

*For all the queers and mystics and fairies and witches
who only ever wanted to be seen.*

Perhaps it was beneath the spirits of the air and the land and the water and the mud to intervene in the lives of Hailey and Ainsley, two white women who co-owned a Southern fusion food truck, but when spirits go on living even after those who see them have been driven away, when the world goes on believing instead in single, all-knowing gods or in the movement of the planets or in the world as a simulation or in nothing at all, such beings begin to grow bored. With little else to do then, they agreed almost unanimously it was for the women's own good.

They'd formed the plan two months before the big day, after a phone call from an anxious bride-to-be who sighed with relief upon finally receiving an answer.

"Hey," came Ainsley's breathy voice, tiny and tinny through the receiver.

"I'm so sorry I've left, like, four voicemails," began the bride-to-be, "and I know things are super up in the air now that you and Hailey . . . well, you know—I mean, I was just calling to say that Zoe and I love your food and, like, of course if one of you wanted to, say, just do it alone, or if it's too painful for both of you, we totally under—"

"We're in," Ainsley said.

The bride-to-be, Lila, blinked. Three mud spirits hung from the unmoving ceiling fan above her by their long, furling tails,

so close that their bulbous noses detected the unfamiliar scent of lavender in Lila's brown hair. Humans, they'd discovered long ago, only worried about who or what was behind them and at their feet—axe murderers or palmetto bugs. They rarely looked up.

“Um, both of you?” Lila said. “You really don’t—”

“We committed to it,” Ainsley said flatly. “Unless you’ve found another caterer, which I’d understand, since we sort of ghosted.”

“No way,” Lila lied, her voice going up (the spirits knew she and Zoe had discussed other options but agreed to *hold out a little longer*), then doubled down. “No! We wouldn’t even dream of it! Oh, my god, Ainsley, thank you *so* much. Sorry again, you guys—”

“Don’t mention it,” Ainsley said, and it was unclear whether she referred to the *thank you* or the breakup, but the spirits were not convinced. When Hailey and Ainsley had visited the home of the engaged couple a few months ago, the spirits had sniffed the trouble between them, but they could not come to a consensus about how to interfere before the “lesbian food truck power couple” (as Zoe called them) had left, untouched by supernatural mischief. When the spirits learned through overheard phone calls that the tumultuous pair had agreed to cater the wedding on this land, all had been delighted at the opportunity for some excitement, then subsequently disappointed two weeks later to hear that the women had split up without supernatural interference.

After this fateful afternoon phone call, however, the news that Hailey and Ainsley planned to honor their commitment to work the wedding set the spirit world abuzz. They’d been forced to share their land with humans long enough to know how these things went, how the right sort of circumstance could force two horribly mismatched mates back into one another’s arms. They were not about to let that happen, not on their land, land that

There were many attempts to take down the witch Amarande in his subtropical convenience store kingdom, though nobody talks about him much these days.

Amarande: unapologetically powerful, unapologetically wicked, in the glamorous sprawl of Miami where winter consisted of three weeks of sixty-degree weather, where stucco houses with terra cotta roofs clashed with the glassy curvature of coastal high-rises, where speculators dredged islands out of the sea itself. Amarande, who lured tourists into dingy shops that offered kitsch towels for the forgetful, slushies for the thirsty, sunscreen for the cautious, eternal life for the poor wretches who didn't know any better—all for the small price of their souls. Healers, sorcerers, druids, magicians, and witches alike tried to take him down, outraged at his boldness, at his wickedness, at his ability to elude detection while drinking the lives of countless adults and children. What tourists broadcast their whereabouts before entering into a convenience store never to be found again, stopping in for an ice cream sandwich and maybe a lighter engraved with an ibis? Many practitioners tried to kill

Amarande, catch him, coerce his secrets from him, become his apprentice, test their power against his. Whispers traveled up the East Coast among magic practitioners, like cocaine from warmer climates barreling up the interstate in a black car with tinted windows. Most every practitioner with a lick of sense objected outwardly to Amarande's legendary Evil behavior, even if some of us nursed an envy at his effortless ability to bottle up other people's lives and lengthen his own. I listened to the rumors, fed them, propagated them for months until I finally told my fiancé I was going after him myself.

"So," I said to him the night before I was set to go. "About this weekend. There's this witch queen down South . . ."

"Amarande?" Lionel said, blowing a puff of pot smoke out through the window fan in our cramped little kitchen so it wouldn't stink up our building. "Sure, babe. I was wondering when you'd bring him up."

"How do *you* know about him?" I asked. Lionel was about as un-witchy as they came. He worked for the National Arts Council, where he'd been that night, in fact, working an event until ten. Despite his feverish interest in the occult—as feverish as his obsession with experimental art, exotic animals, and all the other oddities he pursued with frenzied persistence—he didn't have a drop of magic in him.

"The painter doing a residency with us is a druid," Lionel said. He reclined in the only chair in the kitchen, wearing his wide, goofy smile. "And you practitioners can't keep your mouths shut."

"Oh."

"Are you sure this is a good idea? Babe, I heard he's, like, *really* no joke."

"I guess you could say that," I said. Crossed my arms. Sniffed. "I mean, I'm no joke either, Lionel."

The truth was, I thought taking down Amarande would be *it* for me. At the time, I was feeling stagnated in my career as

I sit up, gasping. His eyes, half open. Body swaddled in Egyptian cotton. Sweat. Sunlight through blinds.

“I just won second place in a speed eating contest in Berlin,” I say.

“Just now?” he says. Slow blink.

“It wasn’t even just a hot dog eating contest! It was all different kinds of food.”

“Mm,” he curls toward me. Leg over my leg.

“Aren’t you proud of me? I won second.”

“Mmhmm.” He doesn’t mean it.

I lie back on three pillows. Eyes wide. His, closed. He knows I’m not dreaming. Knows that the process of astral projection, of possessing the body of a host, is nothing to laugh at. Used to be impressed. I possess the body of the competitor least favored to win the eating contest, stuff its face. I haven’t won yet, but I’m getting better.

“I know,” I say. Long exhale. Didn’t realize I’d been holding my breath.

“No!” he says, waving away the smoke that seeps from my nostrils. He complains about this sort of thing—the smoke, the smell of burning hair when I lose myself in thought, the summer bonfires that burn too hot when I approach—but I really do my best. He continues, “It’s fine, really.” He rethinks. “I mean, it’s

As his first swamp tour group of the day approached from across the parking lot, Jean couldn't help but feel like there was something off about them. They *looked* normal enough. A bachelor party, he could tell from far away: the polos and the snap-back hats and, of course, the only skinny one among them at the head of the pack—no doubt the least hungover—struggling with a thirty-pack of beer. The reigning look was your average peaked-in-college “marketing manager” in between the twenty-six and thirty-two range who still used phrases like “gotta make those gains, bro.” The picture of normal, red-blooded American masculinity. Except something unsettled Jean. Perhaps it was something in their gait; the typical wide-stance walk of manly man straight guys looked a little stiff on them, the knees not quite bent enough. Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but Jean noticed a certain phosphorescence to their skin tones. At first, he thought the white ones were simply so pale their skin seemed almost sickly green in the bright sun, but even the two with light brown skin had a sort of green undertone that offset their natural beauty. They were certainly good looking, almost overly so. Unnaturally so. That was probably it, he decided. Good-looking young men always distracted Jean, teasing that fine line between envy and lust that was par for the course for a married gay man just north of sixty.

When they were close enough, Jean stretched his face into a

smile and shook hands with the nearest one. “Which one of you poor boys had to drag these assholes out of bed this morning?”

Did it take them just a moment too long to understand Jean was joking? Did they overcompensate, laughing their affected baritone laughs just a little too hard amid their put-on grunts of *broooooo* and *this guy*? Jean shook off the thought. They must’ve been hungover.

He noticed then that the box of beer one of them held had a logo he’d never seen, depicting a yellow river with two cartoonishly large, red reptilian eyes poking from its surface. It was in a language—no, an entire script—Jean didn’t recognize. He didn’t fancy himself a worldly man—in fact, his friends and family had always pronounced his name “gene,” and upon learning the French pronunciation as an adult he’d chosen to keep introducing himself the old way—but he’d been in the military in his day long enough to tell Cyrillic from Japanese, and this strange script was neither. He made an effort to relax his jaw at the creepy sense that came over him. Shrugged inwardly. Yuppy guys like this were into that Ikea shit, that vaguely faux European style that probably birthed beers with labels in made-up fonts.

Anyway, weird or obnoxious or geeky or rowdy or whatever, bachelor parties had always tipped him the best in his twenty-five years working the swamp tours. They were in New Orleans to waste money already, and Jean was masculine enough and Southern-sounding enough to pass for straight. “Passing” was a point of pride for Jean—his Catholic parents had raised him better than to walk around “all limp-wristed and light in the loafers”—and it meant he didn’t run the risk of being stiffed on the tip by more homophobic tourists, of which bachelor parties were an obvious subset. No, he was sure this would be a lucky day for him. Jean would bring home a nice steak for the husband tonight, and they’d have the first good fuck they’d had in a little while.

But first, Cecilia was the flower girl at her resurrector's wedding. Even back then, the crows lined the roof of the wicker-woven pagoda beneath which the couple said their vows, brows trembling. Lined the white fence behind the pagoda. Crowded three-to-a-seat in the back where the infamous Thompson family failed to show up after yet another RSVP of yes. The crows shat in the spongy green grass, shat on the train of the bride's dress (*Must be good luck!* the maid of honor laughed).

The bride: Katrinka, twenty-five, still only a sorcerer's apprentice, crow-colored hair. The groom: Christian, twenty-two, son of a banker, dark-featured himself. Sprinkling petals on the ground: Cecilia, four, daughter of a family friend, pink pinafore dress. Frown of concentration on her wide-eyed face. Followed everywhere by crows.

At the kiss, the crows exploded into the air. Circled above, counterclockwise, like a cyclone. Everyone thought it quite romantic, spooky, befitting of a soon-to-be sorceress's wedding. That is, until the birds began to rain shit down on the wedding guests. Even then, Cecilia felt responsible. The crows had followed her there, after all. But there was a charming cabana on the property, and the reception moved indoors without much fuss.

After the obligatory first dances—bride and groom dance,

*"The moon grows pale, and paler.
Somewhere in the night someone's drumming.
Out where the grass grows pretty wet,
A well stands lost in thought."*

—*Itzik Fefer, "The Well"*

Down in the dewy valley, he drops coins into the wishing well until the grass goes brown and the leaves turn from green to orange. He is twenty-four, too old to wish but wishing his life away anyway. He comes here every day as the sun falls and drops a coin, two coins, ten coins into the well and wishes not for fortune but for escape. His name is Linden. He has been at this for six years and he is still a waiter at the Almond Tree Inn. This is the only inn in town, and he is the only waiter for breakfast and lunch.

Winter approaches and the seventh year of wishing begins.

The dining hall of the Almond Tree Inn is old, all dark wood and dusty air and windows with giant panes. Today, two middle-aged women order poached eggs and talk about werewolves in the next town over.

"Yesterday, two bitten!" says one woman as Linden approaches to refill her water. Her hair is bright orange and curly with a gray streak over her left ear. Crumbs spill from her mouth as she speaks. She wears a white blouse with tiny pink

roses printed on it.

“I telephoned Maurine last night, and do you know what she said?” replies the other, who has straight blonde hair and wears a pretty black dress with short sleeves despite the cold. “She said she gives Havensville to the end of the week until the whole *town* catches lycanthropy!”

The two women shriek with scandalized laughter.

Linden says, “When did they know it was werewolves?”

There is a sharp pause. Then, the blonde says, “Well, immediately, dear.”

“The whole city is walled in against wild beasts, but a *werewolf* could walk right through the gate on a full-moon day and wreak havoc on the town the very same night!” squeals the orange-haired lady, too delighted to realize she’s talking to the hired help.

“It could never have been anything but werewolves. Wild wolves simply couldn’t get past those walls,” says the blonde, warming up to Linden as well.

“Or eat all those sheep!”

“Head to toe!”

“Tragic!” howls the orange-haired woman, and for a quiet moment in the six-table dining hall, it seems all eyes are on them.

“And witches are so expensive nowadays,” says the blonde quietly, kicking her friend under the table as the other patrons ignore, or at least pretend to ignore, the conversation.

“They’ll all eat each other alive!” says her counterpart, only a little softer than before.

The blonde looks conspiratorially at Linden. “You should really take a day trip there.”

The orange-haired woman claps. “I hear the whole town is in total disorder!”

“Really something to see.”

“*We’re* going.”

Linden politely replies that he is the only daytime waiter and that the Inn runs most smoothly with his consistent presence. He adds that he has never taken a sick day in his six-going-on-seven years working at the Almond Tree Inn. This delights the two ladies even further.

“Oh, then you *must* go at night!” cries the blonde.

“Even better!” says her companion. “The moon is almost full!”

“It’ll be *such* an adventure!”

Linden smiles and returns the pitcher of water to the kitchen. When the women leave, they tip him forty percent. One of them leaves a note on the receipt in green ink and neat letters:

“You’ll need the money for the gas, dear.”

She has drawn a happy face with its left eye winking.

Linden sighs. He had wanted to be a magician himself, but when the recession hit, his parents simply could not afford to send him to college, and Linden has always been terrified of taking on loans and living in debt forever. His father, a marginally successful accountant, was a slave to his own debt, and only the death of Linden’s paternal grandfather allowed Linden’s father to pay off his loans and retire on his pension. The second-best program in the country for a Bachelor of the Arcane in Medical Witchcraft offered him a scholarship that would have covered half of his tuition, but even that had felt too expensive. Plus, he wasn’t sure if he was ready to commit so wholeheartedly to medical witchcraft as a profession, and the scholarship was specifically in that discipline.

Linden does not go to Havensville. He hopes that the women do, that they become werewolves, that they bite him. They tipped him well, though, so he knows that they will not bite him if they do become werewolves.

That evening, at the well, he wishes for werewolves. The next morning, the ladies have gone.

Every Saturday at 10:45 p.m., long after his wife has fallen asleep, Bartholomew creeps out of bed and heads downstairs to the kitchen. There, he fills the same royal blue ceramic bowl with croutons from the Secret Bag he keeps behind the cleaning supplies under the sink. His wife will never find them there. These croutons he smothers in Creamy Caesar dressing. Then, like a child watching Saturday morning cartoons with a bowl of sugary cereal, he takes his bowl into the den to watch the milky-eyed medium from Florida.

She sits in front of a live studio audience atop a crystal couch, blue calcite in giant geode chunks, smoothed over and carved into the shape of a loveseat and adorned with a sky-blue cushion for her to sit on—to aid, she says, with communication and clarity. Behind her: video feed of mist thickening over cliffs by the sea. Waves crash against the cliffs without a sound.

“In the morning,” she says, tonight, on This Saturday of All Nights. “I sit on my porch and stare closely at the dew in the grass. And I wish, I think if that dew could just . . .” here, as she hesitates, she pinches the air with her thumb as though to pluck the right word from the ether. “Melt! If that dew could just melt into the grass, well, that would be just fine.”

She smiles a warm, firm smile without showing teeth. Bartholomew loves her smile. Secretly, he does not trust women

who smile with teeth. They remind him of sharks.

The mind reader with milky eyes reminds him, a touch, of Mia Farrow in *Rosemary's Baby* after she gets her hair cut short: spritely, with a hollowed-out face and wide, bewildered eyes. But this woman wears cream-colored pantsuits and has lighter hair and carries herself in an altogether more still, self-possessed manner, and most importantly her eyes are foggier and grayer than Mia Farrow's, with only a touch of blue. She sits upright, never slouching forward or slumping backward; her back never touches the back of the crystal couch. She calls herself The Semi-Psychic in half jest; she abhors the word "psychic," finds the art of seeing into the mind or into the future to be much less precise than that label implies. Really, she says, her eyesight is especially powerful—she can sort of "zoom in," as she puts it, close enough to see the molecules in dewdrops or the lighthouse miles away or, when she looks hard enough, the fuzzy shapes inside your head. Like peering at shapes through a fog. This is Her Gift to us. Her eyes glisten constantly, as though she might cry at any moment.

"And someone in here," she says, pointing at someone in the audience, "is hoping two different kinds of matter might melt into one another as well."

The camera pans to a pretty woman with long brown hair and a silky red dress in the audience. This woman covers her mouth with her left hand, laughing with what appears to be shock.

"Is that correct?" says the medium, her voice soft and smooth, like butter left at room temperature overnight.

"Yes!" says the brunette and bobs her head up and down. A man in white linen pants and a loose white shirt holds a microphone to her red lips. "Yes, yes! Yes it is!"

She flicks her left hand out, palm down, and wiggles her fingers. The TV screen fills with her hand, with the thin ring and its chunky diamond. She has bitten her nails to the nubs and

“I’m so sorry, really,” the man said to Sam on his way out of the single-person restroom, head ducked in apparent shame. Sam stole a quick glance at him before entering the john. Long, dark, wavy hair; the bushy in-between of beard and stubble covering chin and cheeks; flowy, bohemian-patterned pants and wannabe-pirate shirt—all typical of those crusty French Quarter hipsters who relieved themselves in the busy cafe’s restroom without paying for so much as an apple on the way out. Sam sighed and let the heavy door of the restroom shut behind him, fully expecting that the apologetic young man had left a real stinker in the toilet without flushing, or clogged it completely, or both. Sam had brought his laptop into the bathroom for safekeeping and gently placed it on the floor beside the door. Finally, he took three wary steps across the black-and-white tiling, breath held in trepidation.

But the toilet bowl was empty! Sam inhaled cautiously, first through his mouth, then through his nose. The comforting smell of lavender-scented cleaning solution and old, rusty pipes filled his nostrils. He sighed with relief. He pulled down his trousers and sat. What Sam loved most about single-person, gender-neutral restrooms was that he could urinate sitting down in peace. More than that, he didn’t have to relieve himself in the vicinity of heterosexual men who invariably shot him dirty looks, seeming automatically to peg him as a queer and no doubt

suspecting him of peeking over the urinal divider at their flaccid cocks in spite of the fact that he was *already married* (and would never do such a thing even if he weren't).

Sam was no lover of urinals, neither their forced proximity nor, more to the point, the pressure they placed on him to expedite the process of relieving his bladder. Anyway, a colleague of his over in the political science department had recently persuaded him that urinals were ableist and transphobic, so when Sam, a cisgender gay man, sat down to urinate, he liked to believe he was committing a small act of resistance toward the patriarchy, even though taking his time on the toilet was something he enjoyed doing anyway. As with everything in his life, Sam preferred to take his time. To luxuriate. To ponder in peace, without his fellow bathroom users finding fault with his masculinity, or the possibility that someone might take the stall next to him, defecating noisily and with vocalized satisfaction. Or, even worse, attempting to make conversation, as had once happened to him!

Contemplating his current exegesis on the different species of birds in Chaucer's "Parliament of Fowls," which made up the third chapter of his dissertation, he let his eyes wander.

That's when they settled on the tip of a long, thick black tendril snaking down the exposed-brick wall in the corner by the door. He followed its vine-like path, face pinching in disgust. More disturbing than the slimy, serpentine shape, however, was his realization that it was no snake or vine at all but was, in fact, the tentacle of what looked to be an oversized octopus of a dark, gunmetal gray, holding fast to the ceiling just above the door with its suction cups. The wrinkly bulge of its head, striated with dark red veins, pulsed with a slow rhythm that suggested a strong, calm heartbeat. Its blank, pupilless white eyes seemed aimed directly at Sam with a stare that saw both into the depths of him and directly past him as if he were not there at all. It filled the space between door and ceiling like a black hole with

its web of tentacles spread across the walls and the mirror above the sink.

Through the jolting flutter of his heartbeat, Sam's first absurd thought was to thank the stars he'd witnessed this terror while already poised over the toilet, lest he have to worry about ruining his good corduroys at the sight of the eldritch horror. Then, he squeezed his eyes shut, opened them, and slapped himself once, hard, in the face. When the pain confirmed that this was no dream, he ran through his family's mental health history and concluded that this tentacular nightmare of a creature was no dream or hallucination or product of late-onset schizophrenia. This was Sam's way: to take stock of every possibility, accept things no matter how disadvantageous, and move forward with the most rational course of action. It was the reason he was such a successful academic and such a nightmare at parties, on vacation, or at any activity selected in the inefficient spirit of whimsy or adventure. Except basketball. He loved to play basketball.

He took stock. This menacing creature hung above the only exit from the restroom. It hadn't plopped atop his head and strangled him on the way in, which either meant the creature had a slow response time, was harmless (unlikely), or was intelligent and wanted something from him that it couldn't obtain by attacking him immediately. Sam knew that this restroom was a dead zone for cellular service, not because he participated in the vulgar, somehow socially acceptable activity of using his cell phone on the toilet, but because he did occasionally check the time on his phone while urinating—afterward, of course, he always wiped his phone down with waterless cleaning wipes, designed specifically for cell phones, which he carried in his knapsack.

This left three options: make a rush for the door (the biggest risk involving the most unknowns), scream for help, or (if the creature was sentient) try to surmise what it wanted.

He opened his mouth to scream.