

# WITCHES OF AMERICA

ALEX MAR



Sarah  
Crichton  
Books

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**W i t c h e s  
o f  
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To D.A., my first reader

# 1

## Stone City

Witches are gathering.

Witches are gathering all across California, witches and their apprentices and little children and polyamorous collection of boyfriends and girlfriends. They are gathering for the season of death, the days leading up to the high holiday of Samhain. October is the time of year, they say, when the veil between the worlds becomes thin and the multitudes of the dead can reach across to touch you, brush your cheek, whisper in your ear, drink your whiskey. So the priestesses pull out their sporty West Coast vehicles, from gnarly pickups to gleaming, eco-friendly mini-mobiles, and they load up, with complicated tents and pillows and crockery and duffel bags full of ritual gear and brown paper bags crammed with discount groceries. They are leaving their cities for the mountains and the woodlands of this schizophrenic state: the rocks and the trees and the clearer skies will bring them closer, perhaps, to friends and family who have passed to the other side.

They spill out onto the highways, then fan out, leaving behind their tech ventures and professorships, their accounting firms and bio labs, their yoga studios and bookshops, heading toward covens in so many counties. Some go even farther, east into the hills, until their earth-worshipping caravan clears the electrical grid and finally comes to stop in a red clay clearing. Here, they start to unpack: all across the landscape, out come the coolers and sleeping bags, the exotic fabrics, the amulets, the baggies of herbs, the idols and carefully bundled wands. People are slipping into velvet, or black leather kilts. A priestess stands brushing out her long hair, uncut for twenty years. Another wraps a belt around her waist, heavy with stones and metalwork, then swings a cloak over her shoulders, so long it drags across the dirt.

This is Stone City, one hundred acres dedicated to witchcraft in Santa Clara County.

Beyond this property, back where everyone came from, the rest of the country

celebrates Halloween, with their rubber masks, Blow Pops, and toilet paper. Here, far off the grid, at a recently installed stone henge the neighboring ranchers know nothing about, *these* citizens are preparing to summon their dead. Within a few hours, at dusk, they'll begin gathering in a circle, even the children, chanting the words to set things in motion.

\* \* \*

I am not what you would call witchy. Raised in Manhattan, I confirm plenty of the stereotypes of a New Yorker: an overeducated liberal, a feminist, a skeptic long suspicious of organized religion, surrounded by friends—several of them artists, writers, and filmmakers—who consider agnosticism an uncomfortable level of devotion. I'm not prone to joining groups of any stripe, particularly the spiritual variety. I believe in something transcendent, but I've yet to meet someone with a convincing label for it.

At the same time, we each have a dimension hidden beneath our carefully cultivated surface, a piece of ourselves that we can't shake off or explain away. For me, it's this: I've always been drawn to the outer edges, the fringe—communities whose esoteric beliefs cut them off from the mainstream but also bind them closer together. As a writer, I took a stab at a novel about the life of David Koresh, in part because I envied the plain certainty of his followers; I cooked up thin excuses to report on a Billy Graham revival in Queens, visit a New Age commune in California, move into a convent in Houston. On one level, I've been driven by an easy curiosity, an attraction to the exotic and far-out—which the whole spectrum of belief has long seemed to me—but I've also been looking hard for those intangibles I might have in common with even the most alien congregation. As a natural outgrowth of this impulse, I am setting out to make a documentary about American forms of mysticism. Finally, through the drawn-out, painstaking production of a feature-length film, I'll come to understand what I've been chasing, beat it into a tangible product, a neat conversation piece, and move on.

This is what takes me to Stone City.

In the early evening, I find myself heading down a perilous, zigzagging road into the Middle of Nowhere, Northern California, a cliff drop always on my right, watching as ranching country turns to meth country and then who-knows-where as the light begins to fall.

I'm at the start of my odyssey across occult America, in the last available rental car from the San Francisco International Airport—a twelve-passenger van better suited to taking a kindergarten class on a field trip. Instead, it is carrying a wary New Yorker thirty challenging miles into old mining territory. The boat-on-wheels winds around

shocking curves every twenty seconds, each time threatening to toss me headlong into a valley dotted with vultures. I head out past nouveaux villas; then scrappy working ranches; then trailer homes set few and far apart; and, finally, past the first in a string of ghost mines where so much magnesite was pulled from the ground long ago. Back then, for the miners, this would have been a drive full of expectation. A century and a half later, it is for me, too, but with a difference: this trip—not horse-drawn, but more nauseating for it—is leading me to Craft sanctuary land, land that belongs to Morpheus, a priestess who has steadily been making her name known among witches out west for fifteen years.

As the sky darkens, I rumble up the dirt driveway, past a metal-scrap heap, a shed built out of glass bottles, and an improvised chicken coop, to stop in front of a double-wide trailer in the twilight. Just then my headlights flash on a Doberman who, with pitch-perfect timing, comes bounding toward the car, barking until its fist-sized heart seems ready to burst.

Slightly stoned on Dramamine, I sit and watch, stock-still, as Cerberus is followed by a thin rail of a man in fatigues, combat boots, and white-man's cornrows.

"Heel!" he shouts, rapping his knuckles on the dog's head. This would be Shannon, Morpheus's husband.

I dismount from the van, step lightly past the dog-monster, and follow Shannon inside—into a bargain-basement Paul Bowles fantasyland. Everywhere there are lanterns covered in lace metalwork, leather pincushion seats, Moroccan wall hangings, animal skulls, and images of the goddess of this, the goddess of that. A clay statuette of Pan sits atop a library of occult titles like *Transcendental Magic* and *Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*. I am still getting my bearings when, across the threshold of bright purple carpeting, steps the priestess herself.

Morpheus: like me, in her thirties; in baggy jeans, tank top, and an ass-length braid of red hair. She is pale and lean, with large blue eyes—not at all intimidating. (What did I expect?) She approaches, carrying a pan of pre-made enchiladas.

The three of us sit at the dining-room table, by the cabinet of loaded rifles and underneath the generator-powered chandelier, Cerberus curled up like a cat at Morpheus's feet. We drink the cheap wine I've brought and settle into talking the rest of the night, Morpheus now and again busting out a big, broad laugh—geeky, unguarded. We discuss their plans for the solstice, initiation rites ("Not telling!"), and the Stone Circle—the henge this place is named for. They'd spent a year and a half erecting it, marking out the positions of the sun from season to season—"never mind dragging those half-ton rocks into place," she says. "Now we have nearly all our rituals up there."

Exhausted, and with little more to learn tonight—we'll get to know each other

carefully, in stages—I turn in. Armed with a tiny flashlight and a sleeping bag, I make my way up the brush-covered hill toward a makeshift cabin somewhere in the distance. Once I reach a plateau, I stop in my tracks, because there it is: the Stone Circle, visible in the moonlight. A gathering of enormous standing stones, huge slabs buried in the ground to rise six feet tall, a very specific fantasy imposed on the landscape.

Once it's daylight, I see that Stone City alternates between untamable, prickly undergrowth and gutted stretches of dry red dirt. Here and there, dotting the land, are guest trailers, broken boats, outdoor hot tubs, goats and Polish roosters, evidence of the pantheon—altars built from Home Depot gazebo parts and statues ordered off eBay—a Maypole covered in last year's ribbons, a "meditation" labyrinth of palm-sized stones, the Stone Circle itself. This assembly of structures has been the single-minded project of the last few years, the excavation (with tractor and borrowed earthmover), then erection (with bare hands and pulleys and the occasional blowtorch) of a peculiar architecture. All this for Morpheus, priestess. Stone City is her place to practice witchcraft safely, and to gather people together for ritual and to build fires and drink and sing and (when the spirit strikes) have sex somewhere in the wilderness, where the bones of wild pigs are scattered.

I may not know it now, but my relationship with Morpheus will go beyond the making of a film, deepen and grow more complicated (she'll prove a lot more formidable than the blithe, skinny redhead who served me dinner). And through our relationship I will realize that this hidden dimension of myself, this curiosity about the outer edges of belief, is not something from which I can recover. Because I *envy* them, the believers. They have guidance; they have clarity; their days have structure and meaning. And, quietly, for a long time, I've coveted these things—after all, they're what most of us want *badly*, regardless of whether we consider ourselves lapsed Catholics or born-again or strident atheists. Morpheus has perfect conviction in a world that I do not understand, and I feel compelled to step inside her belief. When I put my work aside, I have to admit that I am searching—hopefully, and with great reservation—for proof of something larger, whatever its name.

\* \* \*

I have a closer connection to the occult than I'd first recognized. Before my immersion, my ideas about witchcraft had come from obvious sources. Halloween brought witches flying on broomsticks. *The Wizard of Oz* taught me that there are "good" witches (pretty blondes) and "bad" witches (green-skinned brunettes). History class, and a school production of *The Crucible*, sparked a macabre fascination with the seventeenth-century witch trials. But as I began visiting with priestesses and covens

around the country, memories rose to the surface, and I learned that my impressions are also rooted in my family.

Like many Americans, I'm of a mess of backgrounds. When he was ten years old, my father emigrated from Crete, the ancient seat of some of the very gods that Christianity sought to snuff out—from the Mycenaeans' Zeus and Hephaestus to the bare-breasted, snake-wielding Minoan goddess. For me, as an American-born child, the church of my father's parents, even after centuries of Greek Orthodox Christianity, was still evocative of another world: the long black overcassock, the wizard's beard, and the imposing *kamilavka* of the priests; the palpably foreign, musky scent of the clouds of incense the altar boys would shake from censers as they trailed down the aisle; the Byzantine angles of the saints' heads, not in round, fleshy tones but flat, gold, abstract.

As for my mother, her family had moved from northern Spain to Cuba generations ago, and her Latin brand of Catholicism took on a fantastic quality. We lit candles in memory of family members, trying to lure their presence into the house through photographs, votives, trinkets they used to own. I imagined the incredible quiet of cathedrals we'd visit, and the shadowy chapels contained within, to be full of hidden information. The symbolism in paintings of the saints remained bizarre and enigmatic, often with more than a hint of violence—the martyred St. Ursula bleeding from the neck, gripping the arrow that shot her dead; St. Agatha carrying her dismembered breasts on a plate—and my younger self was a little terrified that communion involved the chance to eat the body and drink the blood of Christ. Beyond that, the women in my mother's family were not immune to the notion of communications from the other side—true for quite a few Latin Catholic women. So my religious upbringing, though two flavors of Christian, was defined less by discipline and self-denial than by proximity to mystery.

My mother would tell me of how, in her town of Gibara, on the far eastern end of Cuba, a neighbor who'd given a dirty look to a *brujo* on the street awoke to find a dead rooster on her doorstep.

“All these sensitive cultural relativists—they don't understand that there *is* such a thing as a curse,” she would say.

Years later, when I was in college and experimenting with visual art, I called my mother and told her that I had been making my own version of *vévés* (Vodou symbols that invoke spirits) on huge swaths of paper in my bedroom. She sighed, and in a practical, good-humored tone told me, “Look, you can do what you want, Alexa, but here's what you *should* do: you should stop playing with that stuff, go to a Catholic church, and get some holy water. You bless yourself and sprinkle it on those drawings. And then you *throw them out*.”

My mother wasn't condemning all of Vodou practice; she was simply unimpressed with my amateur-hour dabbling in potentially serious spiritual business. So what did I do, a young woman getting a degree at Harvard in a department rife with the very "cultural relativists" my mother had sneered at? I did what I was told: I got hold of some holy water at the nearest church and followed her instructions. Better to be safe than risk awakening something unfriendly.

This idea—that spirits, good and bad, linger nearby, ready to intervene—has been handed down by the women on my mother's side. Two stories, told and retold quietly over the years, illustrate this best.

I was about nine years old when my mother first shared with me the story of her best friend's murder. They'd grown up together in Cuba, she and Mireya, but separated when my mother was sent far north, to a Catholic boarding school in Maine. The pair stayed in touch by writing letters every few weeks, my mother sharing the shock of her first snow and the travesty of American foods like peanut butter and sweet New England beans. After about a year, the letters stopped, as happens with long-distance friendships. Then, one night, my mother had a dream: Mireya was walking toward her, slowly, as if to give her a message. Suddenly a young man appeared and stepped between them—and, just as suddenly, he plunged a knife into Mireya's chest (my mother felt as if *she* had been stabbed). Several months later, my mother returned home for a visit and saw an old friend at a party. Hadn't she heard? Mireya had been killed by a boyfriend. My mother did the math: the murder had taken place just days before her dream. The dream had served, in a way, as Mireya's final letter.

Fast-forward a generation, to right after I'd left home for college. My mother's aunt Norma, perhaps the most no-nonsense woman in the family line, rang her up.

"Your mother keeps wandering around my apartment," she said, referring to my *deceased* grandmother. "She's worried. There's something wrong in your house."

But there was nothing wrong. My parents, recently retired, were preparing for a long vacation, an entire month in the South of France, leaving in a week's time. Since she had a checkup scheduled, my mother went in for her doctor's appointment and, that image of my grandmother fresh in her mind, asked for her annual mammogram early. She was quickly diagnosed with cancer that, had it been detected two or three weeks later, could have turned deadly. It seemed possible that maybe, just maybe, a spirit had reached across on her behalf.

None of us would claim that there are hard, verifiable facts in these stories—I can't emphasize enough how little patience my mother has for what she calls the "hippie-dippie." This is the woman who taught me to question church authority and sidestep the Pope completely. ("He's just some man who claims he knows what God thinks," she likes to say.) So is this witchy stuff or mere coincidence? I'm not sure. The world

is full of strange and inexplicable business. There are many Americans—not just out-there Americans, but high-functioning people with mainstream jobs and houses with backyards—who have stories like those of my family. Stories of mysticism, of communications from the other side, whether handed down, hearsay, or their own. All you need to do is press a little harder, and out they come: from supermarket cashiers, retired cops, psychologists, high school jocks—it doesn't matter where they live or what they look like. The overriding culture trains us to dismiss these stories as New Age babble, signs of wayward fanaticism, rather than greet them with a healthy dose of curiosity—but Americans are compelled by the mysterious more often than we feel permitted to admit.

\* \* \*

Most people, when witchcraft is mentioned, think of horror films or the witch trials in Europe and colonial Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup> But today when people talk about witches—living, practicing witches—they're usually talking about *Pagans*. The word itself comes from the Latin *paganus*, which became a slur for non-Christian polytheists. Centuries later, academics adopted “paganism” as the catchall for religions that predate Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (the big Abrahamic trio). But by the sixties it began to refer mainly, in a positive way, to capital-*P* Paganism (or *Neopaganism*): contemporary practices pieced together from the salvaged scraps of pre-Christian European religions, Western occult and Masonic societies, and forms of witchcraft. Some Pagans subscribe to new religions, belief systems invented out of whole cloth; some practice traditions that claim “ancient” roots but can be traced back only a few decades; some found the Goddess through second-wave feminism, eager to place a Creatrix at the center of the universe.

There may be hundreds of strains of Paganism, but these super-esoteric paths share a clear core. They are polytheistic and nature-worshipping, and believe that female and male forces have equal sway in the universe. They teach that the divine can be found within us and all around us, and that we can communicate regularly with the dead and the gods without a priestly go-between. Contrary to popular hysteria, a witch is unlikely to try to recruit your child—mainly because Pagans, who respect many paths to things holy, consider that rude. Similarly, there's no points-system afterlife, sifting through the dead and depositing them into either heaven or hell: maybe you're reincarnated, or maybe you end up floating in a zone called the Summerland. There is no concept of “shame,” but an idea of karma: do whatever you want, as long as it doesn't harm others. (“An it harm none, do what thou wilt,” reads the Wiccan Rede, or moral code.) There are structures of authority within specific groups or covens—someone to do the initiating, for instance—but then there are also “solitary”

practitioners, who believe you can initiate yourself. Local consensus can hold sway, but there is no conclave, no pope.

Paganism evolved here over the last fifty years as an exotic religious movement imported from England, where a new witchcraft religion called Wicca had been introduced to the public in the early fifties. Wicca's major spokesperson was a retired civil servant named Gerald Gardner, and the first known Wiccan coven in America was founded by one of his initiates in New York State. In the sixties, Wicca rode the counterculture wave (particularly on the increasingly alien West Coast), attracting radicals ready to shrug off the Christian patriarchy and embrace confrontational words like "witch." The path was cleared for a slew of Pagan traditions to rise up, some direct offshoots of Wicca, many an "eclectic" mix of magical sources. By the eighties, thousands were attending Pagan festivals, many even in public; and the late nineties brought that great unifier, the Internet. Suddenly solitary practitioners or witches still "in the broom closet" could seek each other out, swap spells, arrange to meet way up on the hillside behind the local Walmart. Entire virtual networks of tens of thousands of witches multiplied, connected, and fused into covens in cities and suburbs across the country.

Today, allowing for those still practicing in secret, Pagans may make up as many as one million people in America.<sup>2</sup>

From this perspective, building Stone City starts to make a lot more sense.

\* \* \*

Most weekdays, Morpheus drives to work in the early-morning half-light in her Toyota pickup. Her job—for a federal agency created in response to the Dust Bowl—has her meeting with the aging population of local ranchers, walking their land, and recommending changes to help conserve soil and water. (Staunch Christians, none of them are aware that she's Pagan, in spite of their requests for someone to "witch" their wells.) On these days, we—me, my cinematographer (a tall, deep-voiced guy from Philly), and our sound recordist (a Brooklyn kid who builds fixed-gear bicycles)—follow Shannon on treks across the enormous, barely habitable property as he maintains the guerrilla facilities.

Though his work can at times seem like a Sisyphean effort, this is the realization of a dream. Even in her earliest days of training in witchcraft, as young as eighteen, Morpheus had a notion that she would someday like to create land in California dedicated to Pagan practice—something her community, in the mecca of American Paganism, did not have. (Imagine Christians without churches, Jews without synagogues, Muslims without mosques.) When Morpheus, working at an occult shop in Mountain View, met Shannon, she found someone with whom she could share the

fantasy.

Young American entrepreneurs first forced their way into the Diablo Range in the 1910s to mine for magnesite, then used to help smelt metal. A road was built, Mines Road, a two-day horse-drawn-carriage ride from the nearest town, Livermore; a string of bars and whorehouses were erected between there and what is now the Stone City site. But mining declined steadily after World War II, and by the early eighties, Shannon's grandfather was able to buy his parcel cheap. The area was still pretty wild then. A biker gang used to set up roadblocks and rob people, and his grandfather was once chased off the property by a group of armed partiers camped where the Stone Circle stands now. Today a lot of the guns and motorcycles in the area belong to wealthy retirees from Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (a nuclear research facility)—or the occasional pot grower or meth cook.

It's California land, populated by oaks, junipers, and manzanita shrubs, with their red bark and waxy leaves—a landscape that's meant to burn out every few years. During the right season, tarantulas emerge into the moonlight from perfectly round, web-covered holes in the ground to find one another and mate. Hardly the lush, redwood-studded land Morpheus had envisioned, in keeping with her childhood home. But when Shannon's family offered them the chance to buy the hundred acres, Morpheus, a practical priestess of limited means, decided it was worth the gamble. And so, like a good-humored, decidedly uncelibate incarnation of the desert hermits of old, the Pagan couple trucked it out there, bracing themselves for a different life. They relinquished their material comforts, abandoned the electrical grid, and settled into a shed with no power or hot water, a few candles, a camp stove, and a hand-crank radio. Morpheus's term as the priestess of Stone City had begun.

The brush on the hilltop was impenetrable, so they rented a backhoe to clear out a campground. They were able to get an abandoned mobile home to use as "the guesthouse," eventually adding a whole array of custom "cabins," including The Dollhouse (a grounded treehouse) and Boat Land (a fleet of junked boats embedded in the dirt).

The jewel in the crown, of course, was the erection of their very own henge.

Morpheus had never actually visited a henge in the British Isles, but she'd always been drawn to the feeling of them, and dreamt of having a "natural temple" for rituals. They picked a hilltop and took alignments, throughout the year, for sunrise and sunset. Then came the grunt work, dragging in these massive rocks from all across the property. The largest, final stone, an eight-footer, required the help of seventeen volunteers and a wrought-iron gate jerry-rigged into a cantilever.

But once the circle was raised, the fledgling Stone City gained a powerful draw for the celebration of the witches' sabbats. "The stones have this property of moving

power through them,” Morpheus says, “and they draw it up out of the earth kind of like a candlewick. They form this really strong container”—a container for magical energy—“that acts like a gateway.” Pagans began traveling from miles around for the experience.

\* \* \*

The first time I witness a ritual in the Stone Circle, it’s in honor of one of the sabbats: Mabon, the autumn equinox.

The sabbats mark the Wheel of the Year, the turning of the seasons. For Wiccans and Pagans of some other traditions, these are the spine of the Craft, and some fall on dates that are closely aligned with those of major Christian holidays: Yule, the winter festival from which we get the Twelve Days of Christmas; Ostara, the spring equinox and the source of Easter’s fertility symbols (the rabbit, the egg); Samhain,<sup>3</sup> the time of communion with the dead, dressed up in mainstream culture as Halloween. Two of the stones in the Stone Circle are capped by a third, and they are perfectly positioned, on the high holiday of Samhain, to frame the full moon: a ritual gateway to the other world. Also on the grounds, a short hike down into a valley, is a Maypole for Beltane, the May Day sabbat: a fertility celebration that’s decidedly bawdier in Pagan circles. What else would you expect from a holiday centered around a two-stories-high phallus? Here the Maypole is kept up year-round (they use a living tree), and when the sabbat comes, Pagans dance in circles, braiding long, silky ribbons around its trunk.

But this evening they’re celebrating Mabon, given its name by American Pagans in the seventies, after a Welsh god. This is the time when the days and nights are once again of equal length, the land is transforming, the cold is settling in, and Samhain is on the horizon. It’s a moment for giving thanks for the harvest and asking for blessings during the harsher winter months. Not that any of the Pagans I meet live completely off the land—but the sabbats are for remembering that connection, for conjuring up a time when we were more aware of what we took and what we gave back to our surroundings.

The circle was consecrated—as you can do anywhere, without these massive stones—and maybe fifteen men and women stand forming its inner periphery. I’ve never seen Morpheus in her priestess incarnation before, and now she stands at the center of the circle, in fitted black velvet that trails to the ground, all eyes on her. She has let loose her hair so that it falls, very red, down the length of her back. Her chin is tilted up, her gaze focused on some point in the distance. She stands before an altar, and atop the altar is a bread sculpture: a sun god. I’d watched her bake the bread, and once it had risen, she’d laid the god out on a dish and placed a dry ear of corn between his dough-legs: his penis. He was carried up the hill and placed in the Stone Circle,

surrounded with pomegranates and apples, to create an image so British Isles-primitive I can't help thinking of *The Wicker Man*.

Morpheus raises her arms—and now her slight frame seems to expand and grow stronger, larger, imposing (“holding space,” the witches call this). I understand immediately that this is her natural role. Her place. Following her lead, everyone chants as the sun sinks: *Lord of the wild things, lord of life! Lord of the shadows, lord of life! Lord of the wild hunt, lord of life!*

Morpheus is here to serve them, her witchy folk, but she also stands apart. Whereas they are visitors to this place, this occult no-man's-land, she *lives* in this alternate universe—it is her permanent residence, beaten into existence through the force of her imagination and a lot of uncomfortable living. She's taking steps to shake loose from the mundane world, to collapse her double life. *This* version of herself, she's decided, the more expansive person standing in the center of the circle, is the best part of her.

I belong to that *other* world. With the camera running, I keep myself apart, well outside the circle, still an observer. And the ceremony is a good primer: a ritual salute, a simple offering of bread and fruit and prayers—gentle stuff, basic, nothing that disturbs. No possession, no tranced-out frenzy. At the same time, this is so foreign—these people in shades of black standing inside a henge in American mining country, chanting around a bread-and-corn god—and I want to get closer. I wish I were standing with them.

I decide that sometime, somehow, when no one is filming, I'll find a way to do just that.

## 2

### Little Witch

Through the making of the documentary, I spend more and more time with Morpheus. I learn a lot about the Craft simply by watching her, talking with her. I get to know her—and I give as good as I get, answering whatever questions she has for me in turn. While I still feel like some kind of anthropologist, an interloper, my connection to Morpheus becomes a way in. I want to know just how this person, an American woman my age—my peer, I guess—became not only a believer but a priest. A Pagan priestess. A witch.

Morpheus is a child of Northern California, raised with a name far more prosaic and all-American than the one she'd choose for herself years later.<sup>1</sup> Her first memories are of running down the hallways of a house built in the shadow of the redwoods in Forestville, in Sonoma County. A tomboy, she'd wander for hours through those trees, with their bark like rough and heavy strands of burnt-red hair, each a reminder of general human smallness, a powerful finger pointing up, up, up, to vertiginous heights, with only the slantiest light allowed to slice through.

Her family soon relocated to Santa Rosa, then a small town, her father working as a contractor and her mother staying home to raise her and her older sister. Two girls, two opposites: brown-haired Mirabai studied French literature and schooled herself in European fashion; redheaded Morpheus was the tree climber, the frog catcher. Their mother explored a strain of perfectly Californian Hindu-inspired mysticism, but their father was a bit of a transcendentalist, fond of Emerson and Thoreau. He took Morpheus on hiking and camping trips in the woods. She thought of herself as the surrogate son.

As idyllic as her surroundings were, natural disasters tend to change the way we look at our environment, and that's just what happened with the Loma Prieta Earthquake. By the time Morpheus was in junior high, the family had moved deeper into the Santa Cruz Mountains, and in 1989 the deadly earthquake, a 6.9 on the Richter

scale, forever altered her relationship to the woods. In their mountain home that day, she braced herself in a doorway as the furniture stuttered across the room and china came crashing out of the cupboards. The earth broke wide open in the front yard. Their house was declared “unsafe for human occupancy,” and the family was forced to move into town for several months before things returned to normal. But a shift had already occurred: nature had revealed herself to be threatening, unpredictable, complex. Her father would later claim this was the moment Morpheus changed as well: at thirteen years old, she became “a darker person.”

For high school, Morpheus had to commute to Los Gatos, a wealthy town at the foot of the mountains. Already shaken by the physical instability of her home life, she was further alienated by her new social setting. “I was angry. The students all seemed pretty shallow and entitled,” she says. “My friends were generally the bad-kid outcast group.” Following teen protocol, she began remaking her outside to match her inside: goth one day, all white makeup and lace; punk the next, in rags full of safety pins. She experimented with alter-ego monikers like “Monday,” “Cobweb,” and, eventually, “Morpheus”—after the Greek god of dreams.

She was experiencing “an awakening to being, you know, not your average person.” Her outsidership began to make her *special*. Morpheus was curious about the occult and was experimenting with her own private spirituality, more conscious of the cycles of the seasons. Hers was not a sudden, radical conversion, but a slow, natural slide into the Craft. She started communing with nature late at night. “My bedroom was on the second floor of the house, and I would go and sit out on the roof and listen to the owls and sing to the moon.” She began to feel that something unhuman was out there—she could feel its power move through her. The redwoods transformed from a place for bonding with her father into a place that called to her alone, set her apart.

She soon discovered her first book on witchcraft, at the house of a friend who looked uncannily like Robert Smith of The Cure. This was before witchcraft became friendlier, New Age-ified, so most of the books available were less spiritual and self-helpy and more compendiums of have-a-blast, make-crazy-shit-happen spells. “It was ‘how to do spells and promise yourself to the Horned One and deny Jesus,’” Morpheus says. “I *loved* that.” She remembers a love spell that required using a mirror to capture the reflection of two dogs mating, inscribing it with the name of your love interest, and then burying it at a crossroads. What she read reinforced the instinctive spellwork she’d been doing on her own: chanting, playing with candles, improvising rituals when the moon was full.

And her experiments went further. At sixteen, she’d started cutting herself, for typical adolescent reasons—she was unhappy and numb, and the cuts made her *feel* something—and she became fascinated with blood as a kind of “concentrated power.”

She'd take out a razor knife and ask her boyfriends if they could taste each other's blood; or she'd use her own as ink, for writing out whatever she wanted to transpire. Teenage angst fed her magical technique.

Her earliest sexual feelings became a source of power as well. When Morpheus first discovered masturbation, touching herself became ritualized and, in her imagination, connected to larger forces. It was, basically, primitive sex magic—or magic that draws on sexual energy to achieve a goal. “I had these ideas that I built up in my head, like ‘If I do this, and I’m thinking about a certain thing, when I reach a climax *something will happen.*’” At just ten years old, she'd worked out an elaborate scenario with her dolls. She had a blue-haired doll that was her “little witch,” and the witch had a shop where she doled out spells; when Morpheus would orgasm, the doll's spell would be complete. In a household in which her parents were “shy and awkward” about sex, somehow their younger daughter had become convinced that the intensity of her first orgasms could create change in the universe. When Morpheus discovered sex magic nearly a decade later, the concept was already natural to her.

After her junior year, bored and frustrated, Morpheus dropped out of high school and threw herself into a series of random jobs. She laughs at the self-conscious teenager she was then, remembering how she was fired from a “nouveau-riche yuppie” travel shop for being “too grim.” “I would be dragging my ass around there, dressed in black, trying not to talk to people. ‘I don’t care what wattage of adapter you need—it’s all meaningless and void! You’re all androids!’” But when she was hired to work at a Mountain View metaphysics shop, the Psychic Eye—a place that sold everything from talismans to cauldrons and crystal balls—her identity came into focus. As did many budding witches in the pre-Internet era, she found in the local occult shop her first real resource. Her self-taught, book-learned witchcraft, her private experiments, her angst-in-black and rooftop chants to the moon—it all made sense. At eighteen, she finally found herself among real priestesses.

Shannon and Morpheus first met when he strolled into the Psychic Eye, a lonely Pagan looking for community, and laid eyes on the beautiful women working there. He asked for a job application. Morpheus was quickly impressed by Shannon's dedication to his spiritual practice, heavily influenced by Native American shamanism. Soon the two began working magic together, one thing led to another, and they became a couple.

For a few years, Morpheus trained in the secretive Feri witchcraft tradition—through Linnea, an older woman she'd also met at the shop—and was finally initiated into her coven, known as Vanthe.<sup>2</sup> But her instincts told her it was already time for a change. Shannon had a plan: he wanted to go to college in Humboldt County—something he encouraged Morpheus, a high school dropout, to consider as well. She

decided to move north with her guy. He enrolled in college; she started earning junior-college credits. She knew her relationship with Vanthe would suffer, but she was younger than her covenmates, by twenty to thirty years, and she felt she was destined for bigger things. As young as she was, Morpheus had greater aspirations.

“I had a trajectory in life,” she says. “I just thought, ‘I have a *path*.’”

Witchcraft had given her an appetite.

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For the whole spectrum the sanctuary attracts—mainly “eclectic Wiccans,” which most Pagans are—Morpheus’s practice is more specific. As trained by Linnea, she is a Feri priestess—which means nothing clear to me right now, but will come to mean a great deal.

In their wood-paneled bedroom, with a utility lighter, Morpheus lights a candle on top of a rolltop desk she’s converted into a home altar, draped with satiny crimson fabrics and covered with statuettes of Pan (hooved and horned, pipes in hand) and a white goddess (after a Paleolithic cave painting) and bronze stags’ heads and wax drippings and crystals and a carved wooden pentagram and a framed photograph of her wedding to Shannon, both smiling as they face each other, garlands around their heads, foreheads touching. Now Morpheus raises a chalice of water to her face carefully, as if it contains something too hot to drink, and breathes into it—breathes her *energy* into it. She arches her neck back, then takes a breath for herself. She places a pomegranate on the center of the pentagram, slips a boline (a small sickle) from her belt, and slices the fruit in half; its juice is very red. She picks out the seeds with her white, white fingers, places them in a glass bowl, and carries them across the room: an offering to lay on another altar, by the bedside. A close friend died only weeks earlier, at thirty-five, of brain cancer—Tara, known as a powerful priestess—and here are photos of her and white taper candles and, in pride of place, the goddess Morpheus works most closely with: a goddess she inherited from her coven, a Celtic goddess called the Morrigan. In this statuette, the Morrigan is redheaded, red-cloaked, and barefoot, carrying a spear and shield. A goddess of the battlefield, she’s present at the moment someone crosses over, they say—and what is cancer, if not another kind of violent death? Morpheus grips the Morrigan with both hands.

What she is doing is praying—just as Christians and Jews and Muslims and Buddhists pray. And when she casts spells, whenever she finds one necessary—to heal a friend or protect herself or bind someone from doing harm—it’s with the same prayerlike focus and intention.

Her dark goddess presides over Stone City: Morpheus is building a human-scale statue in her honor, using a male department-store mannequin as the armature,