I reckon. That witch was strict, but the getting real thing sounded reasonable to me conceptually and what not.

At the hotel, Jonah pulled alongside a chain-link fence, down a few lengths, paralleling the lobby’s covered drive. The moon showed through. First time in days it stopped raining. Jonah and I worked it out. I climbed down with the bolt-cutter in case they wanted the back door opened. Jonah parked in the shadows up front. Lights shined down on the back end of the rig. The light gave me courage.

A crowd dropped from the sky on brooms. Yellow and red edged shadows flitted about. A robed woman unfastened the padlock – not by magic – she dialed the combination. Suspenseful music played. Two ladies opened the doors. And when I say ladies, I’m shooting you straight. The forty or fifty witches that showed up for this late-night meeting wore their Sunday best. I stood at the back off to the side, feeling a mite more’n underdressed.

The one who porcine-cursed my brother, she looked polished as the teacher’s apple up there above her audience, standing inside the container with a pulpit in front of her and a pale green curtain back-dropping her. She wore a tight fitting white robe, as did the two dignified and shapely women who stood behind. Any man with a pulse would have looked twice.

Not I, suh. Jonah getting swined, it spooked me so, got me thinking hard on women as people, just like me, real people. Looking across their hats and hair to the stage, I pondered how they all had feelings, maybe even feelings they needed to talk about. Factor in how sloppy everybody says we men express our feelings, maybe, just maybe, we’re meant to go hats off to their story, hiding our own yarns under the same lid.

The lady who opened the lock turned and read from a notecard: “Ladies and gentleman. On this fine, Friday the thirteenth week, the witches of Blair County, Pennsylvania, the Blair Witches, welcome Lavinia Levine.” Applause.

When the MC said “Ladies and gentleman” I thought, cuel, I am not alone, but looking about, gentleman musta meant me. What they do takes so much focus. Witches don’t miss a thing. And here she was, making a big fuss introducing the enchantress who maliciously dehumanized my brother. That’s how I saw him. Wondering against hope if Lavinia Levine could ever turn him back human would have amounted to mental cruelty, weren’t Jonah such a tough old cuss!

“Thank you. Thank you.” Lavinia held up her hands. “Thank you for your sponsorship of our trip. The International Coven Association requires representatives to travel to meetings with a broom between the legs.” She turned and gestured behind herself. “With rain forecasted all the way this container serves us well, while proudly displaying your clan’s ancient logo.” She giggled, and it sounded natural. Lavinia gazed at her audience before she spoke again. “I have a deep respect for all the time in witchery you collectively represent. My books and talks strive to touch the stones of our craft to the latest in self-interactionalization and alkalinity.” She frowned. “I must confess, today I am out of sorts. I manifested myself a conflict, unfairly projecting anger onto the wrong person. Rather than giving a talk, allow me to take some questions.”

A hand shot up. “Yes?” Lavinia pointed.

“Hi.” A lady with a plaid skirt and a white blouse, hand waggling. “Long time reader. First time questioner.”

“Welcome.”

“Thank you. The world looks so unhomogenized, disconnected and disharmonized. People giddy with happiness, things going quite well, but what about all the people who can barely go on, their luck and choices gone bad, hearts grown cold?”

“Good question. This brings up the message that I’m taking cross-country to the television. Since the nineteen-sixties, humanity has received incremental increases in magic or spiritual energy or whatever you want to call it. In the last years the level shot up exponentially. That’s good for people experienced at watching the ebb and flow of life, observing nature’s cycles, breaking free of oppressive structures to let the best plans and words come to them through intuition and inspiration. They have more to work with now. They harm none, and they are real with people. The unifying force of the universe, God or whatever you feel comfortable calling the Source of solutions, it blends with their unmaterialistic approach to life.” To everybody else, Lavinia looked to hold a talking stick with a glass sphere at its top. When she gestured with it for emphasis, I could not forget it was her broomstick.

“Other people *endure* life, unknowingly wasting their power satisfying neuropeptide driven cravings for conflicts and arguments – run-ins they can talk about with other complainers and arguers. We all get to make choices, living within our own bubble of reality. People can create an unhappy world for themselves if they choose, but they can do it without hurting you. Let’s stick to our most fulfilling choice: Seek to keep our lives happy and loving. Harm ye none.” Lavinia nodded compassionately at the questioner. Then she looked on. “Next?”

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Despite the situation, I wanted to hear Lavinia Levine talk. A lifetime fan of Harry Potter, I often dreamed about having mystery and magic in my life. But I only stood back there listening to Lavinia a few questions more. I had to get back to Jonah, still trapped inside a pig and needing a hand with something, not having one of his own.

Walkin back to our tractor, I thought about last thing Lavinia said, so simple, make it a goal to become easier for others to be around. That made me think of how our day started. Jonah bawling me out for listening to electronics tutorials. Me having to shove back my two cents. That went rough. Him getting morphed and such, it had me thinking myself lucky to have Jonah for a brother. But this morning I could uh dumped him off in the woods with the old water heaters and stoves, coons and ursus – didn’t know about keeping it real.

Two young ladies pushed a luggage cart out from front of our truck. By the moonlight I saw sheets hanging off the top as if to hide the load, but even in the shadows I caught my brother’s snout peeking out. As the cart come around, one of the ladies looked like Ms. Levine, but younger. The other which was doin a red-headed noir. For sure, that one looked nothin like a country girl, short skirt, jacket, shirt and tie, “What’s going on?” I asked.

“Lavinia’s putting Jonah in a room for the night.” The sister stopped pushing but kept her hands on the cart. “You sleep in your truck.” Coming closer, I could see that she had dirty blonde hair braided up in a perfect V. Another girl musta done it for her. Wearing her faded jeans and lacy top, in another situation, she would have reminded me of one of the girls back home in cave country.

“This is Linnea,” said Jonah. “Her sister has everything figured out. I can get my food and water from bowls and stretch out while I eat.”

“Her sister’s Lavinia Levine. That’s who made you a pig. These ladies are from the Nawth.”

“By time their coven gets transported, I should be turned back human. Or whatever I was.” Jonah grunted.

I shook my head. “How can you laugh about this?”

“I admire the way your brother has stayed positive,” Linnea said. It surprised me, the sweet tone of her voice.

“Jonah’s a righteous man,” I said, wondering if she might read my mind or put a spell on me. I felt nervous, but spoke my piece. “I just heard your sister teach ‘Do no harm.’ That thing with the cameras, we wanted to make sure we weren’t hauling anything dangerous.” I looked into Linnea’s eyes. Was I getting through to her? “Your container floated ashore. How were we to know?”

The red head with all the black make-up pointed me down. Way she moved, cinched up stricter than a wire-tied bail. Shot me something scarier than the look Lavinia gave Jonah. “You didn’t follow directions!”

“Tatty,” Linnea interceded. “The pig thing makes the point.”

“Not to me. We scheduled here for twelve o’clock.” She pushed to get the cart rolling again. Then she shoved my chest. “If Lavinia missed this fundraiser, who knows what she would have turned *you* into?”

Shiver up my spine, I swung the door open and climbed into our cab. Everything looked all right. I stepped back down, thought things over. Driving truck had challenging moments, but nothing this tricky ever come up in the year since I graduated high school and hit the road. I needed to sleep so I could drive come mornin. We had people walking in and out of our load. Then again, I’d sooner stay away if something private had commenced. I try not to impose.

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I walked back along the side of our flat bed, peeked around the corner. The ladies had lined up, waiting to reach books up to the podium for a signing bonus. Some of them had taken to leavin, a few fine high-end cars, mostly brooms, black cat riding a whisk broom: “Raow!” I heard happy voices and laughter. Worn and whipped, I decided to get up into the sleeper, lay low until daylight. “God in heaven, protect us from this magic,” I muttered, walkin back to our empty cab.

“Did you say: ‘Protect us from magic?’” asked a lady I had not noticed walking behind me. Her voice reminded me of the clucking of a hen. I mean, it had a nice sound to it. She wore a fur trimmed jacket, big hat tilted on top. A name badge like the ones that Linnea, Tatty and Lavinia wore had Green Coven printed on top and LeClara written in sharpie on the bottom. “Oh dear, dear, dear me. Why should anyone need protecting from magic? Magic is so practical.”

“Practical?” A bit older and rounder, but the resemblance, this had to be another Levine sister, close kin, least-ways.

“Yes, practical. I had trouble sleeping in hotel rooms.” LeClara held up a broom. “Then I learned how to sweep my room, not so much for the dirt, more to get everything flowing right. This one’s got natural bristles. The plastic ones just muck things up and vacuum cleaners, they’re part of why I’m taking this up to my room.”

“And that’s magic?”

“Well. Yeah.” She frowned, perplexed by the question. “Magic is like electricity. You don’t know how, but electricity makes your tools work. Magic makes other things work.”

“I do know how electricity works. And there’s nothing magic about the things I do.”

“Really?” LeClara smiled. “Then wear a different hat for the rest of this trip.”

“I can’t do that!” I took off my hat and looked at where it said Goblet of Fire like the book cover. “I never change hats, middle of a run. It’s bad juju.”

“And that works for you?”

“Yeah, it does. For the whole family.” I scratched my head. “Maybe that is magic.” Then I laughed. “But that’s nothing. You traveled across the ocean in a cargo container, right?”

“Part of the ocean.” LeClara opened her mouth, closed it. Eyes fluttered. “We came from the lost continent.”

“How far?”

“Do you mean over the water or through it?” She looked beyond me, blinking rpidly. “Maybe we started underwater.”

“How far, like if I saw it on a map?”

“Well…uh…well, in land miles or nautical miles?” She had a finger on her cheek. “Nautical miles are longer.” LeClara chuckled, sort of a soft giggle. “I guess over the years the water got bigger.”

“Land miles would work better for me. That’s what I drive.”

“But we traveled nautically.”

“Right. Okay then. How far was it, nautically?”

“Well, you see…” She tried to remember for a moment.  “I don’t know that either. Oh bother.”

I thought to change the subject. “How hard is it to fly one of those things?”

“You want to try it?” She held her magic broom out to me without a moment’s hesitation. “Everybody says mine’s a creampuff.” LeClara laughed softly. “A bit of a nag.”

“How does it work?”

“You look where you want to go.”

I took it from her and stepped over the handle with one leg. The hotel had three levels with balconies. As I stood there straddling the broom, I saw the top of Jonah’s cart coming out onto the top balcony. I’m not sure what I thought that first time I held a flying broom: that I was worried about Jonah, that I wanted to make sure he was all right. It was nothing that exact, mostly thinking about him, thinking about him to where I saw him in my thoughts. I learned the hard way. I think more carefully now.

I took off furious fast like a broken motor mount flipped my engine up on one side, jamming the throttle. Then I stopped suddenly with my handle floating across the balcony railing. It’s different than you’d think. When you fly a broom, your weight doesn’t rest on the handle. The broom floats and, if you have hold of it, you float along with it. Good thing I hung on.

With her back to me, Linnea Levine pulled the cart off the elevator, and I could hear her: “Go easy on yourself. People come to take themselves for animals, thinking more of the body than the spirit. A handsome publisher and a sexy little doll unknowingly cursed American men to find flaws in centerfolds, the women to find such in themselves.” Linnea was talking to Jonah – just her, the luggage cart and him. Not sure where the goth witch, went. “If you hope to get back into a human body, you have to become a real human again, like when you were young.” She sounded so sympathetic, my brother *was* in good hands! “You will have to work on yourself. No guarantees.” The back wheels bumped across the elevator doorway, and she stopped, crouching a moment to squeeze one of Jonah’s front legs. “I’m so sorry. Lavinia is, too.”

“Don’t feel bad,” Jonah told her. “If I pull this off, I’ll be a better man for it. Right?”

“Absolutely.”

“If not, I’m a good-looking pig, and I can talk. There’s gotta be some unique opportunities with that.” He grunted, and she laughed, too.

Come to me I was eavesdropping, not a particularly human thing to do, I suspected. And that mattered. Weird, being real sounded the thing to learn. I turned my broom handle to the side and looked back at our truck. Mind’s eye, I saw the details so well. I smelt the coolant and lubricants, hot belts and treads. And, like that, I was there. So fast! I just stood there, trying to wrap my head around it. Trouble is, I’m lousy at wrapping. Come round our farm some birthday and see what I mean. That sounds like something Jonah would say.

“Oh my. You *are* a natural.” LeClara took the broom, looking at it thoughtfully, stroking it. “I never knew you could go so fast,” she whispered. Then she looked at me, cute little smile.

Up at the balcony I saw Linnea pushing the cart along. Tipped my hat. She waved with one finger, smiled even. I crawled into the sleeper, tucked in and crashed. The coven could lock the container if it mattered. I’d passed the mile marker too far. Rain on the tin roof of the sleeper sent my mind right past the dream-world to sleep. Exhaustion from all the brooms and words, it put me out deep.

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Come morning, my brother had us back meandering the Seventy through lite traffic and heavy drizzle. Wipers swipered big drops. Ahead, the moon reddened the clouds. “Morning,” I said, crawling out of the sleeper and into my seat. “Hey! Got yourself some shorts. Is that better?”

“It helps.” Jonah nodded. “Especially sittin up like this.” He spoke hesitantly. “I’d like it if I had a way to hide all the nursing bumps on my chest, too,” he confided.

“That bothers you? That people see them?”

“Never did before.” Shrugged. “It never bothered Robert Plant, course he only had two.” Face looked a memory. “You know, like I useta.”

“Who?”

“Weird thing about being a mammal, that entire warm-blooded class of animal, it don’t matter, male or female, young or old, everywhere you wander, you got mammary bumps on your chest.”

In that moment, I wasn’t sure if he was saying something deep and meaningful or something weird that threatened to make me laugh inappropriately one Sunday in church, y’know, when I finally got the joke. “Yeah,” I said. He *was* right. “All mammals have’m.”

“Whatever the matter,” he concluded. “Now, I understand why women occasionally ask a guy to put a shirt on.”

“Yeah. Probably gets distracting if they’re just trying to talk.”

“And, see, women do try to do that sometimes.”

“Reckon yer right,” I said, crawling into the sleeper for a shirt.

“Hey,” said Jonah. “Look for my Pink Floyd, Animals shirt.”

We made good time. The young sister, Linnea, sent me texts before we come up on radar guns or patrol cars. She had her own crystal ball or something. Linnea made such good predictions that Jonah took to trusting – put the pedal right to the metal whenever she implored “C’mon, c’mon.”

“My aunt says you’re a flight-risk,” she texted me early on, still in Pennsylvania. “If you get a broom in your hands.”

“I would never abandon my brother,” I replied. But as my finger touched Send, I knew she was havin her way with me.

“Psyche!”

And we had some other good jokes, too. I told her not to call me sir unless I turn myself into the king of England.

“Right.” I could picture that dimply smile of hers. “With as many decorations and medals on your chest as a real hero.”

“I know! Like the magnet laden Frigidaire.”

So easy messaging her, that’s what got me thinking to wrot. Mah always told me I oughter. “A story is like a song,” she taught me. The ideas matter but, it’s all about the way you sing them out.” The Australian sister, Lerei, she proofread for me. That’s where bonnet and lorry come from when you close in on our exciting conclusion. (Behind the scenes stuff.) As far as genre goes, they will call our true story fantasy because magic run throughout. And some call the scriptures mythology.

Because we topped off at Baltimore, we skipped fueling in Pittsburg and made time. But I only put on headphones the time I googled about miniature digital cameras and when I looked at the old brooms with legs animation that Linnea sent me. All those buckets of water! The road felt good. With so much hanging in the balance, we had one fine time team-driving, reminded me uh when I was young riding along to Chattanooga or Saskatoon.

Not so much talk, mostly we listened together. Jonah searched the streaming service and played old-school songs, good ones. I picked newer music Jonah might like, and he had cool things to say about the arrangements. A few songs he picked, they spoke to our state of affairs: “You’re no good” by a Linda lady who had the same cuteness as Linnea. Then “Witchy woman, See how high she flies,” I was nowhere near born when that one come out but, when it ended, I played it again.

Before we reached Indiana, Linnea text warned us about the smokies prowling the border. I told Jonah to slow it down. Then I text messaged her a question: “Do you and your sisters mix magic with electronics?”

“What makes you ask that?”

“I thought I saw something electronic on Lavinia’s crystal ball, a tiny camera.”

“You must be mistaken,” she asserted. “I’ve never seen Lavinia use anything electronic with her magic.” That made me think: Most other girls my age couldn’t get enough electronics, but Linnea, she got to looking more like the outdoor type to me, the going off into the woods with outa phone kind of girl. Reckoned it a family thing. Lerei would hike Aires Rock phone-free. Did Linnea’s big sister even know she had a camera on her broom?

Jonah drove a long stretch. Then we switched places. I reached over and he lunged out of his seat going under me, hands on the wheel as he jumped, cruise controlling the pedal until my foot got it. Jonah squealed to the floor against the gearshift, but then he climbed right up into his seat. So we knowed he could come back.

About how the stick-shift poked him, Jonah called it a poke in a pig, instead of a pig in a poke. Google said poke means bag in that old “pig in a poke” saying. It’s about not buying something without looking at it first. Then Jonah played a song about Poke Salad Annie, “Gators got your granny. Dun, dun, dun!”

Lotta laughs, but one time when it got quiet, he looked over at me: “I’m going to do this thing, baby… er… esteemed brother.”

“What?”

“I’m going to become more humbletistical!”

“I think you mean…”

“I know, less egotistical, but saying it stupid… that helps.”

“I see that.” I glanced over at him where he sat. He looked misty eyed.

“I’m not proud of this, but there have been women I went out with who were sincerely good-hearted people, and I never called them back. I wish I could call them now, say I’m sorry, and that I was a sorry sack of slime.” He grunted at his counterfeit curse word.

I laughed too. “You wish you could make amends?”

“Yeah. But I think this pig thing, I think it helps me work it out on my own a mite.”

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Ohio, Indiana and into Illinois, I kept thinking about my broom ride. Finally, trying to get it out of my mind, instead of a song, I q’d up an audiobook selection, Harry Potter’s first experience with broom flight. “Shoo-oo-oo-oot!” said Jonah, slow and Suthon. “Riding brooms would rock!”

For me, the book segment got me thinking more clearly about what I did. When I tried the broom, I took it like borrowing an old skateboard. In the third book it said that the Firebolt, Harry’s extra-sweet second flying broom, had a top speed of one hundred fifty mph. That’s fast, and seems like a broom oughta go faster downhill or with a tailwind, don’t it? Our family runs a trucking company, named like the action movies startin with “Trans” and endin with our name. Like them Dukes, we make it a point to have sick, crazy fast vehicles for recreation, even got our own Audi A3. But when I flew LeClara’s broom to our truck from the balcony that was the fastest I ever went on anything. I was sure of that.

Most Illinois come flat as a pancake, not like mountain country where a distant familiar peek tells you what burg come next. When you drive through non-Chicagoland, Illinois, off in the distance you see nothing. Except, that is, when you drive toward Effingham, Illinois. It was raining steady but with a high cloud ceiling. You could see the whole thing.

Effingham is the crossroads of America. That is, I-70 and I-57 merge for a few miles, then split apart and continue on. A lot of wheels ride that connecting stretch of road. To acknowledge that junction, a cross went up, one hundred, ninety-eight foot tall, built to uplift and edify those who drive by, also built to beat out the cross in Texas, the one that used to hold the tallest crucifix in America record. I looked at the pyramid shaped points at the ends of the cross’ arms and head and wondered if they gave the cross added power – pyramidal power. Of course, only one of the three pentahedrons might possibly align to the north-pole, y’know, now that it’s shifted a scoch.

I saw Jonah looking at the tower, and I knew from the other times we passed by that he was thinking himself a prayer. I’d heard him at it enough times to know. Jonah never beseeches much for himself, so I beheld the tower and mumbled some worshipful words for Jonah. I muttered a few things about us learning to be real, with the help of the Son and what not.

I heard a slam from in back. Lavinia dropped from above, pacing us and getting rained on. She knocked on the window. I run it down.

“Get off at the next exit,” she shouted. “Bobber’s truck stop.” That sounded a lot more neighborly than it reads. “Park somewhere that keeps the back door private. Then you need to do the combination and open up back there.”

“Is the combination 62-4-42? Like the number you dial to enter the ministry of magic.”

“You know your Harry Potter facts, don’t you?” She smiled. “In numerology 62442 comes out to be a nine – completion.”

“Yes, Ms.”

“Ms?” Lavinia shook her head. “I’m not crazy about that either, but you are trying.” She laughed again. It was nice joking with her, and Jonah waved enthusiastically. But the exchange felt edgy to me after what happened. I gave her a thumb’s up and closed the window.

Bobber’s is one of your biggest truck-stops – so big you smell the diesel two mile out, another mile closer the coffee and tabasco fumes come waftin. We found a parking place between two trucks with sunshades and reefers running, pullin the nose in a glumph proud so the back ends of those trucks hid the door end of the container.

After opening the door, I put the ladder in place. Leaving the brooms, they passed as tourists. Tatty with her eye make-up, she stepped down trying not to touch anything dirty. LeClara made me feel good, the way she took my hand to help her down. Linnea approached the ladder next, and I held my hand up to her. The way she pushed it away, that smile of hers before she jumped down, that stuck in my mind when I folded the bars agin the door.

Lavinia talked about how Route 66 used to make a gentle turn at Effingham, going with the flow, not crossing, not crossed. “Abandoning our highways for the interstate system, the *Ameribahn* acclimated Americans to the coming small-town downtown ruination by the box stores.”

“Hey, ba… Hey, brother, leave the door open,” said a familiar voice behind me. Standing there in his black concert T, Jonah did make a good-looking pig. Paps always says, if you’re going to do something, do it well.

Swinging the door open, I looked into the dark container. “What about their stuff?” I reckoned they must have things of value in there.

“The coven needs you to keep watch, make sure nobody tries to go in there, but keep the door open.”

“What about you?”

“I’m a pig. Not a pit bull.” He made a somewhat human sounding laugh. “They want me to come for supper.”

“Jonah!” I put my hands up and shook my head. “There’s truckers stop here that know you. Somebody might recognize the curl of your hair.”

“It’ll be okay, kiddo.” Lavinia whipped up a spell to make me look human. If I put my front legs on the table and lean, looks like I’m sitting in a chair at the table.”

“All right then.” I took it on faith. “She can whip your spell for you in there, and I’ll sit here for a spell.” I sat on the edge of the container and hung my legs down. Then I pulled them in because of the rain. And I waited. They took a lot longer than Jonah and I ever took. I waited some more, and it kept on raining. Deep puddles in the gravel proved that.

Had some luck telling myself I was getting more real by learning patience. I did some push-ups. I recited old poems and the Gettysburg Address. I practiced a lot with patience, to larn getting real. Then I finally had enough of the ef-ing patience! Got so torqued, I never noticed it stopped raining.

You wouldn’t expect it, us being truckers and all, but our family don’t cotton much to cursing. Paps set the tone for us. If we ever commence complaining, we do it family friendly. But the sun had set to settin, and I come annoyed. Couldn’t help myself. I started taking verbal shots at Jonah, firing blanks: “That Jonah… that ef-ing (I’d say that for the ‘f” word) that ef-ing Jonah…” Amazingly it become: “Jonah, that ef-ing ham!”

Effingham, Illinois would never sound the same. Was that magic? They say people don’t usually laugh alone, but I did! The thing where I called Jonah’s mammal bumps hogwarts, my side got awful soar laughing. Lavinia cursed Jonah, she done it in Pig-Latin! Instead of a cat burglar he would be a ham burglar.

I knew right then, I knew laughing was one of the secrets to realness, finding something funny in the too serious. Cogitating realness, comparing the genuine laugh to the fake laugh, plenty to learn pondering all that. Just as I stowed that idea away, a coven of brooms got summonsed out of the container, like Linnea’s animation. Lavinia's jabbed me hard going by. I almost laughed again. Not quite.

There they were, behind our container, settling onto their brooms. Jonah sat the front end of Lavinia’s broom, still looking to me like a boar in shorts and a T-shirt, her sitting behind him. All white hooved, he had a grip on the broom handle like the last grasp on a suicide knob. The “He’s riding bitch” thought came around, and I let it sojourn along as fast as I could. Nobody seemed to notice, but that would sound bad if somebody read my mind.

When the witches lifted off, I closed the door part way and shinnied up top. I had to see what was going on. People coming and going, even when those witches angled into the sky on the way to the Effingham cross, nobody noticed. Lavinia flew point, but it looked like the red-head crowded her.

I watched them, curving and changing direction together like a flock of starlings, murmurating about. A flying convoy, they flew up one side of the cross, over the top of it and down the other side. The news had footage of that moment, and you can’t see the witches at all in that. The picture went out of focus when the change happened. What I saw, when the witches flew by the ends of the crucifix, the pointed pyramid shape of the ends filled in to make the ends flat. Then the coven paused, ready to fly back my way. I could see up there them floating.

I was about to climb down and open the door wide when I felt my phone vibrate. “Could you follow us down the road?” said Linnea’s text message. “We need to cut loose for a while. This flying in place, bites!”

While I composed an answer, another text came.

“Lavinia said to tell you ‘We would very much appreciate it, sir.’”

“Okay. Let’s do it then!” I said it enthusiastically out loud while I texted it, meaning to mask any contentious notion I might husband about likening Lavinia calling me sir to Jonah calling her ma’am. But I did it only to play it safe. I had begun to think these witches did not read minds so much. But it had showed me how nilly-willie the words in my head went. I locked up the back and climbed into the driver’s seat, headed out I-70. I followed the road with one eye. The other eye followed the sky, traveling above the weathered but postcard worthy bones of Route 66.

And what a sky! The moon, a few days shy of full, shined an arch across my horizon, all the way from Effingham to the Mississippi, reforming just ahead. Linnea messaged me shots of the moon-bow, so dramatic from above. I still have the pictures. So beautiful, sure it touched my heart and made me realer. Five times they did it on the way to St. Louis; the coven summersaulted the moon-bow. I saw the last one when I crossed the Mississippi bridge.

I did not take it for some marvel of intuition, but I knew without a doubt they would loop the Gateway Arch, especially after they splashed the waves flying across the Miss. They traversed the riverfront park, splitting into two squiggly lines going past both sides the courthouse. Slipping past Linnea like the bad hat, Tatty led left.

A flood of text directions guided my short trip to the Ball Park Hilton. Made me wonder, was getting good at following directions another secret to becoming real with people, trusting them and wanting to make their plans work, or could asking for directions still amount to moments of weakness that you don’t want any woman to see, like Jonah said? He always laughed. Who knows if he meant it?

The guests gathered at the far corner of the hotel property. As soon as I set the brakes, I was on the ground hustling back to open the door and set the ladder. Lavinia explained that “Commercials usually contain magical scenarios, like novels and movies, conditioning people to think that unexplainable phenomena, a miracle if you will, can solve a real-life problem.” Jonah was front row, could care less who saw him as a pig. “‘These dramatizations,’” she read from a magazine article. “‘Have led a significant cohort of people to clean up their minds and discipline themselves.’” Lavinia looked up and scanned her audience. “Made up stories of magic motivated them to make magic in the stories of *their* lives.”

“Harry Potter books!” somebody declared and you could tell everybody agreed.

There it was, after all the hours of Jonah’s talk shows, all the dramatic hosts and well-informed callers that my headphones failed to cancel – best topic ever! This I had to hear. I would find a bush or a rock that I could put between me and the presentation, a private place to hear the show.

Tap on my left shoulder, and I looked back. Then I looked back the other way. “Hi, Darrin,” I said to my number six brother. Jonah’s number one and I’m seventh. Darrin was holding a Milwaukee drill, hole-saw chucked. Our family packs Milwaukee because they’re still made right here in the good old North America. Hey, made in Mexico, they don’t have to send it around the world in cargo containers, exhausting heavy fuel oil, risking hauling one of the fifteen-hundred containers that fall overboard every year. “What are you doing here?” I asked.

He held up three deadbolt sets. “Jonah asked me to install locks on this box.” Darrin does our fixing and fabricating. As for interest in witches, the only emotional thing he said to me about a Harry Potter movie we saw together: “It’s going to take some high dollar roofers to fix the damage that dragon did to Harry’s boarding school.” That’s Darren.

“Right. So they can open up from inside.” I looked up at Lavinia with her green curtain, audience hanging on every word. “Can you wait for her to finish?” I pointed at Darrin’s pickup. “Hang loose for an hour?”

He looked at me sideways, but then he turned toward his truck. “Okay, baby brother.”

“Thanks. Hey, Darrin.”

“Yeah.”

“Notice anything unusual about Jonah?”

“Not really.”

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Walking toward the glint of our mirrors, I saw movement in the shadows, the shape of a woman, stepping up onto the running board. Coming closer, I saw it was Linnea with a hand on the door handle, hair loose over her shoulders.

On her other side she held two brooms, natural straw and stick craftwork. Both had curves going the right way to repeat the arch of Linnea’s back as she stretched to peek into my window, an amazing picture, I mean, if you deleted the truck, with its less perfect curves. “Anybody home?” she asked, looking toward the gap at the top of the window.

“Jonah’s around back with your sister.” I barely smiled. Everybody else had all the fun, flying the cross and the moon-bows. “What are you doing with those?”

“We had such an epic ride, I thought you would like a turn.”

“Wow. Did you read my mind?” I asked her sarcastic, but she *had* read me about right.

“No,” Linnea said flatly, and I could see it in her eyes. She caught my grumpy tone. “A mind isn’t like reading off paper. With a book, the words don’t change.”

“I don’t know. I just read your mind saying you want help doing a chore with these brooms.”

“What?” Linnea looked from one broom to the other and sighed. “Lavinia told Jonah cave water could help him. Jonah told her you know where to find it.” Linnea stepped down off the running board and held up the brooms, one in each hand, looking up at me. “My Aunt LeClara says you can fly one of these.” She shrugged. “Not everybody can, you know.”

I shook my head. “I only tried it once. But if you don’t mind flying with a student driver…” I reached for the broom with the hood tied over top its handle.

“That one belongs to my sister.” Linnea pulled it back. “I don’t have her permission for you.”

“Okay.” I said it like it didn’t matter. But I just come within inches of getting my hands on the crystal ball broom.

“You can use mine.” She held the other one to me. Then she pulled it back. “You’re disappointed!”

“You read my mind?”

“Like I said. A mind is not like a book to read.” Linnea frowned at me. “But sometimes I look at somebody’s face, I get a sentence or two.” She stepped back. “Like just now.” Linnea looked away. “My broom’s not good enough for you?” She sounded hurt.

“No. I’m not good enough for it.” I shook my head. The way she said it, whapped me but good. I knew better, and I got “not real” anyway. “Look at me. I would very much appreciate flying your broom.” I put my hands together, looked her in the eye.

“All right. All right.” Before Linnea handed me her broom, she tied a black satin rope to the middle of its handle. “We do have something important to do.”

“Right.”

“But first, you have to answer a question.” While we stood there talking, she tied the other end of the black rope between her legs.

“What.”

“How is it that you know where to find cave water in Missouri?”

“I grew up in Missouruh.”

“Really?” She gave me a look. “You made such a big deal about us being from the ‘Nawth’ and you come from Missouri?”

“I admit it, St. Louis and Kansas City seem more like Chicago or Cleveland.”

“Than Memphis or New Orleans?”

I held up a finger. “But troops from Missouri sided with the South.”

“At least you *can* say Missouri correctly.”

“According to a Nawthoner.” I turned sideways from her to swing a leg across the broom. She seized an opportunity to slap the back of my head. “Hey!”

“You should’ve seen that coming?” Linnea stepped back from me, putting a hand on the truck fender, holding the broom with the other hand, sliding it down between her legs and setting a stance. “Let’s take it slow. Look up above us, but focus down closer, like the lower branches of the trees. Good. Good. Then shifting your gaze slowly up toward the treetops. That’s it.”

“Up to the treetops,” I said, and we drifted higher. “Shouldn’t we get up by the rooftops?”

“Those are tall rooftops.” Linnea held a hand up as if to block me seeing the penthouse. “Just lead us where we should go.” She randomly pointed toward the interstate, and we made way. “I know,” she said. “You think people will see us. But you’d be amazed. With all the video clips and social media distracting everybody, you step off in a public place. Hardly anybody notices. Some teenager walked up to me once: ‘Where’d you get that?’” Linnea spoke with a valley girl voice. “‘It’s new,’ I said. ‘Wait a month and google it.’”

“That happened?”

“Cross my heart.”

I had to think about that phrase. Are crosses good for hearts? I remembered that the heart has a little known glandular function. When love squirts into the bloodstream, it comes straight from the heart. Now how did supposedly ignorant medieval people know that? Symbolizing love with a heart? Maybe I was thinking too much, but stuff in my head that I always leaned on had come loose. “I’m not used to living supernaturally,” I confided.

“Natural is natural. It doesn’t get more natural by calling it super.” Linnea sounded annoyed. “That’s like being really unique.”

“It is or it isn’t. Like complete.”

“Right. So take it slow. Look ahead for near destinations that lead to the next one.” Linnea cruised along by my side, following streets from above. “Until you get close, if you think of your final destination, think quickly and indirectly.”

I liked this, her teaching me like a friend, getting me behind the wheel on a country road. “Avoid thinking about how the destination looks?” I pointed, like signaling another rider on a bike trip.

Linnea read the signal and followed along. “Correct. Until you get close.” We followed the on-ramp to the Forty-Four, drifting right to travel above the shoulder of the freeway.

Flying along so effortlessly up there, combined with Linnea’s personality, it set me at ease to comment about our destination. “It’s been a while,” I said. “But I have always loved the crisp way a cave smells.”

So much blurred motion, the easy turns along I-44, the smell of water along the Meramec River. It happened so fast, but I knew where we were when we flew past our barns, shops and fields through the secret entrance to our family’s secret cave, scarin the bats. As a boy I wandered the caverns, finding the “charmed” cave water for Gammy’s remedies. “Never touched a pipe,” she would gleefully say.

I swiped down my phone screen to light the flashlight. We hovered above the sparkling ancient water that I come to dip from as a boy, walking in on the narrow ledge. Beneath the surface, tiny fish certified the water potable.

“Okay then.” Linnea gestured scoldingly. “This is why I suggested you think shorter goals.” She wiggled her broom handle and dropped.

“You thought that would happen?”

“I saw how fast you flew down to the parking lot in Pennsylvania. It’s unusual to fly *that* fast. First time for me.” Linnea took a ball jar from the purse hanging off her shoulder. “Water’s cool.”

“Fifty-eight degrees.”

“This room?”

“Every room. Like all the rooms in your body keep the same temp.”

“Oh yeah.” Linnea looked about the low domed meander niche with the entrances at either end of the ledge. “So, you’ve hiked this cavern?”

“Many times.”

“And you’ve been to this part… lots… right?”

“Yeah.” I looked right and left, like trying to remember. “We go…”

Linnea held a hand up, threatening another back-head backhand.

“All right. All right. This way.” I started moving toward the smaller entrance on the right, the one that led to the surface, but then I paused. “Say, that black rope’s what kept us together, right?”

“It worked well, didn’t it?”

“It did, but now it’s untying itself.”

“Oh, heck. It’s untying here, too.”

“What’s going on?”

Linea put her hands to her face. “I didn’t actually ask my sister to borrow it.” She reached out to me with her purse. “Here. Hold this.”

I hesitated. Jonah always told me not to hold a purse. If you’re desperate enough to do it by the underhand, you shouldn’t. Otherwise, it never looks good. Of course, there weren’t a lot of people watching. I took the purse.

“Finally!” Her look, so funny. I liked visiting with her. “Stay where you are,” she said. “I’m coming around behind you, if I get enough time. Whoa!” The broom moved forward fast, and she pushed off, landing waist deep in water and flittie white fish. Linnea laughed.

“Your sister summoned her broom?” I grabbed the rope where it floated and shoved it into my pocket.

“Yes sir. I would have thought she had enough of it, flying all the way from that cross.”

“I’ll bet it’s Jonah’s idea. He loves exciting modes of transportation.”

“That is what brooms are.” She waded toward the back side of my broom. “Can you tip it down in back for me. Looks like I get to ride bitch.”

“In back is riding bitch?” I tipped the broom handle, imagining the back going down into the water and me staying dry.

“Sure, the back is bitch, just like riding a motorcycle.” The whole broom went underwater, letting her slip onto the back. In the sudden darkness, we rose out of the water. “Sorry. My broom’s a little spirited, but she likes you.”

“I got my phone wet, but your purse is dry.”

“Perfect!”

“What?”

“Just kidding. Sorry about your phone.” Reaching around, Linnea took the purse from me, held it to my waist with both hands. Her soft words tickled my ear. “Picture your truck, in all its diesel sippin and grinnin glory.”

That broom flew us right into my sleeper. The TV had an old Mannix episode just ending. Before my eyes closed, a surfer dude passed something burning to another surfer guy while Joe Mannix consoled a precocious kid. Linea was so neighborly. She took off my shoes and socks, pulled off my wet pants, knew I was beyond doing it for myself. “Why did you flatten the ends of the cross?” I asked, raising a leg to help.

“Such horrid feng shui. The points were like knives, stabbing their energy across the country.” She pulled up my blanket and gave my forehead a peck. “Good night Southern man. Sleep well.”

“Whatever happens with Jonah or me, you can trust us to keep your secrets.”

“Don’t worry about that. A spell will give you uneventful and happy memories of this trip. And you’ll get paid handsomely.”

“Will I remember you?”

“Ah…” She looked off. “It’s better for us to forget about each other. That’s the witching way.”

Most witches descend from long families within the craft. They grow up with magic. Other people I’ve talked to who come to it late, the rescues, they had the same experience the day they first lived magic intentionally. When they stopped moving, they went to the dream-world to sort out the experience.

I saw Granddad in our barnyard broadcasting feed to a polite gathering of chicken, turkey and geese. He addressed me with my nickname. “Hank. I know you tire of getting called baby brother.” He winked, and I could tell Granddad had his memory this time, like when I was a kid. “Your pappy was a seventh son. So was I. That makes your brothers a mite jealous of you. But we are a righteous family. All bear the same mark.” Then Granddad tucked me in, like when I was little.

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I awoke to the sound of rain. Ahead of us, the moon retired hours ago.

“Hey sleeping beauty,” said Jonah when he heard me sitting up. “And I mean that. You truly are a beautiful soul.”

“Okay. Back atcha.” I got myself into the shotgun seat. “You’re in good spirits.”

“And so is Lavinia.”

“You and Lavinia took flight after the talk.”

“We did.”

“Are you two friends?”

“Off on a better foot, least-whys.” Jonah took a drink from the long straw that led to his cave-water smoothie. “Something good happened with us.”

“Oh, do tell.”

“Well, you know that thing they always say a man should give to a bitchy woman. I gave it to her good. I gave it to her real good.”

“Wait Jonah. You want to be human again, right? Better calm your amygdala right down!” I got stern. “Don’t say something crude.”

“What? No, I gave her an attentive ear. And let me tell you, she knows cool stuff.” He slapped his leg-rest. “And *so* funny!”

“And she curses people.”

“What I hear, mostly she undoes curses. All kinds of them.”

“Come again.”

“Yes, my far less used up and worn out kin. Turns out, ordinary people put curses on each other all the time.”

“How so?”

 “Saying things like ‘You’ll never amount to anything.’” Jonah shook his head sadly. “I hope you haven’t heard that one. Or for another instance, ‘You’re making a big mistake.’ That’s a curse, too.”

“It sounds familiar.”

Jonah took on a sad, tortured expression. “How about this curse? ‘You’ll never make money at electronics without a diploma.’ Ever hear that one?”

“That’s not the same.”

“It could be if you bought into it. Just in case, say ‘Gone away, gone away, gone away!’”

“Gone away! Gone away! Gone away!”

“Very good.” He looked over at me. Pig or not, I knew he was smiling. “We have a surprise for you.”

“What?”

“Well, Darrin put deadbolts on one of the doors back there.”

“Uh huh. I saw the drill.”

“Now it locks to the other door.”

“Uh. Right. Good fix.”

“Yep.” Jonah nodded happily. “Lavinia can open the door from inside.” He looked at me. I saw a tear roll down his snout. “It feels so right to fix a problem for her.”

“Good job.” I nodded. “Is that my surprise?”

“Oh! The surprise. Darrin drove all the way home. Then he come back.”

“Yeah?”

“He brung you something from Granddad.”

“Suh?” That caught my interest. “Where is it?”

Jonah pointed back over his shoulder, beyond the sleeper. “It’s back there.”

“Why?”

“They’re ‘clearing’ it for you.”

“But what is it?”

“I can’t tell you.” He smirked. Really! Jonah smirked. “Well, I could. If I wanted to spoil it.” Then he looked around like checking who could hear. “Okay, it’s an item Granddad doesn’t use anymore.”

“An item?”

“Yeah. An item. Like in a video game?”

“That the gospel?”

“The gospel truth. It’s an antique, but you could still use it if you wanted. You’ll like it.”

“Hmm.” That made me think of playing *Warcraft*, buying a shield made from petrified bark, my childhood days. Made me wonder if some of what we played back then, the movies we watched, made us less real, less human. A mess of guys got hit and kicked conceptually before I got growed. I leaned my seat back and looked out, thinking about Granddad, remembering his easy nature.

He had such a presence before environmental factors took his mind. When I dreamed him, I should have asked him things. We had passed our township, our county and our far state line. Jonah had even chewed through a good helping of Oklahoma before I crawled out of the sleeper. A lone star flag on a sign said welcome.

“Woo who!” Jonah Homered. “All the driving you’ve done, you finally get to the West.”

“That so?” I peered out the window. “It doesn’t look so different.”

“*Au contraire*.” Jonah shook his head. “It’s day and night. In the West…” He stretched his leg out, pointing onward dramatically. “You can set sail.”

“All right.” I considered my situation. The things that happened, if you wanted to reenact them, you’d have to do it on green screen. My phone was broken, couldn’t get a text from Linnea and my brother was *so* happy. I crawled back into the sleeper, trying to remember if the witch of the West were good.

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I awoke to Jonah whapping at my arm where it hung off the bed, so considerable gentle, at first I wondered who it was. Wheels weren’t turning. It was night. I put on some dry things and sat on the edge of the sleeper, behind the seats. Looking out I saw we had pulled up in an old town with a moonlit valley view. “Time for me to work the wheel?”

“Nope. We’re staying here tonight. Be in California tomorrow morning.” He winked. “Got an extra early start in Saint Louie. Even had time to flatten the ends on a giant cross in Texas.”

“Oh?”

“Linnea got you a new phone. She transferred your apps and pictures.”

“If you say so.” I took it from him. “My old one got soaked.”

“She just called.” Jonah pointed across some parking. “You need to go into the lobby of this hotel and pay.” He held out the black amex card. “Lavinia’s card got declined. Just pay the bill. Act like it’s no big deal.”

“Okay. Sure.” It didn’t seem like a big deal. Wait, were we falling under a spell? Crossing in front of the shotgun seat to get out, I looked at the old case sitting there, like the case for a musical instrument, black fabric with leather ends, Granddad’s surprise I suspected. An old clarinet, or who knows? The case had no bulge, but it looked it could hold a saxophone. They say that’s the instrument that sounds the most like a human voice, but I never heard Granddad play anything but harmonica.

I had to walk up a stone stairway to open one of the brass trimmed oak doors. The ceilings on the lobby level set low, but with the burgundy carpet and all the dark reddish wood, the room had an impressive ambiance. This building went back a long way, likely living another life or two, fulfilling another purpose or two. It felt so neighborly.

Western skirt and shirt, pigtails and a cowgirl hat, Linnea stood speaking to a pretty lady with Gandhiesque patterns in henna on her arms. “You’ve done wonders for this place. The energy is divine. Really, I’ve been in some amazing spiritual places, and this hotel feels like that.”

I laid Jonah’s card on the counter. “It does have its charm,” I said, nodding and looking about the room. Behind the front desk a painting captured an historical Western moment. French and Yavapai-Apache the plate said.

“Thank you.” The lady spoke a velvety Asian accent, swiping Jonah’s card, looking gratefully into Linnea’s eyes. “We have people here from beyond the veil.” As she said that, the sad native woman and her tragic fur trapper stepped out of the painting, rendering it a landscape. I had just got used to seeing witches. Now I’m seeing ghosts.

“Aha! Star-crossed lovers clinging to memories of young love,” said Linnea, cheerfully regarding the wispy couple. “Their love will last forever. But they cannot let go of living on Earth because this hotel has such good energy.” That made me wonder, did Hogwarts have good energy? What do you think?

Looking at the receipt, I tried not to gasp at something truly scary – the price. Appeared we rented most of the three-story building. But Linnea made everything okay. Even the ghosts took pleasure hearing Linnea’s sweet voice. They trailed us as we walked to the door, stepping back when Tatty bustled in for the room-keys. She shook her head at the ghosts, gave me a sharp look on her way out.

Linnea missed that. “Don’t tell me,” she whispered, steppin out. “You think I spread it pretty thick with the owner.”

“I thought you spoke kindly. Occurs to me, telling folks what they’re doing right, that’s getting as real as real gets.”

“Look at you, reading my thoughts.” Linnea smiled approvingly. “A lot of people have emotional needs that never get met. You look and you can see something missing. I spoke the simple truth, but nobody has ever told her any of what I just said.”

“And it did her some good to hear it. I saw it in her face. It went soft.”

“Well done!”

Outside, the cargo doors had opened. An audience, which included Jonah, had gathered. The hotel ghosts stood near him in the front row, listening intently. Think it was my idea, Linnea and I stepped closer to hear her sister speak: “Let us remember,” Lavinia declared. “Consciousness traces back to the hundred million years in Pangaea, the uni-continent. In those days, we lived simpler lives as lichen, palm trees and dragonflies – brother and sister all, black or white, North or South, we blended mind and matter.

“North and South, brothers and sisters!” I put a hand to my forehead, staggered, taking *that* in. “So she’s saying aspects of my spirit stretch back that far? All the way back to when the primordial ooze got to where you could walk on it?” Seemed a decent rhetorical question but, the way I said it, I could see how it made her laugh.

“It’s simple stuff.” Linnea shook her head at me. “If you look back at yourself as ‘we’ instead of as ‘I,’ you’ll remember.” She looked toward the semi.

“When you let the peace of that ancient memory in,” Lavinia continued. “It helps you turn off the voice in your head. People take classes and spend years sitting correctly to achieve such a meditative state. From there you can see the truth, but you can do it sitting any old way. You can do it walking.”

“I thought meditation might be a tad flaky, maybe even a wheense foolish,” I admitted. “But turning off the voice in my head, fishing is like that for me. When I stop thinking they come to me.” I laughed. “Then I let them go to keep it fair.”

“Whatever.” Linnea waved for me to follow her around to the front of the truck. She looked back at me with that goofy smile. “It just sounds like my big sister saying stuff.”

“To you that’s what it is.”

“Right?” She pointed up at the cab. “Have you taken your grandfather’s gift out, yet?”

I looked at her blankly. “Ma’am?”

Linnea stepped up on the running-board and swung the shotgun door out of the way of the seat. “Open it already! What are you waiting for?”

“All right. All right.” I stepped up beside her and slid the buttons apart to release the latches. Swinging the case open, I beheld a completely unexpected, yet hauntingly familiar sight. For the first time in my life I felt the theme music of the spheres, written by the angel Michael (Post.)

Linnea reached in and stroked the wear-polished handgrip area. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

I picked up the business half, admiring the blue tarnished copper brush cap, the perfect whisking blend of sorghum and horsehair fibers. The handle felt both strong and light, wrought from swirly tight-grained wood. “They painted the handles in the Harry Potter movies to make them look like wood,” I said. “Getting athletic in front of a green screen, that put such a strain, they made them out of titanium.”

“C’mon,” Linnea said impatiently. “Hook it up.”

“Okay, okay!” Feeling a bit like Paul Newman in *The Hustler*, I screwed the two halves of the broom together, the bronze Wentworth threads meshing smoothly. I just stared at it, turning it over in my hands.

Linnea jumped off the running board, crouching slightly on the cracked concrete. “Let’s take a ride!”

I stepped down next to her. “Might as well.” I stood on one foot and swung the broom between my legs, expecting Linnea to summon her own broom. Waiting without words, I savored the perfection of that family heirloom. I did not notice such a feeling the other times I broomed, but the handle vibrated gently in my hands. Felt right at home there.

Linnea pointed out the tall dome-shaped peak off across the valley, white stone atop, bottom rock, red. She straddled up behind me and snuggled her arms tight round my waist, cheek agin my back. Felt so cozy! “How about taking us there?” she suggested.

I looked out, reckoned she made a reasonable request. Rush of wind like no pink jeep ride could ever imagine, our shoes hit hard on stone above the tree line. Standing there, I glanced over my shoulder. Linnea’s hat hung back off her neck, pigtail on her shoulder. She was smiling. According to Jonah the moon would not make it full until tomorrow, but you wouldn’t know it. I could see the buildings of the town far below, main-street spotted by dark skies streetlights. On the edge of the valley I saw thunder clouds, waiting to soak us another round. “It seems funny it stops raining times she’s teaching.”

“It’s no coincidence.”

“Oh yeah. How’s that?” I twisted around on the broomstick so I could see her.

“Lavinia is the oldest sister in my family, an elder of the coven.” Linnea’s voice took on an annoyed undertone that I would not have noticed when I first met her. “Lavinia devotes herself to helping people improve their lives – such a good cause the weather feels obligated to help.” Linnea frowned. “She’s so important. I’m just the simple-minded seventh sister. Funny thing. My mom and grandmother were number sevens. They got picked on, too.”

“I’m the seventh son of the seventh son of a seventh son. So I can relate. Everybody treats me like a kid.”

“But you *do* feel the magic.” Linnea held her arms out like wings. “When I was a girl, I played with the wind in my backyard. I waved my arms in it, and the wind followed. You know, pre-teenagers are the deepest thinking age. I got all angsty and worried about doing harm by manipulating my environment, but I came to see that playing with the wind was playing with it.” Linnea gestured and a pleasant breeze sojourned on by. “Why wouldn’t our environment like that? To play? That’s different from what Lavinia does with weather.” She got a good grip about my waist. “Take us back, but… wait… try to maneuver as you go. Get creative with your speed!” Linnea put her hat on, pushed it down. “Move your hips!”

You’d think I took her a carnival ride, the doofy sounds Linnea made back there. We leaned turns together like on a motorcycle. Down in the valley I saw a crick. We went to it and followed it upstream to a red-walled canyon, moon shimmering the water. It was sweeter than a hay ride under the Milky Way with lightening bugs below. For you city kin, like a feather-clouded summer moon, kicking the can and hiding into the wee hours. “I see Kanye! I see Kim?”

Instead of blasting us in the face, the wind flew along with us. When I turned to go back the wind follered, Linnea playing with it like when she was young. I slowed down as we came back to the hotel parking, touching down easy. Linnea held on a moment before she stepped back off the broom. I felt reluctant to end the ride, too. She still had her hat on, cute as a speckled plum.

With great care, I pressed the broom into the velvet indentations and tucked the case into a private nook of the sleeper. “Isn’t this unusual?” I asked. “Some random guy like me having this broom?”

“My step-sister, Tatia, she thinks you shouldn’t.” Linnea smiled slyly. “When I took your wet pants off for you, I saw something only a wife should see.”

“My tattoo?”

“I did. You sure are a hardcore Harry Potter fan!” She giggled. “Anyway, most witches are women. But anybody can do magic. It’s part of being human. Learning to follow the still small voice of intuition word for word, that’s the path. I think men deserve the chance to do that, too.” She looked at me appraisingly. “You do magic like a man.”

Out on the edge of the parking lot I noticed a plant that I thought might interest Linnea. I closed the door behind me. “Look at this,” I said, walking toward it. “I believe that’s a hesperaloe plant. I have an herb identification app I’m making that will identify it for sure.” But taking the phone out of my pocket, I remembered that mine died. “Ah, heck, I’ll bet I lost it.” I turned on the phone and went to the apps. “No. Here it is.”

“I transferred everything from your phone.”

“That’s amazing. I figured the cave water fried it.” I scratched my head.

“See. It’s good you understand the science, but information *can* survive without electronics.” The way she said it, I believed. “I put a wand app on your phone, too.”

“Nice.” I pointed my phone at the shoulder-high plant and tapped the screen. “Yep. Hesperaloe. Javelina are kin to Jonah’s barnyard pig species, and they eat these little flowers.” I shrugged. “Our ma, she says: ‘Every plant has its own nourishments, tonics and enzymics. So if you can take it in, you oughter.’”

“You made that app?”

“It was easy, like face recognition but for plants – more distinct differences. Mama insists I follow through on my idea, and I’m glad she does. Been fun. Somehow I’ll find them, but there’s still plenty of powerful plants I don’t know.”

“Is that so?” Linnea sounded funny, whispery I’d call it. “I’d love to help you with… ah… you have a clever idea. Hmm, you’re going to make some lucky lady a good husband.”

“You, too.” I faltered. “I mean, you know what I mean.”

I thought she would laugh, but Linnea just went to it, picking the orange flower-cups that bloomed up and down the dry stalks. She didn’t say, but I figured they were for Jonah. I got something from the truck to hold them. Along the way I saw the ghosts walking hand in hand, looking happy in love. Moving much faster, Tatty come the same way. When she looked at me, I’d swear she smiled. The night felt special to me. I shall never forget it.

When I got back, Linnea had stepped down from the parking lot to a lower vacant area. There, tumbleweeds leaned toward letting go of the Earth, and hesperaloe offered their tiny flowers. In the shadows, I saw movement, a silver haired javelina delicately eating blossoms. “Look. Here’s one, now,” I told Linnea. “Careful not to corner it.”

“These flowers taste swell,” I heard Jonah say. Then I made out his silhouette, his foot pinning down the stalk for the javelina to eat. That surprised me.

“What are you doing, hanging out with wild animals?” Linnea berated. “Don’t you want to become more human?”

“Now wait a minute,” Jonah said defensively. “Javelinas are not big rodents, like the rural legend says. They are *suina*, just like me. I googled it.” He laughed. “Thanks to the fickle finger of fate I’m learning from a *sunai* suina.” Look all that up in your Funk and Wagnalls. I did.

Linnea was not convinced. “You should stay with humans.”

“He is!” said the javelina. “I transformed myself so we could be closer.” Lavinia rested a foot against one of Jonah’s. “We have come to care about each other. Wanted to hold hands.” To demonstrate, she clovenly caressed him.

“I call her Lavinia Javelinia, and she laughs,” Jonah volunteered. “See how far we’ve come.”

Linnea did not laugh. “What about the witching way?” She threw a handful of flowers at the both of them. “You have to forget each other.” She stormed off toward the hotel.

“Your friend doesn’t understand,” Jonah said. “I figured out a lot of stuff about being real slash human. Like…oh… forget about counting your blessings. Just quit complaining because all of that stuff’s blessings, too.”

I looked after Linnea. Then I looked back at Jonah. “I’ll talk to her.”

“Okay. You know, it’s up to us, ascending the stairway to heaven or barreling down the highway to hell.”

“Okay.”

Inside, Linnea stood where Tatty sat with a laptop on the coffee table in front of her. Tatty reached into her purse and took out a room key for Linnea. Coming around beside Linnea, Tatty’s laptop screen come to view for me.

Tatty scowled at me and slammed it, packed everything upstairs. Linnea looked me sharp, too. I stepped back involuntarily. The ghosts come around standing between us, off a few steps to my left, looking dazed. Lot for them to mull over, I reckoned. They spent so many nights at the same routine, on the wall or up and down the halls. This night went different. Different ideas came to those old souls.

“Linnea, don’t be too mad at Jonah. He’s trying.”

“He’s trying my patience.” She shot a catty glance at the native woman. “These ghosts are trying my patience. Do you want to take a try at trying it?” That sounded like jokes, but Linnea never smiled.

I held my hands up, looked her square in the eye. “Look, Lavinia and Jonah like each other. They like each other a lot. And, well, we’ve been hitting it off. Is the witching way the only way?” Then the ghosts stepped between us, kind of wandered there.

“You kids are up past your bedtime.” Linnea took out her phone, tapped the screen. Undulating light surrounded it. *“Dormite!”* she commanded. Brilliant light cintilated out to the ghosts. Away with it they went, onward and upward I hoped. I heard harps. Linnea took a few steps toward the stairs, but then she stopped and glared at me.

That look, I knew I could say nothing right. “Okay, it’s late,” I said, taking pleasure in figuring out the real way for that moment: If someone’s upset, give them space! “Goodnight.” I headed for the door. Reclining in the sleeper with my phone, I caught up on the news, looking up things that Tatty’s laptop put my mind onto.

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I barely fell asleep when Jonah got into the truck. Somebody must uh got the door handle for him. “Sorry to wake you, brother. We gotta git.” From the back, I could hear the container door slamming. “Linnea sent the ghosts to the astral world, and the owners are hopping mad.”

“Might be for the best.” I sat up and put on my shoes. “Those ghosts bought the farm a long time ago.”

“Maybe so, but Lavinia had to cast a spell on the management, *forgetiumte*, or something like that. She says it should give us time to make the next county.” He pointed me toward the driver seat. “Let’s hit it.”

Tricky driving kept me occupied for a spell, up and down steep grades. As we neared La Paz County, I checked my messages. I had a few texts from Linnea, one apologetic, the next grumpy about apologizing. I texted back, made some conversation: “Did you know there are internet memes of your sister?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Google ‘Witch instructor with crystal ball and ghosts.’”

The moon lit up the dramatic landscape as we drove down into the saguaros of the lower desert. Went a good five mountainous miles before I heard back from Linnea. “DID YOU MAKE THAT VIDEO?”

“No.”

“THAT NEVER HAPPENED! NOT LIKE THAT!!!”

“I know it. Somebody used the curtain behind Lavinia’s podium like a green screen. That pasted in footage of the ghosts, it happened somewhere private.”

“I would hope so.” I was glad to see Linnea write small case letters, but she was still upset. “DID YOU SEE WHAT THE GHOSTS WERE DOING?”

“Looks like the words you had at the front desk put them in a neighborly mood.”

“Who did this?”

“Can’t say for sure. Why don’t you ask Tatty? Her laptop had a picture of your sister in front of the curtain.”

It took a moment, no text, no talk. Cogitated on activating a camera in there. Then I heard an air vent slam. Tatia took off fast, fixin’ to fly faster. I could tell. But I thought I could catch her. “Jonah, get me my broom. Get ready to take the till.”

My brother sprung to like a pit crew. While I crawled out the window, holding the steering wheel, he got my stick out of the case, screwed together and into my hands. We made the driver switch easiest ever. With Jonah in the driver’s seat, I paced him at the window, ready to fly.

Tatty caught on fast, turning and pointing her phone. The way it lit, I knew she tapped the wand app. I veered left, thinking she aimed at me and good thing, too. The mirrors would have jammed me when the truck tanked. Jonah barely managed to pull onto the shoulder as it ground down. Tatty left’n I never got out of the pits. But I was like a dog chasing your pickup. What would I do with Tatia if I caught her?

She come up with the perfect way to disable our truck. Any mechanical issue, no problem, we could have handled. Jonah and I are country boys, handy born. Darrin would come out here just as fast as the road let him – don’t matter how bent, broke, burnt or weered out. But this were different. Tatty made our beautiful Detroit diesel into a young cow. Some kind of statement to Lavinia, I reckoned. I thought it unfair. Looking back on it, we invaded Lavinia’s privacy, plain and simple. Turning Jonah into a pig could uh been the natural reaction for any woman.

Despite the spooky treatment Tatty gave me, when I got the bonnet on the lorry open, the transformation looked humanely done. (That’s Lerie's wording. She says: “You want to get mindful, empty your mind.”) The cow stood firmly supported by the cross-members with oaken planks for a deck. Tatty made no twisted attempt to connect the heifer to motor mounts, bell housing, hoses or wires.

It was not a talking or otherwise magical cow. So things must have looked straightforward. “You know,” said Lavinia. She looked into the engine compartment with me’n Jonah, back human, but she didn’t mind the rain. “I think I stand a good chance at changing it back.” She took out her phone.

“Let’s not risk it.” Jonah sounded surprisingly impassioned. “What if the spell goes wrong, and this cow ends up as an unfixable power plant, doomed to the scrap yard? Look at her. She has so much of life ahead.”

“Yes. I suppose she does.”

“This can work.” Jonah nodded earnestly. “We’ll spend what it takes to hoist out this Holstein unthreateningly. I can give her a good home. She might get milked, but she’ll never get cooked.”

“But cow dairy is the worst!”

“Really?”

“And what about your truck?”

“We can get another engine out of a wrecking yard in Prescott, Phoenix for sure.” How Jonah said it, you knew the cow mattered more than the truck. “She’s got such nice eyes,” he added. “Yes she does. Ooh. She’s a pretty girl.”

That was such uncommonly kind-hearted, good-karmahed thinking, I should uh seen it coming. But Jonah transforming back human shocked me so. “You look younger! Yer barely ugly, anymore.”

“Because as he let go of toxic thinking his body let go of toxins.” Lavinia hugged Jonah enthusiastically. It seemed she forgot she had to be somewhere.

But Lavinia was paying us to get her there. To get her there on time. I knew right then I had to do something. I had to face my fears! My broom was sitting on the driver’s seat when I climbed up. Rather than putting it away, I went around it, crawling back into the sleeper. Digging about, I found that length of magic rope that Linnea tied us with to go broom spelunking.

Linnea was standing there when I climbed out. “Can I help?”

“Yes…miss.” I touched her cheek. “Come with me.” I walked back a few strides and climbed up onto the flatbed, the narrow strip of it in front of the container. Linnea climbed up after. I hardly told her anything. She helped me like I had an extra set of hands, got all the chains loose from that container before Lavinia and Jonah finished their embrace.

I tied the rope high up on the front of the container. Then I looked back at Linnea.

“You intend to tie that to your broom.” Linea nodded thoughtfully. “And all the other broom-riders are connected by a rope that’s tied to the container.”

“What do you think?”

“That could work.” She nodded. “Only one thing.”

“What?” Her tone of voice, I feared things would go south.

“If you do that, I’m riding bitch.”

“Cuel!”

Linnea managed to convince her big sister our plan would work. Trouble was, Jonah could not leave the cow. Lavinia wouldn’t come right out and say it, but she hated to leave Jonah. “This is a vulnerable time for him,” she cautioned.

Linnea, it seemed she picked up my get it done spirit. Without running the idea by anybody, she took out her phone and tapped the wand shaped icon: “Bovinexitus!” she declared. Brilliant light leapt forth.

Jonah and Lavinia gasped. I stepped back. The cow floated up out of the truck and into the pasture beside the road. Could uh sworn that stretch were dessert when we got there. I didn’t remember seeing the other cows, munching away at clover, oblivious to the rain.

“I think your cow will be safe here,” Linnea said.

Jonah hesitated, but a dog and then a responsible looking farmer come over the rise. My brother nodded, folding the hood shut.  They got up into the container. Linnea and I mounted up, standing atop the sleeper. I lifted off slowly, rope deslackening like fixin to tow a car. When the rope tautened, the container held us a spell, then followed along.

Linnea spoke close by my ear. “It’s working.”

“Look at all the diesel we’re saving.” I wasn’t trying to be funny. I was impressed. Low compression fuel had got pricey. “Where to?”

“Los Angeles.”

“Okay.” I thought of the landmark that always made me think of Los Angeles. Shoulda thoughta Reed and Malloy’s black and white Plymouth Belvedere, sumthin hinky goin on. We accelerated. Bringing the wind along with us, Linnea made the ride a gentle breeze. We crossed mountains, fields, orchards and more mountains.

“Woo who!” exclaimed Linnea. “The Pacific!”

“Right?” Then we were floating way up high, looking down on the red bridge that always made me think of Los Angeles.

“This is the Golden Gate Bridge.”

“It’s what I pictured.”

“That’s in San Francisco.”

“Oops. This *is* my first time to California.”

“Really?” Linnea looked back at the container. “Good thing it’s night.” She pointed. “Go that way. Follow the coast. I’d say we’ll have no problem getting to Los Angeles before daylight.”

“You ladies will want to sleep in a bed tonight but, yeah, we could take it out of overdrive.” I set off, following the coast, out over the ocean. After we passed the big city, I moved in so we could see the waves lapping against cliffs and beaches, seals even. The full moon to the East, I thought about *ET*, the youngster flying a bicycle in front of the moon. That made me wonder how we’d look silhouetted against the moon, a man and a woman riding broom, towing a forty-foot cargo container. Maybe somebody saw that. Would they have to forget it?

Linnea pointed out places along the way like Big Sur and Monterey Bay. “California is amazing, so many resources and industries.” She pointed ahead across my shoulder. “Take Los Angeles with aerospace and the best theme parks. People come from all over the country because it’s the downstream. And here it is.”

I took out my phone. “Twelve o’clock.”

“It’s Friday the thirteenth!” Linnea sounded happy back there, wiggling around.

“I was thinking about that,” I said less excitedly. “Will that make trouble?”

“Trouble? Oh. Right. The bad luck thing.”

“I reckon.”

“The moon’s full tonight.”

“It *is* pretty.”

“It turns full twelve other times this year.”

“Why didn’t they just make it thirteen months to the year?”

“Here’s another one. How many men do you have with twelve apostles and one carpenter’s son?”

“Hmm.”

“Thirteen is a prime number, too. With a successful city like Los Angeles that has four million people, thirteen is one of the elite fundamentally foundational numbers beneath those millions.” Linnea moved her hands higher up my waist. “But to me, lucky or unlucky, numbers get dealt to us like cards. The best you can, play your hand.”

“Amen!”

We landed the container in the network parking lot. Our hotel sent vans. I saw Jonah break out the black amex again. I suspicioned Tatia’s hand in the coven’s interrupted prosperity. What was it with that woman? And how do you rig a crystal ball to take a selfie?

I slept on a real bed, got a shower and gave the waffle maker in the lounge a few spins. Linnea said the syrup had high fructose stuff so I put yogurt on my waffles. The hotel vans took us to the studio. We got led into a meeting with one of television’s most influential people, a game and talk show host with a down-home, sensitive demeanor that overshadowed the tabloid talk. Before we got to the meeting, a team of tailors converged on me’n Jonah, taking measurements and calling out numbers.

“What was that?” I asked Linnea.

“I don’t know. But thank you for cooperating.” She looked up at the high ceiling, at the camera booms and lights parked along the wall. “They know what they’re doing here.”

You could tell, the meeting room was a set for filming meeting room scenes. It looked so real, it made me nervous. So when our host walked in, forget it, that canary yellow suit! I looked down the table at all the smartly dressed sisters and cousins. I wondered why I was there. Only a handful of them would make the cut to go on the show. I would do more good out in the parking, guarding the black box.

“This is going to be a great show,” the host said with his usual booming cheerfulness.

Lavinia took it in stride. “The important message is that magic raining down on Earth, *prana* if you will, has intensified dramatically. Creative people like you are having fun. But many people react erratically, even insanely. How can we get them counseling and healing?”

“Good point.” He put a finger to his ear. “Jonah, Jonah’s brother, they’re telling me you need to go into that room.” A door opened.

“Okay.” I followed my brother, happy to see him human again.

They had suits for us. I traded my work shirt for a fitted button down, my boots for dress shoes and put on a silk tie. “What a shame for you,” I told Jonah. “You will never look better.”

He grinned at me. “When Lavinia says learn to be real, she doesn’t mean learn to be real mean.”

We barely returned to the table when the host put a finger to his ear. “All right,” he said, starting toward the door with a red light shining above it. “Give me Lavinia, give me Linnea, give me Jonah and give and his co-driver.”

“But they didn’t fly here on brooms,” Lavinia whispered to Linnea.

“They came all the way here with brooms between their legs. You saw Jonah’s tattoo before he put on his shorts.” Linnea shook her head. “It’s a family thing for them.”

“Do you suppose we’re related?”

“No. I don’t. We’re from the Nawth!” She giggled. “Ya’ll!”

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We walked into quite the audience, three hundred strong. They had applause lights, but that clapping sounded *so* real. Six seats awaited us on a low stage. I wondered at the extra.

“Tonight’s guests came from afar on brooms to talk to us about magic. Sayin lately there’s more of it. It makes things better for people, but other people melt down.” He smiled coyly, holding his cards. “This is a serious issue!”

“OMG!” hissed Linnea. “He really does look like a tuber head.”

“But I think,” the host continued. “We want to know about the romances that started along the way. About why they have to erase the memories of love for each other, the witching way they say. We might like a word or two about the ghost orgy.”  He looked away from us at the audience. I knew without seeing it. He had his “Somebody said something crazy” look. “Seriously, am I to understand that you turned your boyfriend into a pig?”

“Well…I…” That question took Lavinia by surprise. “Yes, I did. I can see you listen well. I can feel your capacity for compassion. You have helped people. But the truth is, I was thinking of you when I did it, thinking that you are a pig.”

He looked surprised, but they say the show must go on. He pointed at my hat. “You’ve been living an American Harry Potter story.”

“You could say that.”

“I just did.” He laughed. “In your story, who is the one who shall not get named?”

I shook my head. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Well, I for one, would like to see somebody flying a broom.”

“I sent you the video,” Lavinia told him.

A door slammed open on the side of the hall. A broom flew in. Tatty went down every curved row of seats, hanging off her handle, moving fast, I wondered if anybody else saw her. Then she sat next to me.

The audience freaked. I looked at the host, on his feet now. With the look of a trucker, he maintained the group focus effortlessly: “Ladies and gentleman, if you reach under your seat, you will find your own copy of the ending of this American witch story, something my staff worked out.”

The audience got looking beneath the seats, but soon they sat back down empty handed.”

“Nothing? There should be a hundred dollar bill for each of you, too.”

The audience groaned, but the drama kept them hangin. Lavinia amitted she made up the witching way, that she thought the other boys that liked Linnea weren’t good enough.

 Linnea freaked. “You had to come here to air our dirty laundry?”

“It’s not like that. If you can talk things out on national television, healing happens, all over the country. People out there with a similar situation get better right along with you.” Those words, you could hear it so plainly. This was a good host.

 “Okay. Fine,” said Lavinia. Then she fixed a gander at Tatty. “Why did you spread those fake pictures of me helping the ghosts make love?”

“Because you treat me like a red-headed stepchild.”

“That is what you are,” said Lavinia. She didn’t laugh, but you know she saw the humor. The audience did.

 “You made my Cummins a cow,” Jonah said. “Instead of playing the victim card, get to your issues.”

My fault, before Lavinia could explore their relationship further, I asked Tatty about all the missing hundred dollar bills. She left faster than she come, flewed off five ways to Sunday. Reckoned I coulda outrun her, but I stayed put. Last time Gramps visited my dreams, he told me Tatty’s the kind of which goes through life in fear of other people’s memories. Something we never want to become. Amen. One thing, I never saw the ending the interns come up with for us. Personally, I think our story is like life: It never ends.

Although the audience went away none the richer, they left happy. We summoned our brooms, mine caused a fuss flying to me in its case, and everybody got to ride bitch, even the host. Tallying up, difference between Bewitched and I Dream of Jeanie, Samantha had to learn a craft. Jeanie was born fully magical. Who knows about Herman and Gomez?

Linnea must have wanted to alieve my triskaidekaphobia. She gave me a kiss for luck that felt plenty real. Later on Linnea made it thirteen times – tender snuggles to boot. Listen, if this were a real story it would sound hokey to say, but everybody lived happily ever after. That’s the gospel! Thanks for listening. Be well and mean well good buddy. Ten-four!