

Miss Mary Mack

Miss Mary Mack

a cautionary tale for the young

by

Sonya Bader-Mein-Hyphen



Invisible Books

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Miss Mary Mack

Chapter One

“Listen to the words of the Great Mother, who of old was called Artemis, Astarte, Dione, Melusine, Aphrodite, Cerridwen, Diana, Arienrhod, Brigid, and by many other names . . .”

Jenny Kilvert (not *Brightshadow*, Mom, puh-leez!) was up late on a school night (that part was OK.) She was up late with her parents and their friends, who were running around in robes, jingling with bad art-nouveau jewelry, solemnly pronouncing absolute twaddle in pseudo King James English. This was so far from being OK, it had taken plenty of persuasion to get her to go along with it.

Jenny’s parents were pagans. Mr. Kilvert was a computer consultant for an insurance company, which paid enough for Mrs. Kilvert to run a metaphysical shop called *The Last Unicorn*. Jenny had grown up in pagan circles and gatherings, and now, at age 16, she’d had just about all the camping out, drum-beating, and sitting in circles she could stand. But her parents’ friends, who’d known her since she was born, and called her by her unendurable pagan name, loved seeing her when they were at the house for a ritual.

It was so embarrassing! Jenny hated hippies. There were kids at the high school who dressed like her parents and their friends, in 60’s retro. Bellbottoms, peace signs, tie died shirts, and they made a big deal about not eating meat. Like their clothes, their causes were a parody of sixties’

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

fashions. Jenny herself wasn't very up on politics. Perhaps she would be when she could vote. Till then it was all sort of academic. To simplify matters she told people she was an anarchist. Politics were boring. But animal rights and vegetarianism hardly qualified as politics.

"There shall you assemble, who have not yet won my deepest secrets and are fain to learn all sorceries. To these shall I teach that which is yet unknown," intoned Mrs. Kilvert, while the rest of the celebrants held up their ritual daggers, their athamés, to draw down power, or to channel power, or to get better reception or something.

While the coven chanted in unison. Jenny said under her breath:

*"Miss Mary Mack Mack Mack
All dressed in black, black, black
With silver buttons, buttons, buttons
All down her back, back, back."*

That kind of fit, actually. They were all dressed in black, and if they didn't have silver buttons all down their backs they certainly had silver pentagrams dangling down their fronts.

"Oh Mary Mack, gracious goddess!" thought Jenny with a smirk.

"Nor do I demand aught of sacrifice, for behold, I am the mother of all things and My love is poured upon the earth," droned Mrs. Kilvert.

MISS MARY MACK

“Oh, I demand something in sacrifice,”
thought Jenny, like an increase in my allowance.
Jenny intoned under her breath

*“She asked her mother, mother, mother
For 50 cents, cents, cents,”
To see the elephants, elephants, elephants
Jump over the fence, fence, fence.”*

“Hear the words of the Star Goddess, the dust of whose feet
are the hosts of heaven, whose body encircles the universe,”
said Mrs. Kilvert. Jenny whispered along:

*“They jumped so high, high, high
They reached the sky, sky, sky
And they didn’t come back, back, back
Til the 4th of July, ly, ly!”*

At this point the incense burning on the charcoal disk in the little iron caldron flared up and with a loud pop shot sparks in all directions. The candles at the corners of the altars suddenly flared up, their flames rising to an unnatural height as if being stretched upwards, and went out, from the bottom up, as though the tongues of light were disappearing up into another dimension. The room was in darkness. The incense was suffocating. And someone had used the wrong kind. Instead of the usual patchouli Mrs. Kilvert favored, there was an overpowering smell of carnations.

“So mote it be!” cried the high priestess, Mrs. Kilvert.

“So mote it be!” thundered back the coven.
“Jesus fuck.” thought Jenny.

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

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“Dieter, eat your mush. A spoonful for Opa now.”

Dieter looked helplessly at his father, the lieutenant-colonel, sitting erect at the head of the table, reading a precisely folded newspaper. Without looking up, the lieutenant-colonel said:

“Orders are orders.”

Dieter’s mother was in the kitchen, making more coffee, leaving him to the mercy of Oma Itten. His father had married his mother while in Germany, and she had returned with him to the US to raise a family. Now he was stationed at a base in New Jersey; they lived in a house which the army helped cover the cost of. And every year Dieter’s mother’s mother, his grandmother (“Oma” in German) came to stay with them for a month.

“You know Dieter, when you don’t eat your mush, it hurts Oma terribly. You don’t want to give your Oma rheumatoid arthritis because of your heartlessness? Many diseases are caused by the wickedness of children. If children were not so heartless, and ate their mush, there would be no orphans.”

Oma was completely insane. She was talking in German, so his father didn’t catch everything she said. The evil old hag took full advantage of this.

“I’m eating, Oma. See, it’s delicious,” Dieter placated.

“Of course it is, Dieter. It is made with love.”

Making it with love was quite bad enough, but Oma’s mush had many more frightening and

MISS MARY MACK

inexplicable ingredients. Oma was much given to organic, which she called “biologic” food, and diet books formed, with books about the paranormal, almost her exclusive reading material. The health mush was her latest obsession. She was convinced that a certain combination of grains, with garlic, eaten daily, would guarantee virtual immortality.

To look at her, it worked. At the age of 95 she was impossibly hale, had perfect vision and all her teeth, and executed the housework in its entirety when she visited, insisting that the regular cleaning girl was “a lazy prostitute” and left everything “sticky.” Since Dieter’s mother considered the cleaning girl a treasure, they gave her a month off with pay to keep her away from Oma Itten.

“Momma,” said Dieter’s mother returning from the kitchen, “you must not tell Dieter these stories. You will give him a complex. Dieter, Oma is joking. Oma, we have spoken about this,” said Dieter’s mother with a significant glance.

“Yes Dieter, Oma is only joking. No harm will come to your poor Oma if you do not finish your health mush. But you must remember that your mother’s father, your grandfather, would not eat his health mush either. And this heartless child who refused the lovingly prepared breakfast treat brought about the second world war and untold suffering for the entire German people.”

“Oma!” shrilled Dieter’s mother.

“Hmm,” participated Dieter’s father from the head of the table from behind the newspaper.

“I’ve got to go to school now. See Oma, I have finished the health mush.”

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

“Work hard at school.” sighed Oma.
“Remember Oma loves you and how bad you are.”

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Amalasantha, daughter of Theodoric King of Italy lay in bed, staring distractedly at the ceiling, wondering if she would ever have real boobs. She tried to imagine what they would be like, succeeded a little too well, and shuddered. Very well, she didn't have boobs, and that was kind of a relief. But she wasn't Amalasantha either, and that was a trial to her. She was Emily, daughter of Ted, proprietor of Ted's Italian Groceries and Appetizing. She spoke English and lived in Laconia, New Jersey. Being a 6th century Frankish noblewoman would have solved certain problems. But just talking with a French accent and pretending not to understand English helped somewhat.

Except at school. Why did they send her to school at all? Why couldn't she just stay home and read the books on her own and get an equivalency diploma? Her parents were adamant on this point. Kids who were home-schooled turned into life-long social retards, her father had explained with irritated clarity. But what kind of social skills could you develop in a high school where everyone was, as far as she could see, already a social retard?

Nom de nom de nom!” breathed Emily in exasperation as the alarm clock beeped. Six thirty. At least she could walk to high school, which meant

MISS MARY MACK

she didn't have to actually leave the house till seven. She got up and began sorting through her clothing.

"How can you take so long to decide what to wear, it's all black," sniped her mother as she passed the door on the way downstairs, cell-phone in hand. *Parbleu!* muttered Emily, selecting the more faded of the black denim jackets to wear over her black T-shirt with the inverted pentagram in red.

Galumphing downstairs to the kitchen, backpack jangling its panoply of buttons, badges and key rings, most of them featuring Hindu gods or military emblems from the former Soviet Union, Emily made for the coffee machine.

"If you're not having anything but coffee for breakfast, at least put cream and sugar in it."

"I like it better this way. It goes with my shirt."

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"Hey, Emily," came a voice from behind her as she reached the sidewalk. It was a tall, thin, androgynous young man with a black turtleneck and a leather jacket.

"Dieter, hi."

"Did you see that show on the History Channel last night, the one about the Valley of the Kings?" asked Dieter, anxious to put thoughts of health mush far behind.

"No, I forgot it was on this week. How was it?"

"It was great, really wild, they explained all the stuff painted on the walls of the tombs, how it was like a map of the world beyond."

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

“You mean like Dante?”

Emily remembered reading a translation of Dante in English class the year before. It had started out well, with a suicidal poet on his way through Hell, but it proved to be so religious and complicated that she'd lost interest long before they reached Lucifer. The illustrations by Doré still interested her, but the book was a real snore.

“No, this was all pictures. You could really see what was going on. Like a comic book.”

“Dante's Divine Comic-Book?”

Dieter laughed.

“Yes, rather like that. Anyhow, it'll be on again this Friday night.” Dieter liked Emily. He'd met her when his family moved back from Germany. Having grown up there, he was quite bilingual, and culturally European. Many of the things about Emily that made her seem eccentric or unfeminine appeared to Dieter perfectly normal, and rather civilized. In Europe, women of the middle and upper classes were expected to be well-read and witty. Emily wanted so much to go to Europe, to France of course, but Germany would do, and being friends with Dieter was a very welcome taste of exile.

The school loomed before them. Built in the beginning of the last century, it was an odd but common combination of brick and columns, like a classical education factory. Nowadays the education you got there had more to do with the factory than the classics. Emily was taking honors French, because she wanted to go to France, and after three years of the language it was a pity not to

MISS MARY MACK

go on with it. Not that she was learning much. She could live without make-pretend conversations about the Paris Metro and episodes from *The Little Prince*. But Monsieur Grevisse, who called her *ma chère*, liked her, it was an easy “A,” and there was always the satisfaction of showing up the popular girls who took French because — who knew? Maybe they thought it had something to do with Lacrosse.

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Todd made his way through the living room past empty beer cans and full ashtrays. His mother was shuffling around in the kitchen, making coffee. The guy she came home with last night had already left. That was a relief. There was nothing more embarrassing for Todd than these guys’ attempts to avoid, or worse still, to make conversation with him. Mom didn’t have to be at work at the convenience store till 9, so she still had an hour to pull herself together. A divorced father who sent in his payments made her unambitious career choice possible.

It was already a rotten Monday. Todd put his *Songs of the Seal Hunt* CD into his Discman and plonked the headphones into his multiply pierced ears. He had to give some thought as to how he would get out of gym class.

Todd hated gym. Of all the things he hated about school, gym class was the kicker. The kids who he most wanted to avoid were all there, and they were in their element. The monkeys on the

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

basketball team who proudly wore their ties to school on days they had a game. The football jocks with their weirdly perforated numbered shirts who likewise exulted in their uniforms.

Those guys were too big. Todd sometimes wanted to just take out a stopwatch and stomp on one's toes to see how long it took for the pain to reach the brain. There were maybe two kids in his class he liked, who were skinny and useless at sports like him and not too nerdy to talk to, who made the gym class, well, not bearable, but less unbearable. Fellow prisoners. If he could talk the nurse into a sick note, and sit on the bleachers with one of these feebs who always seemed to have a sick note, he would condescend even to talk about *The Lord of the Rings*, which he had at one time greatly enjoyed but wouldn't generally admit to having read now that the film was out.

Aside from the social dimension, the promiscuous mixing of the different orders of humanity, gym was just disgusting. It stank of sweat. There was weird mildew on things. You could get athlete's foot. You had to take off your clothes and shower with the other guys. Todd remembered the first year, before he'd started to invent clever ways to get out of gym. Suddenly he was in a room packed with guys stripping, a kaleidoscope of unbuttoning shirts, unlacing sneakers, briefs and undershirts. He couldn't help looking, with a kind of morbid fascination, at the other guys, to see if he was keeping up with the pack in sexual development. To his great relief he saw his hairiness and his size was average. The

MISS MARY MACK

whole thing sort of fascinated him, and for a few weeks he secretly looked forward to gym, for this comparing. Then one time he arrived early, got into the locker room when some older kids, upper classmen, were getting dressed from their just finished gym period. Again he looked, to “compare and contrast” as the English teachers like to say. A voice blared at him: “What are you looking at, faggot?”

God! he hated gym class.

Todd slung his backpack over one shoulder, turned up the volume on his Discman, and left for school.

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Jenny wanted to think about Miss Mary Mack and the previous night’s odd phenomena. But now she stared ahead in stupefaction as her English teacher appreciated a piece of literature at the class. The literature in question, a poem by Emily Dickinson, wasn’t that bad. Not all the way to interesting, but not as raging pointless as many. But the teacher was ruining it. Having him point out the beauties of the poem was like having someone else handle your food. Even if their hands were clean, it made whatever was on your plate uninviting.

How clean were Mr. Smithson’s fingers? Not that very clean. He tended to let black gunge accumulate under his fingernails, which you noticed when he was going over your paper and was pointing out something. Jenny thought a nailbrush with a nice bow on it might be a clever

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

thing to pop into his faculty mailbox in the main office. But finally, she neither liked nor disliked him enough to give him the hint.

Manicure aside, Smithson dressed typically for a teacher. He had about four outfits worth of clothing which he kept cycling through, and after two weeks you'd seen the whole fashion show. Mostly button-down oxford collars, Dockers, a couple of sweaters. If he wore the tweed jacket he had something important to do after school. There was a vague but overwhelming dowdiness that all high school teachers seemed to share. Male adults tended to dress dull anyhow, but even the women teachers, actually, especially them, had this middle-aged dreary thing going. Was there a special store where female high school teachers went to get the costume jewelry pins to put on their dresses above their hearts in a way that said "I try?" And dresses? Who wore dresses? Elected officials, female pastors, people who were paid to be dull.

Jenny glanced over the room. Even though she didn't much care for her fellow students, it was good to be on this side of the room, facing the blackboard, in the ranks of those who still cared what they looked like.

Jenny wasn't very enthusiastic about reading poetry in English class. She *wrote* poetry. She wasn't sure if it was good or not, but it was creepy and it scanned. She wrote in very strict rhyme and meter, because she thought not to was just sloppy. Her favorite poet was Edgar Allan Poe. Not just for *The Raven*, which everyone thought they knew but few had read to the end. Some of Poe's verses were

MISS MARY MACK

uncommonly strange: like *The City in the Sea*. She'd memorized that.

*Lo! Death has reared himself a throne
in a strange city lying alone . . .*

She read and reread Poe's stories too, some of which got crazed and ecstatic in their language to the point where they were pure poetry. Her favorites were *Ligeia*, *Metzengerstein*, and of course *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

When she was a kid, Jenny had loved horror movies, which her hippie parents discouraged her from watching. "What do you see in that? It's so . . . *darkside*?" her father would ask, unfailingly at the best part of the film. When she was 10 or 11 she would set her alarm clock inside her pillow so no one would hear it go off, and get up at 3 am to sneak down to the den when some classic horror film would be playing, *House of Frankenstein*, or *Village of the Damned*. With the whole house asleep she could really enjoy the film, without her father's rhetorical questions, or her little brother wanting her to explain it to him. For her, that was a taste of the real Otherworld, the Enchanted Sector, whatever you called it. Nothing like her parents' idea of magic, where all the real witches were good. To be on the couch with a blanket pulled around her, with everyone else asleep and out of her hair, basking in the blue Otherworld glow of the TV screen while the old gypsy told Lon Chaney "The way that you go, my child, is full of pain, through no fault of your own" or Victor Frankenstein

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

scrawled another entry in his *Secrets of Life and Death* notebook . . . Jenny had looked for that book in the library over and over, and searched for it online. It was never there in libraries, and the internet just led her to the web pages of dweeb fanboys, but for a while she kept looking for the book. Somehow she knew that if she wanted that book so bad it had to exist somewhere, maybe under another name, but somewhere. It had to be.

She had a similar feeling sometimes when she'd be riding her bicycle around the suburban blocks at sunset. In the twilight as she coasted by the houses, watching the lights go on, making yellow squares of light as the sky purpled into night, she knew that somewhere, and not that far, just far enough that she'd never biked there yet, there was someplace that touched on the marvelous. Maybe a half ruined castle hidden by a billboard, an abandoned industrial park whose weeds concealed ruins with inscriptions in a non-human tongue. Something had to be there, and not that far away, or she couldn't feel the longing so strong.

"Jenny, you're looking thoughtful back there, what do you have to add to the discussion?" asked Smithson. She had obviously been daydreaming, and this was his way of discouraging private thought in his class. She had an answer for him.

"This may seem kind of irrelevant, but I was wondering, are children's songs poetry? Songs like "The Worms Crawl In, The Worms Crawl Out" or "Miss Mary Mack"?"

This caught everyone off guard. There were a couple of titters and one low "Oh no!" from her

MISS MARY MACK

classmates, thinking that she was just joking or trying to pull the teacher's chain.

"Actually," said Smithson, "you ask a very good question. The answer is yes. Songs like the ones you mention are indeed poetry, though they don't seem to be written by individual poets. We would call them 'folk poetry' because they seem to be spontaneously created by entire peoples. Some of them may be extremely ancient. A good example is

*Ring around the rosey,
a pocket full of posey;
ashes, ashes,
we all fall down.*

That poem is believed to go back to the middle ages, when the Black Death, Bubonic plague, decimated Europe. The 'ring around the rosey' seems to describe the red swelling of plague sores; the 'pocket full of posey' suggests the common belief that the plague was carried by bad air, and that you could avoid it by holding a cloth bag of spices and dried flowers in front of your mouth when you were near plague victims. The 'ashes, ashes' mimics the 'atchool,' the sneezing of plague victims, and the 'all fall down' is a suggestion of the fate everyone expected."

The class was silent.

Tiffany, the girl sitting behind Jenny, stopped admiring her fingernails long enough to whisper, "I hate you."

"How do you know all that?" asked one student. "Do you know everything?"

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

“Hardly. It’s something I did research on while I was getting my MA.”

Smithson clearly enjoyed the adulation: he couldn’t resist giving the kids a bit more.

“Some of the games that go with the rhymes, and who knows? maybe the rhymes themselves in some form, may go back thousands of years. Variants of hopscotch are played throughout the Americas, Europe and Asia, with a variety of names, including ‘Hop-Around,’ ‘Heaven and Hell,’ ‘Paradise,’ ‘Potsy’ and ‘Airplane.’ What all the variants have in common is that the kids toss some object onto a pattern chalked on the ground, and then hop into, through, and out of the pattern without touching the lines.

“*Escargot!*” interrupted Jenny. “In France they call it *escargot*, that means snail. Their hopscotch pattern is spiral, like a snail’s shell.” Jenny’s friend Emily had told her about that.

“Very, very impressive!” said Smithson with a nod.

“You make me so sick,” whispered Tiffany to the back of Jenny’s head, while Smithson continued:

“Some scholars believe the game may be thousands of years old, going back as far as ancient Crete or beyond. It may be a trace of an initiation ceremony for young people. I’m not coming down on one side or the other of the antiquity question, but all this means that rhymes like ‘Miss Mary Mack’ are not only poetry, but possibly very *ancient* poetry of religious significance. Excellent subject for your oral presentation, by the by.” Here

MISS MARY MACK

Smithson looked wearily out at the class to see if this sally had raised any interest in the whole matter of oral reports.

“ It would save you some trouble memorizing the poem if you chose a Mother Goose rhyme or a children’s song,” Smithson ventured, not above appealing to the students’ pragmatism.

The bell rang. Under cover of the clangor, Tiffany said: “Very, very impressive, Miss Kilvert. Totally puke-a-go-go.”

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Dieter was the first of the friends to make it to the lunch room. He was always like that. Punctual. *Pünktlich*. The importance of being on time had been driven home twofold: by his military father, and by the German nation. Growing up in Göttingen, he had absorbed the on-time and rigorous ways of his neighbors. And they seemed to him right. Admittedly he had slacked off a great deal since moving to America a year before, and by European standards, he was now *faul*, a lazy waster. But in a public high school in New Jersey, he was on the honor roll.

The cafeteria made him stiffen a little with disgust. There were always papers, cans, the occasional tray from the previous seating, and all too often a film of tacky ick on the tables, and this had taught him not to rest his elbows on them. Dieter had never quite fit in: he had been an American in Germany, and now he felt like a German in America. Luckily, by the end of

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

freshman year he'd made three friends, Emily, Todd and Jenny, all of whom made a sort of European sense to him — and they had all been flattered to learn that they would have fit in better across the sea.

Dieter looked, with an almost undetectable flaring of the nostrils, across the cafeteria. It was an anatomy of the school. There was the table of the “little pubers” as he liked to think of them. Freshmen, all boys, and looking more like little boys than like adolescents. They giggled and poked each other through every meal. The previous week, two of them had massaged a banana till it was a leathery lozenge of liquid, then had a “duel” with it. Each squeezed one end of it to see who would get splattered when it “went off.” As it turned out it was the English teacher, Mr. Smithson, whose shirt took a sudden pattern of banana pudding. To Smithson's credit, he laughed so hard at seeing the terrorized faces of the little culprits that he contented himself with a barked order to “clean up this mess” and hadn't even given them a detention. The kids respected Smithson for things like that.

Then there were the science nerds, who always had their graphing calculators and notebooks out. Usually they were helping each other with the homework. They were unnaturally animated, and usually excited about some sort of competition for which they were building — a robot, or a catapult, or something like that. None of them dressed in traditional nerd clothes, the pocket protectors and horn-rimmed glasses of the 1950's. But they all dressed in a way that was pointedly normal, a style

MISS MARY MACK

adults call “business casual.” The only eccentricity would be the occasional jokey T-shirt with a cartoon character on it. For all that, they were a confident lot. They knew they were nature’s aristocracy. Teachers and parents cheered them on with uncritical enthusiasm. Everyone knew these nerds were going to be well paid one day. They were all success stories just waiting to happen.

Next came the table of popular girls. Everything about them was a little overdone. The hair was a little too long and a little too highly colored, like the fingernails. The jeans were low-slung hip-huggers revealing the tops of thongs, or boys’ boxer shorts or briefs.

Hip-huggers look good on no one — they make tall girls look hyperextended and short girls look stump-leg dwarfish, but they do at least show ass, Dieter mused. *Volkswagen*, who had made such a splash with those idiotic bud vases, could have made themselves a fashion coup by marketing butt-vases to fill the literal market *niche* hip-huggers created.

Dieter’s was awakened from his *Fahrvernugen* by the prattle of the girls. Their conversation was conducted in superlatives and clichés: everything was “totally” something. An inept remark earned a “That was random!” These were all the most physically developed and attractive girls, or at least girls who knew how to make themselves look like they were in that category. They were mean, cliquish, and either stupid or good at acting like they were. They were dream-fodder for most of the boys. Tiffany was one of the undisputed leaders of

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

this set, and would often dispatch other girls on little errands for her. Girls who weren't quite so conventionally attractive were glad even to be ordered around by someone that popular.

Moving along, you came to the table of the "Dopers," long-haired boys with tie-died shirts and exaggerated bellbottoms, who listened to Phish and the Grateful Dead and either played an instrument or (more usually) thought about it. Or smoked pot (or, far more usually, just thought about it). They thought it big fun to leave pyramids of soda cans and other trash on the table when the bell rang for end of period.

There was a little knot of Emoh boys, but these were so wimpy and pathetic they didn't really count as there at all.

Across the room was the jock table: thick-necked cumbersome looking boys who were always laughing and playfully mock-punching each other. The area around that table was the one where you stood the greatest chance of getting winged by an airborne French fry. The few popular girls who left the charmed circle of the popular girl table did so to take a seat either with the jocks or the long-haired boys. The "nice" girls went with jocks, the "bad girls," the ones with overly long fingernails and overly low-riding pants, drifted over to the long-hair boys.

The rest of the room was pretty average. Most of the kids at school were not particularly distinguished in any way. Regular kids, grinding through their homework when they had to, OK in sports but not ambitious, neither popular nor

MISS MARY MACK

unpopular. They were the ones who watched with delight while a kid back-talked a teacher. Or stared in vague dismay as a nerd earned high praise by an over-the-top accomplishment of some class project. They enjoyed the show without ever feeling the need to be onstage.

There was one other group that deserved notice. The punk table. These were the kids who dressed in black, wore one or more belts studded with little silver pyramids, and T-shirts with skulls and pentagrams on them. They listened to the Sex Pistols and Children of Bodum. They didn't really know what Punk was about, but they knew they were pissed off, and their dark clothes and slouches and rude talk broadcast the message. The girls got a big kick out of taking a tampon, rouging it up with a red magic marker, and seeing if they could scare any boys with it.

Smithson had intercepted one of these: the punk kids were finally playing table-top hockey with it.

"Isn't that gross?" one of the girls had asked him proudly.

"Immeasurably," said Smithson. "Now throw it away. This isn't the women's long-house."

The kids looked at him blankly.

"Forget it. Just throw the thing away."

It was all so different from middle school! There they were all just kids. There were some differences of course, enemies and friends, kids who were bookish and kids who were good at sports, but they hadn't divided into exclusive groups. There was a kind of a general fellowship.

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

Once they got into high school that all fell apart. They were herded together there with kids from different middle schools, and a cruel sorting process took place through the first year. You might no longer even speak to kids you'd known since elementary school if they were in a different group than yours.

There weren't any Goths at the school, since Goth was over. But the closest thing you'd find to it was the table where Emily and Todd now joined Dieter.

Jenny appeared soon after. Putting down her tray at the table with her three friends, she said: "What do you know about Miss Mary Mack?"

Dieter and Todd looked blank. Emily laughed and started clapping her hands and extending them, palm outwards, to Jenny, miming one side of the hand slapping game that went with the song:

"Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, that much I know," said Jenny, and turning to Dieter and Todd, who were still looking blank, she explained the game that went with the song.

"But still," said Jenny, I need to know who she was."

Emily suddenly looked serious.

"Mack, Mary, Miss. Early twentieth century suffragette and campaigner for women's rights. Her distinctive dress, 'with silver buttons all down the back' gave rise to a street ballad popular among those who opposed the emancipation of women. Made financially secure by the estate of her wealthy

MISS MARY MACK

mother, she went on to do pioneering work in vertebrate zoology, publishing monographs on the migratory habits of Indian Elephants which continue to excite interest, though details of her study have been contradicted by the reports of later observers."

"Wow," said Todd, "how did you know all that?"

Dieter raised an eyebrow.

"Is that all true?" asked Jenny.

"As far as you know," said Emily, narrowing her eyes and rapidly glancing from side to side like a shifty character in a cartoon. They all laughed.

"I should never believe anything you say," said Jenny.

"Probably a good plan," advised Emily. "But what's the interest in Miss Mary Mack?"

Jenny briefly brought them up to speed on the previous night's witchly doings.

"So my mom now thinks she has major mojo working. She was in such a good mood that she raised my allowance, without my even asking."

"You always said that Wicca stuff was all nonsense," observed Dieter, "what do you think now?"

"Oh, I'm still sure that Wicca is nonsense, but I think I might be ready to believe in Mary Mack."

"I always imagined Mary Mack as kind of a mean-spirited Mary Poppins. The long black dress with all the buttons was definitely Victorian," ventured Emily, taking things seriously for once.

"Yeah," said Jenny, "with kind of a pinched face and mean beady eyes."

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

“But she must have been a little girl, if she still had to ask her mother for the fifty cents,” observed Dieter, always methodical and careful in his thinking.

“Or, if she was a grown-up and she still needed to ask her mom for the two bits, that would explain why she had that pinched bitter expression,” added Todd, beginning to take an interest.

“Here’s where it gets really weird,” said Jenny, and filled them in on what Smithson had said about the ancient roots of children’s rhymes.

“I think we need to get some more information about this Mary Mack,” said Dieter. “We could see what there is on the internet.”

“OK, want to meet after school and compare notes on what we find out?” said Jenny.

The bell rang for the end of lunch.

“At the pyramid?” asked Todd.

“*Mais oui*,” said Jenny. “But of course.”

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There was an old cemetery in the woods behind the school. A badly paved road led to it. You followed the road uphill, the houses got fewer and fewer until it reached the cemetery, after which the road turned into a flagstone path through land now owned by the town. It wasn’t really even parkland, though some people did hike through it. Originally it had been owned by the water authority, and held a reservoir (since drained). Now it was in a kind of real-estate limbo.

MISS MARY MACK

So was the cemetery. It went back as far as the early nineteenth century, and some of the families named on the stones still lived in Laconia, New Jersey. A small graveyard, the plots in it belonged to the descendants of the deceased, who kept it from being completely overgrown by weeds and brush. But it really hadn't been used much in the last fifty years. The town had developed all the way downhill, on the shores of an artificial lake, and no one was much interested in living or being buried on the scrubby eminence of the forsaken hilltop.

The unfrequented place held one curiosity: a large mausoleum in the shape of a pyramid, with two sphinxes in front. It had been built for Thomas Chickering, the town's one claim to history.

Chickering had been a doctor in the late nineteenth century, beginning his practice just after the civil war. He had specialized in mental illness, especially criminal insanity — he was an *alienist*, as they called it then. Being of wealthy family he had gone on the “grand tour” of the continent when he had finished his education. Usually this trip, a year-long circuit of the capitals and noteworthy sights of Europe, was taken at the end of college. Chickering had deferred his until he finished medical school, and then took a different sort of tour. He visited the finest asylums, clinics, and sanatoria of the continent, and returned with the most advanced ideas regarding the treatment of mental illness.

In nineteenth-century America insanity was generally treated with beatings, sermons, and

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

imprisonment. Chickering introduced the use of exercise, music, and education in the asylum he founded in Laconia. Not surprisingly, he got rather better results, and the fame of the Chickering clinic spread. It continued to operate for some time after Chickering's death in 1905, but burned to the ground due to an accident involving fireworks on the Fourth of July the year World War One ended. The only enduring record of Chickering now, besides his place in medical history, was this mausoleum. A pyramid, over whose entrance was inscribed:

Charles W. Chickering, 1831-1905
Friend of the Insane.

The Egyptian style in funerary monuments had begun to come into fashion after Napoleon invaded (and looted) Egypt at the very end of the eighteenth century. But it didn't really take off as a graveyard style until the Tutankhamun finds of the early twentieth century. So Chickering's choice of monument style was a little unusual. He himself had become interested in Egypt during the last twenty years of his life, and published a monograph suggesting that Egyptian mythology could help us understand the world of madness, dreams and the unconscious. At the end of his life he had begun a correspondence with Freud on reading that author's *Interpretation of Dreams* which appeared in 1900.

Such was the history of the place, though this was known to few of Laconia's inhabitants. The

MISS MARY MACK

place was simply known as “the Pyramid,” and little thought of any more. Officially it was referred to as “the old Chickering Monument” by the town’s officials, who periodically decided something should be done about it.

This was because the Pyramid was popular with various groups of kids. The sides were spray-painted with the names of rock bands, or those of teenage lovers on either side of a plus sign. There were usually a few beer cans and the occasional empty peppermint schnapps bottle at the feet of the sphinxes. “Doing something about the situation at the old Chickering monument” generally meant having the police send a black-and-white up to the cemetery several times a the night around Halloween and again around May Day.

Dieter was, of course, the first to arrive, with a small sheaf of computer printouts in his hands. To him, a cemetery was a very normal place to be. In Europe they were considered not at all creepy, but simply viewed as another sort of public park.

Emily arrived next. She was secretly glad to find him there alone. She liked him a lot, though it was difficult to tell if he liked her back. That stiff Germanic thing he had going made him pretty hard to read.

“What did you find on the net?” asked Emily.

“Nothing really. Just a children’s song, as far as anyone knows.”

“Then what are all the printouts for?”

Dieter shrugged. “One likes to be thorough.”

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

Emily nodded sagely, arms folded, doing a pretty fair imitation of Dieter, which went right by him.

Jenny and Todd arrived. Todd kicked aside an empty schnapps bottle with the end of his shoe, laughing to himself as he read the label. Peppermint. He'd drunk himself sick on that stuff one Halloween night up by the Pyramid. They all sat down on the ground in front of the pyramid, facing each other, leaning their backs against the flanks of the sphinxes that stood at the entrance.

"Well?" said Jenny to Dieter.

"Nothing of use on the net that I could find. Smithsonian's information checks out, but there doesn't seem to be anything specific about Mary Mack. It seems just a made-up name."

This was disappointing. Jenny hadn't expected the track would fade quite this fast. She'd already been imagining that a door had finally opened in the dull blank wall of her life in Laconia. That something marvelous was finally happening to her.

"You didn't maybe have a little something to smoke with your parents' hippy friends?" asked Todd with a grin.

Jenny gave him a gorgon glare.

"Sorry," Todd backpedaled. "I mean, I would have."

"No, you know I'm totally straight-edge."

"Well," said Dieter, "Do you think it's possible your parents' ritual actually worked? If they actually raised some kind of power, maybe you got a free ride on it. Maybe it supercharged your Mary Mack

MISS MARY MACK

poem. If there is some kind of special meaning to Mary Mack, maybe that helped.”

Jenny shook her head. “No way. They raise about as much magic power as a Sunday church service. You know what they’re like. And if you want to refresh your memory, you can always check out who’s hanging out at my mom’s store.”

“Hippies and losers,” agreed Emily, “plus the occasional head-banger who hopes it might have something to do with Satan and torturing cats.”

“We need to consult an expert,” said Dieter. Dieter was always more comfortable in the shadow of some authority.

“Where are we going to find an expert on — I’m not really sure what we’re looking for. Mary Mack? Paganism? We might as well get out a ouija board and ask the friend of the insane,” said Todd, pointing to the tomb behind him with his thumb.

They all looked up at the Pyramid.

It was early September, and the wind was plucking the first bright dry leaves from the trees. Three fiery-colored oak leaves were being wafted across the front of the pyramid. Suddenly each of them heard a long rasping sound, that went on for almost a minute, then it stopped and resumed with a change of pitch. One by one they realized it was the sound of their own breathing, incredibly slow and perfectly synchronized. There was no other sound in the world, it was as though the volume had been turned off completely. The leaves floating across the tomb-front were still there in midair, moving in slow motion, like a movie slowed until it advances frame by frame. In fact, they could almost

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

see the frames: there was a slight distortion in the image, like a faint quick ripple going through a projection screen. This was the pulse of their own blood imperceptibly moving behind their retinas.

The pyramid glowed golden in the autumn sunlight, the graffiti on its sides no more distracting or distorting than the dappled shadows from trees. The shape seemed strangely clear and easy to understand. Clear as writing, like the emblems they use on signs to show “No Smoking” or “Ladies’ Room” or “Airport.” They could understand the meaning of the shape, even though they could not have easily put it into words. The pyramid was a thing risen, it had pushed aside the vulgar reality of suburban New Jersey like a volcanic island shoved up out of the surface of the sea. It was a sign of a new land, an other place, a *real* place. Real like you think life will be real when you grow up and you live like people in magazines. Real like being famous. Real like things look (but aren’t) when they’re on TV.

Then it was gone. The wind-borne leaves fell and rustled like paper against the side of the pyramid. It had all taken place in the time it takes for a leaf to fall.

“Wow.” said Todd.

“Yow!” thought Jenny.

Dieter furrowed his brow.

“I think,” said Emily, “I know who we should see.”

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MISS MARY MACK

Emily's Aunt Zora wasn't really her aunt. She had been a friend of her mother's mother, and had seen enough of Emily at family gatherings to achieve aunt status. Emily's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Napoli, were still on cordial terms with old Aunt Zora, though they didn't have her over to the house. Zora lived just on the other side of Laconia, and you could get there from the high school in half an hour by bicycle.

"You're sure she won't mind all of us showing up like this, without calling first?" asked Dieter. "We really should have stopped and gotten some flowers or a cake to bring."

"That's really more of a European thing," said Emily. Then she hastened to add, "but it's a really nice thing, and I think I'll try doing that next time." Emily was always a bit protective towards Dieter. She made it her responsibility to explain cultural differences, and make sure he knew she thought his European style was the superior one, even if it didn't really always work in the US.

"Cool place!" said Todd.

Zora's house was a little oasis of disorder in a generally well-kept lower middle-class neighborhood. The front yard of the 1950's split-level had been planted with hedges and trees so as to effectively shield it from the street, and gave more the appearance of a grove than a home. The dining room window had been extended out into a wide bay window that was full of plants, hanging and potted. And there were several years worth of Halloween decorations on the front of the house. A number of feeders posted outside lured a flock of birds, mostly

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

sparrows and finches, but with a sprinkling of mourning doves and grackles, all of whom flew noisily up to the trees as they approached.

“Your aunt must like Halloween. She’s a month early with the decorations,” observed Jenny.

“Oh, she *really* likes Halloween. The decorations stay up all year.”

“Way cool!” said Todd, visibly impressed, and more than a little envious. “Wish I had relatives like this.”

Emily shrugged. She hadn’t seen Aunt Zora in over a year. It had been at her Grandmother’s funeral. And she’d never been inside the house. It was pretty weird for her to be standing there unannounced with three teenage friends, but the afternoon had taken so strange a turn already that nothing seemed that unlikely. She knocked.

She knocked again. They could hear some sort of stirring and clattering in the house, a muffled crash, and finally the door opened on a plump woman of medium height in jeans with a plaid work-shirt open over a black T-shirt. Her copious hair was braided and wound up into a neat bun at the back of her head. She wore a necklace which incorporated a lot of silver charms, tiny carved human skulls, animal teeth and various shinies. Her clear blue eyes instantly brightened, and then went narrow above a big smile as she gave Emily an enormous hug.

“Emily, dear! Emily Emily Emily! You’ve come for a visit!”

Emily was dying of embarrassment. Her friends stood there grinning, enjoying the situation

MISS MARY MACK

hugely. Todd rescued Emily's beret as it fell from her head at the impact of the hug.

Aunt Zora released her and stood back for a moment.

"And these are your friends! Come on in! I was just making some tea!"

That was it. No polite enquiries, no formality, just as though Emily was a regular at the house and always came by with an entourage. The kitchen was right off the entrance hall, and Zora led them through it into the dining room, the room with the bowed window they'd seen from outside. She shoed them into chairs, big comfortable chairs with too much upholstery, high backs and arm rests, the kind that were good for reading a novel in all afternoon. A boom box on the counter played a CD of what sounded like xylophone music on bad drugs.

"What are you listening to, Mrs., uh, Mrs. . . ."

"Aunt Zora. That thing that sounds like a xylophone on bad drugs is a gamelan. It's an ensemble of instruments, with drums and xylophones and lutes and gongs. They play it in Java. It's music for a puppet opera.. I'll turn it down a little so we can talk," said Zora, bringing in a tray with a big brown English teapot full of sweet peppermint tea, a stack of handle-less Japanese tea mugs, plates and napkins. Then she made a last turn into the kitchen to pick up a platter heaped with brown cakes.

"I hope you like home-made gingerbread."

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

“Yes, thank you, uh, Aunt Zora,” said Todd. “There’s an awful lot of it. Were you expecting company?”

“No, I like eating it myself. Now that I’m a senior citizen I can do just what I like, so I have cake for breakfast and lunch, and ice-cream for dinner every day of the week.”

“That’s all?” asked Jenny, “Don’t you eat vegetables?”

“Nope. Never liked ‘em.”

“But vegetables are good for you,” interjected Dieter, always the voice of reason.

“Well then, the people they’re good for can eat them,” laughed Zora, with a wink to Dieter to let him know she wasn’t laughing at him but at herself. “Still, you probably haven’t come by to talk about my diet.”

There was a long pause, and Todd took a pull at the peppermint tea with as pained a face as if it were peppermint schnapps.

“Well,” began Emily, and then it all poured out, in no particular order, the others adding details and making corrections. Aunt Zora remained silent except to ask questions and ascertain she had the sequence and substance of the story right: the whole series of events from the ritual at Jenny’s house, to the odd phenomena at the Pyramid. When they were done, the four friends paused again, just as they had at the beginning of their story. Everything about Aunt Zora’s house, the faint puppet opera music clattering and chiming in the background like pop music from the spirit world, the tea and gingerbread, the African masks

MISS MARY MACK

and shelves full of seashells on the walls, all of this had put them at their ease. Or perhaps it had just distracted them from their worries about how their story would sound.

Now they were waiting for Aunt Zora to give her opinion, and suddenly it occurred to them that she was an adult they didn't really know, not even Emily really knew her that well. This could go a couple of ways

"I believe you," said Aunt Zora. "These kinds of things really happen. More often than you think, in fact. Only people generally ignore them or pretend they never occurred. Mind you, I wouldn't be volunteering information on this if you weren't well caught up in it on your own. I wouldn't like to get the reputation of being a dotty old hag, or a witch, any more than you'd like to be classified in ways that would draw the attention of Guidance or Special Services at school."

"Well, what causes these things, and what should we do with them?" asked Emily.

"Nothing really causes them," said Zora. "There's an old saying, *the spirit bloweth where it listeth*. That means spirit goes its own way. You can't really control it. That's why they can never 'prove' it's real in a parapsychology laboratory.

"Your parents, Jenny, with their ritual. They made a favorable setting with their incense and candles, and you added something to it, added just enough to it with your hand-clapping rhyme. Mary Mack may go far back in history or she may not, it doesn't really matter. What counts is that the poem opened your heart to that magical world of

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

children's rhymes with their cryptic characters who are so oddly and deeply involved in the facts of life, and the facts of death too. The world of Miss Lucy's Steamboat and Barnacle Bill and the Place on Mars Where the Ladies Smoke Cigars. It all came together for you at that moment in the ritual, and you did some real magic."

"Will I be able to use magic again?" asked Jenny.

"I expect so." said Aunt Zora.

"Make all kinds of things happen?" asked Emily.

"Some things," said Aunt Zora. "Magic can't make the impossible happen. The greatest magician who ever lived couldn't annul the laws of gravity to the extent of levitating a Ping-Pong ball. But magic does let you bend probabilities. And certain situations, like weather, or finding parking places, things with a large element of chance, are quite susceptible to magic."

Jenny was disappointed. She had been hoping, vaguely hoping, under it all, that this would open the door on really magical experiences, like in the TV shows about teenage witches.

Aunt Zora saw that Jenny's face had fallen, and asked her what was wrong.

"Nothing, really. It's just that I thought magic was about more than, well, avoiding a rainstorm or parking the car."

"Oh it is, it surely is all that. What you experienced in the cemetery wasn't trivial was it?" asked Zora.

The four friends looked at one another.

MISS MARY MACK

“No, not at all,” said Jenny.

“It was better than any drug,” said Todd, who alone of the four friends had tried grass, thanks to one of his mother’s gentleman callers.

“Exactly,” said Aunt Zora.. “Back in the 60’s people use to think certain drugs gave you a spiritual experience. And they do, in a way, it’s just a very low-grade one, and tends to leave you too confused and physically run-down afterwards to do any good.”

“It was like poetry, what we saw in the cemetery,” said Jenny.

“God bless you, Jenny! Poetry is exactly what it was. It was exactly what great poetry should be: an experience of the deepest and richest levels of existence. Magic is an *art*. It has the same goals as any other art. The same strange uncontrollable success rate. And, like all great arts, it also lets you nudge reality.”

“How exactly does it work, this nudging of reality?” asked Dieter.

“The short answer is, by similarity. Emily’s Mary Mack poem aligned with the situation: her parents and their friends were all dressed in black with plenty of silver on them, just like Mary Mack. The hero of the song asked her mother for fifty cents, and Emily wanted a raise in allowance. Without intending to, Emily used a spell: her children’s poem lined up with the circumstances and her own intention, the level of energy was high enough, and magic happened.”

“So, you make a model of what you want, and wish?” asked Dieter.

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

“Yes,” replied Aunt Zora, “only you don’t so much wish as *will* it to happen. Doubt kills it. Another reason why you can’t reproduce magic in a laboratory.”

“How did it work in the cemetery?” asked Emily. “How did we make that magic happen, and what will the results be?”

“I wasn’t there, but I think the location itself cast the spell. The old Chickering tomb is a special place, and a beautiful one. I’ve always been a sucker for Egyptian kitsch, and a nineteenth-century American pyramid with sphinxes is very magical looking, even more so on a fine clear autumn afternoon when the cold air and oblique sunlight make things look unnaturally distinct. It’s a poem by itself, the Chickering tomb is. And you sat there very honestly and earnestly looking for understanding of the spirit world. And you got some.”

“I watched a TV show about the Valley of the Kings last night,” said Dieter. “I was telling Emily about it this morning. It was about how their myths about the Otherworld were like things they’re finding out now in psychology.”

Aunt Zora laughed. “People have always been eager to have the Egyptians validate whatever they want to believe at the moment. But still, you might look further into Egypt. Your experience at the tomb may be a *leading* of some kind. And certainly having a knowledge of Egyptian myth, you’ll be able to get your bearings a little better in your dealings with magic. At the very least it’ll give you a vocabulary to talk about it. I believe old Chickering,

MISS MARY MACK

who hosted your occult adventure this afternoon, was something of an Egyptologist.”

“I’m into that,” said Todd. “Egypt is cool.”

“Me too, said Dieter. ”I will look into this Chickering person as well. See what I can learn about him at the library.”

Jenny nodded, already journeying down the Nile in her poet’s soul.

“I propose then,” said Emily with mock solemnity, “the foundation of the Laconia Egypt Exploration Society.”

“I second the motion” said Dieter, extending his hand across the table to take Emily’s. Todd reached out across the round dining-room table to place his hand on theirs, and then Jenny followed suit.

Aunt Zora shook her head and laughed, “Now look what I’ve started.”

Chapter Two

At dinner, Jenny's parents went on and on about the ritual. The strictly vegetarian food steamed spicily, squares of tofu swam in sauce, a big ceramic tureen of brown rice stood in the center of the table. Meat wasn't allowed in the house, but Jenny made up for it whenever she went to a restaurant, always ordering the most carnivore things she could find on the menu. They tasted good and they made her parents squirm. What was not to like? And bacon, how could anyone not like bacon? It was crisp and greasy and salty and irresistible.

But bacon was farther than ever from the thoughts of Jenny's parents. Mr. and Mrs. Kilvert were divided as to the meaning of the "theophany" as Mrs. Kilvert kept calling it.

"What if it was just a draft?" asked Jenny. Her parents laughed. They thought she was kidding. They always just assumed that she thought and believed as they did. But she absolutely didn't. They were completely bogus. They were good parents, and she loved them, but when it came to religion they were embarrassing. Jenny used her fork to slowly plough a square of tofu through some congealed sauce on her plate.

Now she had finally really had a spiritual experience, and was probably responsible for them having one too, yet she couldn't tell them about it. They would never believe that a hopscotch rhyme had done more than all their bad antique English. And there was something else. She instinctively felt

MISS MARY MACK

that what she had experienced was secret, that it would be wrong to tell it to anyone who didn't have a reason to know it. She looked at her parents, busily discussing their next big ritual, *Sambain*, the one on Halloween night. A wave of anger went through her, which only showed up in an extra level of expressionlessness in her face. Then it passed and she felt sad. It was really wrong that she had to be the mature one here. That she couldn't just blurt out everything she felt, like they did. Her deliberate silence was part of the distance between them. She looked at the silver hair which had long been at her father's temples, but which was now showing up in his beard. She looked at the lines on her mother's face. Suddenly they looked, not just older, but *old*.

"I've got to go do some homework," she said, getting up from the table and taking her dishes into the kitchen. She went to her room, turned on the computer, and started searching for Egyptian myth on the Internet.

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Dieter sat in his room reading. He had a big book on Egyptian myth, with color pictures, in German. All the really important work in Egyptology had been done by Germans in the second half of the twentieth century, so he had unusually good access to the material. What interested him was a book called the *Amduat*. That meant "The Book of What's in Hell." It described the nightly descent of the sun, below the horizon, into the Underworld. There he passed through twelve hours, or more

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

properly, twelve regions. Each one had its dangers, and its strange attractions. At the lowest point in the downward journey, the sun experienced its own death, saw its own corpse. Only after this point could the renewal of the sun god take place, could he become the strong reborn sun who would rearise the following dawn. There was something about this passage through the night that spoke to Dieter more than any other myth of the Egyptians. He had always been impressed by stories of explorers, the men who had first mapped the polar ice-caps, the great deserts, the oceans. He remembered learning with disappointment that the entire planet was mapped, that there was nothing left to explore. Everything had a name and belonged to someone. Outer space hadn't panned out, didn't work like in the movies. It was still a long, expensive business to even send a man to the moon, and the outer planets were inaccessible except to the telescope and the robot probe. Without the faster-than-light-drive of the SF books, outer space was out of reach.

But here was something still unvisited. Or at least unvisited for the last 2,000 years. Supposing it were possible to travel with the sun on his night journey, to actually ride in the "Barque of Millions," the boat vast enough to hold the souls of every one who had ever died. To glide down the Nile to the Ocean, not the Mediterranean, but the great Sea of Death! For an instant he could picture it, standing on the boat beside Ra, a ram headed god at the center of the boat, standing under a canopy to protect his royal scone from the Egyptian sun

MISS MARY MACK

blazing above. Dieter imagined the other gods who stood beside him, in sandals and kilts, animal-faced, intent on the boat's course. He looked forward over the upcurved prow of the boat, with the ornamental banner hanging down in front of it.

Then the image was gone. But that was where he wanted to go. He wanted to take that journey. To go beyond the day, where everything was ordinary and vulgarly bright, and enter an other world where whatever was visible had to shine with its own interior light.

Dieter turned on his computer. He would do a little research into Egypt. But first he logged onto a chatroom. A chatroom where he had never gotten to know anyone, since he tended to just lurk there. The chatroom where he completely deleted the screen-name and profile he made for himself every time he logged off.

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*From the Journal of Amalasantha,
Daughter of King of Theodoric
September 15*

It all comes down to boobs, I guess. Tonight I was looking at myself in the mirror, trying to see if there was any improvement since my last self-inspection, which was, admittedly, last night. I'm really flat. I mean really, really flat. It's dismal. At least I'm not muscular, like that girl in gym class. That would be too gross. But I really don't need a bra at all. If I were the daughter of Queen Theodoric, I would have huge boobs, which I would keep fetchingly

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

laced into one of those velvet medieval bodice situations. Everyone would notice me then. Dieter would notice me then.

Is that what this is really all about?

My namesake, Amalasantha, was the kind of woman people noticed. She lived back in the sixth century, and when she didn't like the prince her mother had set her up with, she took as her lover a slave. *He* sure gave her his undivided attention. And everyone noticed the slave after that. Especially Amalasantha's mother, Audofleda, who sent a bunch of soldiers over to the village where the love birds were hiding out, killed the slave and beat the daylights out of Amalasantha.

Amalasantha got back at her mother Audofleda though. When they took communion together at Church (which they had to do several times a day, because this was the middle ages and everyone was insanely religious when they weren't killing each other suddenly), Amalasantha put poison in the communion chalice and that settled things with Audofleda.

Then this neighboring king got mad because poisoning someone at holy communion was a pretty low trick even by medieval standards, so this king built a steam bath, put Amalasantha in it, and cooked her like a lobster.

That's what comes of having great boobs.

Just in case you were wondering what Amalasantha's father thought of all this, I wonder too, because the book I'm reading doesn't say. But Amalasantha's cousins, who were all kings, were outraged because they thought being steamed alive

MISS MARY MACK

was a disgraceful death for someone in the royal family, so they insisted on being paid lots of money by way of compensation for the injury to family honor. When they got their lavish sums they of course started trying to cheat each other out of their shares which led to even more medieval fun involving heavy sharp things.

Where am I going with all this? Well, if I were a take-charge, in-your-face tightly bodiced big-boobed medieval woman, Dieter would notice me. He would have to, because he lived in Germany, so he'd understand that European medieval Frankish way of acting, and I wouldn't have to wonder if he noticed me at all, I could just send my guards to seize him and that would be that. And there he'd be in my castle, with his rugged features and intense gaze, in the dungeonette apartment I'd keep him in, coming to his Teutonic senses about my ladyship.

This is already my junior year in high school and I'm not making a very good job of getting noticed. In freshman year, looking back on it, I was still just a kid. I had thought that getting out of middle school was going to be a huge improvement. I felt like I was ready for a car and an apartment. I had known all the same kids at elementary and middle school, and I had a place in the pecking order. Not a very exalted place. I wasn't popular like Christine Kirk, or an object of horror like that weird fat girl, Magya Gulak, who was so gross that she became religious because no one knew what to do with her. I was a normal kid, well maybe more amusing than normal, though I say it myself who shouldn't, but still a regular girl and not disliked.

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

In high school that all kind of fell apart. By the end of the first year everyone was a science-fag, or a sports-fag, or a music-fag, or a theater-fag. I guess I'm a theater-fag. I realized I was funny-looking, and was lacking in the bodice department, and there was no way I was ever going to be popular like girls with long straight hair and tight hip-huggers. I'm not an *ingénue*. I'm what they call a *character actor*. I wasn't too happy to find this out, since I had always thought of myself as the central character in whatever happened. After all, wherever I went, there I was. An easy mistake to make. Very pre-Copernican of me. I didn't so much mind finding out that I wasn't the center of the universe, that I too revolved around the sun. But at least let me be a planet! Not a chunk of invisible dirty ice in the asteroid belt!

So now, in high school, I found out that wherever I went, there I *wasn't*. I wasn't even teased or picked on. I just wasn't there. So I discovered the world of theater-fags. I got mixed up with them in my sophomore year, and had a couple of small roles in the school's productions, and made myself into someone who would be recognized. I started in with the French stuff. I had actually liked French from the start, since I completely ignored the teachers who wanted to tell us about Napoleon or how to make croissants. I knew that French was about interesting insane people like Amalasantha, or Arthur Rimbaud.

Rimbaud was my big discovery last year. He's like Sylvia Plath for boys. When I discovered his book *Une Saison en Enfer*, "A Season in Hell," it was

MISS MARY MACK

like getting religion, like poor old Magya Gulak come to think of it. Actually, let's *not* think of that. Rimbaud said everything I had ever felt — it's like he understood how weird my life has become since my childhood was over and I had to figure out how to not be a nothing who no one paid any attention to. Rimbaud taught me what all the girls would be wearing this season in Hell. It all made a kind of queasy sense, being involved in theater, learning to make use of the fact that I know how to be funny, then adding this stage-Frenchwoman thing. I made life into a comedy. *A Comédie Française*

Et Printemps m'a apporté l'affreux rire de l'idiot, as Rimbaud said. "And Springtime brought me the scary laughter of a retard."

Last spring I reached the limit with the theater crew. I had found my place with them, made a lot of friends, had a number of crushes on guys, all of whom, it turned out, were gay and decided to come out to *me* — because they thought I was *safe*. Because they liked me. Because actually, though none of them said this, they didn't really think of me as a girl. The last time that happened — all right, it was only the second time, but twice in one springtime is really more than enough — I just started laughing. *L'affreux rire de l'idiot*. The aforementioned scary laughter. It's so strange how Rimbaud works. You read the lines, and they don't make that much sense sometimes, and then they turn out to be the emblem of parts of your life you couldn't explain or talk about to anyone.

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

Anyhow, I suppose it wasn't very nice just to laugh at this awesome and intimate revelation, but it really didn't come as a great surprise, and I didn't much care. Well, I suppose it could have been much worse. He could have confessed to me that he had a crush on some other girl in the cast and pumped me for information about her. *That* would really have been awful. It would have opened the way for all kinds of elaborate medieval intrigue which probably would have ended up with me in the steam bath with Amalasantha asking me to scrub her back as a final merciful service before we were both parboiled.

School has started again and this year I'm not going to do the theater thing. I got what I wanted out of it, which was a *persona* I could put on like a mask, like medieval armor if need be, a *presence*, so I'm not just nobody. Now that I'm a junior, I'm older than half the kids in the school, and already thinking about college, so I don't have that much to prove. I can coast while I think of what my next move will be.

Another thing that makes it easier is now I have a gang of my own. Dieter, Emily and Todd. It's not a real entourage, like I was trying to put together when I was going in for theater last year, but they're my friends, my real friends. Its kind of hard to say how we all got together. One thing we all have in common is we're all really smart. Even Todd. Todd is, like, a head. He has these really big teeth. I mean his front teeth. They're big and flat. It makes him look oddly like a beaver when he smiles. He lives in a *trailer* practically with his mother, who

MISS MARY MACK

lets him do whatever he wants, and that seems to mean drinking beer and smoking weed. He even smokes cigarettes, which is totally gross and I can't figure out how he can afford it, they're like \$6 a pack! But he smokes with a lot of style, I have to reluctantly admit . . . he kind of looks cool when he smokes, like somebody on a CD cover or in a movie. I met Todd through the theater. He was working in lighting. He was too much of a laid back hipster type to actually take part in the shows as an actor. I don't know if he really has any interest in theater at all. I think he just liked being able to get out of so many classes with the passes Biber, the drama teacher, is so free with. Some teachers carefully write them out and check their watches and everything. If you ask Biber for a pass back to your class he just says, "Write it out, I'll sign it." You could write it out for any time and he wouldn't notice. I think Todd has a couple of extra signed blanks in reserve.

Anyhow, Todd and I got to talking backstage during rehearsal. Since I was always just a minor character in the plays I was in, I often had plenty of time waiting for my scene to come up. Todd has a very sharp tongue. I like that about him. Really, he should have been a girl, some of the things he says about the other kids are so withering. Actually, he wouldn't make a bad girl. His face is very fine-featured, delicate you might say: That and his long black hair give him a somewhat feminine look. The teeth louse it up though.

Todd and I would hang out among the curtains and ropes and things, and sometimes sip a bottle of

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

beer he had along. Todd I'm *sure* is gay. He doesn't have to make the midnight revelation to me. I'm not just going by his somewhat femmy looks. I personally am the absolute foolproof touchstone. If a guy likes me, he's gay. That's all there is to it.

That's how I know Dieter isn't gay. He doesn't even notice me. But then again he doesn't even notice anybody. He's really intense, and really thinks about things. He has these craggy, hewn features, and those profound soulful eyes. *He* could be the male lead in any play.

And he takes all these serious books out of the library about everything from Egyptian mythology to Roman law, which he doesn't even need to read for a class. And he reads books in German. I thought it was impressive to carry around a copy of *A Season in Hell* in French—and, really, it is. But Dieter reads poetry in *German* for fun. I met Dieter through Jenny. Jenny I felt an affinity for because I already knew her a little from her mom's store. Jenny sometimes works there after school, and I would go there to look at the jewelry and things. I'm not interested in neo-paganism, which is, as far as I can tell, just a little better than Star Trek, but I do like weird jewelry, especially if it has skulls on it. Jenny knows I'm into skulls, and she likes them too, probably because it creeps out her hippy parents. Come to think of it, we're all into skulls, Todd too, though the ones he wears on T-shirts or as pins on his denim jacket or as an earring are more in the biker end of the spectrum. All except Dieter, but I guess if you carry around books of intense poetry in

MISS MARY MACK

German you don't really need a skull earring to tell people to back off.

September 16

I'm always complaining that nothing ever happens here in Laconia. Well, today something happened, but I'm still not sure what it was. It all started off at lunch when Jenny told us about her parents' ritual hi-jinks. Only this time something really happened, and it had something to do with Miss Mary Mack from the children's song. I'm still not too clear about it, 'cause I've never even been to a pagan ritual (though I've watched enough episodes of *Charmed* and *Buffy* to qualify, I guess). So then we all decided to meet at the Pyramid and discuss it further. And when we were there the something happened. We all saw something, or felt something. Time slowed. I don't mean it was dull, I mean time *slowed*. All sound stopped and everything stopped moving. It wasn't even scary, at least not then. Now it seems scary, because this is not the kind of thing that happens to you if you're not going nuts. Only I don't think I'm going nuts. The other three were all there with me, and going nuts is kind of a private thing. Stuff that happens to four people at once isn't mental illness, it's in the realm of what they call on TV, *the unexplained*.

Then we went to see Aunt Zora, who's a witch, only not an off-the-rack witch like Jenny's parents, but some kind of a real witch, a woman with power. You could feel it. And she told us that this was some kind of an opening on the spiritual world.

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

That we should be cool with it, and even deliberately look into it. Now Dieter is mad for things Egyptian, and that gave us the impetus to use Egyptian mythology as a kind of a map to the spirit world we're trying to explore.

Aunt Zora also said that you could use magic to nudge reality, and I have a pretty good idea of how I'd like to do that. I want to give Dieter a nudge so he'll notice me, actually a lot more than notice me. Also, since he's so interested in Egypt already, Egyptian magic ought to work on him. So I did some research on Egypt and found out that their love goddess is named Hathor, that she's this golden-skinned woman with cow horns, and she's pretty much the same as Venus or Aphrodite, only a lot more too. She's not only the goddess of Love, but the goddess of Death. That will come in handy, since the place we found where we know we can access power is the Pyramid, in the middle of a cemetery. In fact, one of Hathor's names is "Lady of the Cemetery." Now, the next problem was, how to go about casting the spell.

The only one I knew who would be able to help me there was Jenny, with her neo-pagan parents, only I had to be discrete about it. Or perhaps, more properly, devious. It wouldn't be good for the morale of the Laconia Egypt Exploration Society if they knew the first magic action they officially carried out was to be directed at one of its members! But I figure all's fair in love and war, especially in love.

I think this "nudging reality" thing made an impression on all of us. We're probably thinking

MISS MARY MACK

about what magic can do for us. So when I spoke to Jenny about it, she was positive, and I think the others will be too. After all, if I get to “make a wish” as it were, with the occult support of the gang, then they will get to make one too. I wonder what the others will choose to do? Jenny, I think, secretly wants to be popular at school. Or maybe she’ll just put some kind of an acne-hex on Tiffany. We all kind of hate the popular long-haired girls who sit in the caf showing off their butt-cracks and clacking their fingernails on the tables.

I think Jenny, for all her sophistication would like to *be someone* in the school, and not just a nerdy almost goth-girl. I don’t care about the popular thing. I had a go at that last year when I became a theater person, and my success at it really bored me. So what if people you don’t know know your name? It’s just high school. It doesn’t really change anything. But knowing that you *can* get that does change things. I think Jenny needs to taste that. To know she isn’t really a mouse-burger. As long as it’s an experience out of reach, it seems too interesting. I saw her face last Valentine’s day. They have this really degrading custom at the school: everyone makes a heart out of red construction paper on a big loop of yarn, and everyone gives theirs to whoever they like. By the end of the day the really popular kids are wearing these horse-collars made out of valentine-hearts, and most everyone else is wearing maybe three. The winners are announced on the loudspeaker as the King and Queen of Hearts, and they get a dinner at a fancy restaurant. Really lets you know where you stand. I got a

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

couple of hearts, but I didn't wear them, I mean, why add to the general malaise? Jenny didn't get any, I don't think. I think she could have if she had looked like she wanted them, but she just gave off this vibe like this was not the thing to do. She was wearing a pretty forbidding outfit too, all black, she looked like Sylvia Plath's daughter. Black on Valentine's day? That alone was the tip off to me. Jenny wants to be popular all right. Well, who doesn't, at least for a while?

The boys are harder to read. Todd probably wants to stay stoned for the rest of his life! He should probably pass on Mary Mack and Hathor, and go right to invoking Jack Daniels. I wish he didn't drink and smoke. He's such a smart guy, and he could easily get all A's. That's not saying too much though, admittedly. They ask so little of you at a high school that anybody who makes the least half-hearted effort to study aces the tests. I mean, the tests and things are all geared to the level of the dumbest kids in the classes, and then dumbed down even further because the dumb kids won't study even on those minimalist terms. So the teachers give more tests on the same material, hoping that enough of the morons will have absorbed the material by sheer osmosis so that they can pass it the second or third time around. If a smart kid studies the subject for five minutes a night, he'll be so far ahead of the rest of the class the teacher will practically lick his feet in gratitude. And nobody wants to have a teacher licking their feet. It's not even sanitary. It's more like, really sad.

MISS MARY MACK

So Todd is this major underachiever. One time he showed us his second grade report card, which he called his best review. The comment was “Your son is the worst student in my class. All he does is sit in the back of the room and read the encyclopedia.”

What would Todd really wish for? Probably just to get out of high school. Or maybe to get out of that little house he lives in with his mother and his short-term wicked step-fathers, as he calls them. Todd has a lot to wish for. But Dieter, whose wishes are what concern me, is the hardest one of all to figure out. The German thing makes him rather more opaque than the others, that’s for sure. And he is totally brilliant.

So I talked to Jenny. I told her I had a magical action (she said I should call it an “intention”) in mind, so she said, cool, come over to her house after school. We went down to the garage at their house, which was converted into kind of an overstock storehouse for her mom’s shop. There was a table there, and there were metal shelves all along the walls with books and herbs and all kinds of stuff. She explained to me how the neo-pagan thing works.

By Jenny’s account, you need to get a bunch of white people, put them in robes, and have them stand in a circle for hours and say a lot of nonsense in fake old English. Oh yeah, and you have some candles and incense going. It sounds pretty Episcopal, really. Except the Anglican Church has better music.

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

OK, that was her parents' approach. Was there an alternative route — a shortcut?

Based on my conversation with Jenny, I think there is one, and it's through what Rimbaud called *l'Alchimie du Verbe*, "the alchemy of the word." Through poetic *style*. The Mary Mack song is surely something Rimbaud would have appreciated. He saw the poetry of

. . . *contes de fées, petit livres de l'enfance, opéras vieux, refrains niais, rythmes naïfs.*

"... fairy tales, cute little children's books, opera librettos, silly rhymes and rudimentary rhythms."

And as for our experience at the Pyramid, that fits in with the Rimbaud style too. He wrote:

"J'aimais les peintures idiotes, dessus de portes, décors, toiles de saltimbanques, enseignes, enluminures populaires . . ."

"I loved stupid paintings, door-panels painted with fanciful ornaments, stage-sets, the pictured canvas backdrops used by traveling acrobats, crude images on signs, lurid images from ads. . ."

That kitschy fake-Egyptian setup at the cemetery, the sphinxes and mini-pyramid naively placed in the hills of New Jersey made a great *poetic* effect. It was the just the kind of innocent stage-set art Rimbaud had in mind. What Rimbaud had, and what we had stumbled onto was an aesthetic. A style. A taste. What they call in fashion "a look."

MISS MARY MACK

Jenny said that one of the terms used for employing magic is ‘casting a glamour.’ Well that’s exactly what we did, we cast a glamour, we made magic possible by hitting that particular note. *That note was childhood.* That’s what Rimbaud meant when he declared his admiration of crude, guileless wonder-pictures. He was talking about something like the illustrations in old-fashioned children’s books.

Childhood. *Enfance.* Rimbaud found ways back into the magic world of childhood via the childlike in art. And he used that mood, that magically charged mood, to carry out his Alchemy of the Word. Now *we* know how to turn on that power. Jenny found it by feeling it in a children’s rhyme, then it came to all of us at that kitsch mausoleum. That’s the secret of magic: getting back the childlike feeling. That sense of wonder. *Enfance.*

I explained this to Jenny, who thought it made pretty good sense. Not to mention the intrinsic coolness of basing a system of magic on a decadent French poet. The next question, to my mind, was how do we direct it?

Jenny asked about my magical intention. I said it was a love spell, which made her smile. she wanted to know who I was directing it at?

That’s what I like about being a girl. No ethical questions. Here we were beginning this grand spiritual adventure, and I am proposing to turn it into a personal soap opera. To Jenny, this made perfect sense.

I also know that girls are *never* to be trusted. *Especially* not by other girls.

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

I told her it was just a general kind of a love spell, that I wanted to invoke Hathor, the Egyptian love goddess, to see if we could get her to share a little glamour with me. I mean, it'd be nice to be popular, wouldn't it? Get a little payback for the Saint Valentine's Day Self-Esteem Massacre?

That clinched it. Jenny was with me 110 percent.

Jenny suggested we charge some Hathor amulets, which were easy enough to get. She found some rummaging in a box full of silver charms on one of the wall shelves. Four little silver Hathor-head pendants, still mounted on cardboard and wrapped in clear plastic. They showed a rounded, symmetrical woman's head, with cow ears and curling horns rising up and above her forehead, giving the charm a heart-like shape. They only cost a couple of dollars and Jenny said she could get what we needed by way of herbs and oils for free.

It seems that if you're going to have a deity charge a talisman, you need to rub it with an oil compounded of herbs that will be suitable for your intention. For love-drawing, you'd want sweet herbs like cardamom or juniper, or hot ones like love-berries or ginger. You'd steep them in a romantic oil, like rose oil, and rub that on the amulet, before you charge it, and later on, from time to time, to "feed" it.

I looked at Jenny wide-eyed when she retailed all this detailed info. She laughed and explained that you don't spend after-school and summers working in a Wiccan store without picking up a few things.

MISS MARY MACK

Evidently not . But we had two more things to sort out. How do we cast the spell, what words do we use in our ‘Alchemy of the Word?’ And then we have to sell the boys on the idea.

Jenny didn’t think that would be too difficult. Dieter would probably just regard the whole thing as an intellectual problem, and set about solving it without wondering too much about where it’s going. He’d have no problem finding us an Egyptian invocation to Hathor. Todd was a wild card, though.

I said he’d probably just think it’s a new experience. Like getting stoned.

Jenny said I was probably right, but then she gave me a funny look.

Dieter will go for it in, I’m sure of that. But what did she mean by that look?

She probably realizes that Todd’s gay, and will want the Hathor magic to attract guys!

I can’t believe I just wrote that. That is so gross.

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Todd got back to his house late. He’d been hanging out with some guys in front of the convenience store, and they finally got a man in his 20’s to pick up a six pack for them. They retired with this to the wooded area in the back of the store’s parking lot. Being in way-out-nowhere New Jersey, far from anything you could decently call life, at least meant that there was plenty of cover. The town was dotted with little places like this, each one littered with

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

beer cans, schnapps bottles, and the occasional empty pack of rolling papers. Todd wasn't much interested in the company, but he was a teenager, had the right clothes, the right canvas backpack covered with the right magic-markered slogans, and was willing to punctuate his sentences with "sweet" and "dude." That pretty much guaranteed his acceptance in any group out to catch a buzz where he could kick in a dollar or two. And at this point he pretty well knew all the stoner kids in town. He didn't much more than tolerate them for their usefulness. They were pretty stupid, and the police all knew them too.

The police in Laconia were a joke. There wasn't any crime to speak of, so they didn't have much to do except issue speeding tickets to commuters. One of the tricks they got up to, in their idleness, was to take an interest in the local youth. They sponsored a number of "drug free" events in good weather, pizza parties and swim parties. The stoner kids would show up for these events, willing to hang out with cops in return for a few slices of greasy pizza with gristly pepperoni. The whole idea made Todd shudder. The last thing on earth he wanted was to be treated to a 'big brother' or dad stand-in — in the person of some dim side of beef in a police uniform.

He had plenty of foster fathers as it was. His real father had left when he was too young to realize what was happening. Now he was in Alaska somewhere, fishing or drilling for oil or whatever it was one did in Alaska. He never wrote, just sent his support checks. Once he had sent Todd a little

MISS MARY MACK

carved statue of an Eskimo man with a seal. No explanation, it wasn't even his birthday. His mother had gotten terribly angry: she said that after a decade he suddenly remembered he had a son! Todd was eleven. He rescued the statue — his mother had wanted to throw it out, but he made such an incredible fuss over it that she let him keep it. It had, after all, been sent to him, carefully packed in its box, although there was no card, letter or even a note. Todd had later carefully examined all the tissue paper it was packed in, to be sure there wasn't a secret message of some sort penciled on the wrapping. But nothing. And the gift was never repeated. That was five years ago.

Todd began to take an obsessive interest in Eskimo culture. He went a lot further than just learning that the proper name for them was not Eskimo but Inuit. He read everything he could lay his hands on, While other kids were reading about Little Red Riding Hood, Todd was puzzling over Nerrivik, the woman who lives at the bottom of the frozen polar sea and gives birth to seals, whales, fish and walruses out of her own body. Shamans, *angakoks*, swim down to her and comb the tangles and seaweed from her hair.

All the Inuit tales were weird and funny, and often as not about starvation or sex. Todd figured that maybe because it was dark for so long up in Inuit country, a night that lasted half the year, everyone told each other gamier and gamier stories just to keep themselves amused. Sort of a grandiose version of the story-telling you hear at a sleepover or at night at summer camp. It's too dark to see

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

who's talking, and even if you know everyone by voice, you can't see them. So people feel they can tell the dirtiest, strangest things that come into their heads.

Lately he had even become interested in traditional Inuit music. He ordered some ethnographic tapes from the Smithsonian, transferred these to CDs, and often as not he'd be listening to droning groaning vocals with single drum accompaniment on the way to school. The other kids assumed he was listening to rock and roll while he was soaking up chants about the walrus or caribou or the poetry of going hunting in spring and listening to the buzz of the first mosquitoes of the season.

He even became interested in the Native Americans who had lived in New Jersey, the Algonquins, and had come to love their tales of Tricky Rabbit Person, Friendly-to-Humans Beaver Person, and Whale Person who was so fond of tobacco he would swim to the shore for a pull on a man's pipe.

That was Todd's secret. No one knew about his interest. If his mother ever noticed the small but serious collection of Inuit and Algonquin books on the shelf next to the bone figure of the man in the fur parka with his seal, she never said anything.

She probably didn't notice. She was manager of a local convenience store, and that kept her fairly busy. She sold lottery tickets and newspapers and coffee to the local people, and in this way got to know most of them by their first names. *She* had social skills, as she would point out to Todd. And she didn't dress like a freak. When she'd had a few

MISS MARY MACK

too many she'd become sentimental and ask him what had become of the little boy who had loved to come to work with his mom? Despite his protests that that was only because he could steal candy, she would continue to insist on this question until he locked himself in his room and tried fall asleep before she drank enough to start crying.

But that was pretty unusual. Todd's mother liked a drink, but she was too independent to stay home with the TV and mope. On nights when she didn't have to work the next day, she'd go off to the VFW and have a few drinks with her friends, the other single women who worked in the local stores. Men liked to buy her drinks, and every few months she would bring one home for what she called "a test drive." Then Todd would have a potential new step-father for a while. Usually for a week or two; unusually, for a few months off and on. Todd hated this. He thought his mother was a drunken slut. He wouldn't even look at the men she brought home. If he had to pass them in the house, he would simply refuse to meet their gaze and slip by and away as fast as he could. None of the men seemed to mind this, in fact they found the situation awkward too. Todd didn't find it just awkward. He thought it was a personal humiliation. He thought his mother was the town whore.

That she wasn't. She was just a lonely woman who was still good looking, who liked going out for a few drinks, and hoped to meet a man who was "a keeper." And as she saw it, her husband had left her for no good reason, her son disapproved of her with even less pretext, so she might as well just

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

please herself — no one else was prepared to be pleased.

One of the perks of this situation, as it appeared to Todd, was that she wasn't on his case all the time. She didn't mind that he smoked: actually, the both of them would smoke together in the car if she had to drive him somewhere. That, he thought, at least was cool. She wasn't drinking with him, but she knew he drank some, and she made no complaint as long as he didn't get into trouble or get sick on the furniture. It was, Todd thought, all in all a pretty sensible arrangement. He liked being treated like an adult, though he didn't always like having to treat his mother like an adult. Treating someone like an adult, he was finding, often meant letting them act like children.

But still, on balance, Todd was pissed off. He had no father, he was embarrassed by his mother. He didn't see why he should work at school: so he could get a job as a convenience store manager? You didn't need good grades for that, and to fail courses in a public high school you really had to work at it.

He didn't see why he should care. It seemed quite sufficient to keep his profile low, especially with his teachers and guidance counselor. Not that that was hard. With thirty kids in a class, you only got noticed if you were an A+ student, or were an F student with discipline problems. The middle range of B students were ciphers to the teachers: it was all they could do to remember their names. Todd was almost completely invisible. Even his

MISS MARY MACK

punk clothing made him blend in with a certain group of students.

His guidance counselor was even less likely to notice anything. Mr. Piccolo was a middle aged man tending to pudginess, with a bad comb-over, and too much jewelry, He still wore an ID bracelet he'd gotten in the 70's, his high school ring, and a thick silver chain around his neck. (If it had been a gold chain it would have been even better, but Piccolo, who had an associate's degree from a community college, felt he had *some* class.)

Piccolo would share his philosophy with the students, and this usually meant the latest mischievous set of inspirational catch-phrases he'd picked up from professional development seminars.

"What makes a winner?" he would ask Todd when they had their yearly conference. "Eating the heart of a brave defeated enemy?" suggested Todd. Piccolo laughed nervously and went on to explain the mysteries of positive thinking. There was not much chance this guy would bring up the Inuit.

Todd had fallen in with the clique of theater kids by accident. The drama teacher, Mr. Biber, a funny expansive sort of man, had said to him one day:

"Hey, Sid Vicious, want to learn how to run stage lights? Get you out of class."

So he did. Todd was certainly capable enough, and since he found it handy to have an ongoing excuse for missing classes, he made sure he was prompt and reliable. After a certain number of passes were presented, the teachers just waved him

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

in or out as needed. He was passing the tests, what did they care?

There he met Emily. Emily was probably the first thing to really hold his interest since he had discovered the Inuit. She was funny, she had a sharp tongue. Without even thinking about it he'd maneuvered himself into a position where he was standing off to the side with her and making funny remarks about the other kids. Actually, ripping them to shreds.

"You're mean," said Emily. "I like that in a man." Soon the two of them would automatically seek each other out. Todd put on his peacock display of wit, Emily loved it. It was flattering; he was funny. Todd had never been a big success with the girls. There had been one girl he'd had a crush on in fourth grade, Christine Kirk, but everyone had had a crush on *her*. Girls hadn't really shown up on radar for him until he was in seventh grade, when there had been certain, ah, physiological changes. It had started with his 7th grade Spanish teacher, Señorita Plunkett. A young woman, she had worn short skirts and laced boots that went up to her knees, and he couldn't take his eyes off her. Grave contemplation of her footwear did nothing to improve his Spanish, and finally the señorita contacted his guidance counselor. The dopey pleased expression his face assumed whenever he looked at her had convinced her he was full of drugs.

Since then Todd had had crushes on a number of girls, but never had a steady girlfriend. There had been, of course, the occasional stupid fumbling at a

MISS MARY MACK

party when everyone had had a little beer, but he had always been horrified the next day to get a good look at the person he was now on appallingly better terms with, and let things cool as fast as possible.

In eighth grade it had all become what the Hygiene teacher referred to with a leer as “happy hormone time.” There would be these weirdly intimate conversations with guys he didn’t even know that well. They’d all be in the library or something and suddenly they’d all be talking about pornography, and where you could find it on the net, and what sort of private fun you could have with it. Or they’d ponder who had gone how far, who had done it, what girls would do it, and who was what kind of a liar about it and never could do it. Todd was morbidly interested. Though he played it very cool and never took active part in these interesting discussions, he followed them intently, trying to figure where he was on the scale of achievement.

Eighth grade had been the year of sex *Glasnost* among the boys. And ninth grade had been the year when they started pairing off with girls, the year when everyone found out how they actually rated. The jocks were the first to score, of course. They were the school’s heroes after all, it was their successes, not those of the chess team, that the principal proudly announced over the intercom after the pledge of allegiance. You’d see them walking down the halls, their arms around their girls’ waists, or very pointedly stopping to smooch and paw them. That’s what high school was about, Todd realized. Mating season. Animal behavior.

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

Being a higher primate wasn't all long-term memory and opposable thumbs. It had its knuckle-dragging downside too.

Todd was painfully thin, far from needing a shave, not an A+ student, and not in a band. Plus he had big front teeth that made him look like a beaver. To disguise this fact, he made a point of never smiling. He had nothing whatsoever to attract the favorable attention of the ladies. For a while he had wondered if he was gay, but his taste in pornography gave him some confidence that this was not the case. Anyhow, he knew some guys who clearly were, and they tended to be theater people, or really into creative writing, and generally got made into pets by fat girls.

Straight he might be, but that wasn't doing him a lot of good. He was, he felt, completely unattractive to any girl who wasn't either half seas over on beer, or trying to make her boyfriend jealous with the nearest available male (yes, he'd been through that once or twice before he'd learned the signs.) So Todd just hung out, caught a buzz where he could, and hoped tenth grade was going to be an improvement.

With Emily things had been really different. It wasn't like a dating situation, they were just hanging out, enjoying being horrible. She was clearly completely relaxed with him, which in turn let him loosen up and show some of his real charm. They rapidly became friends. To the point where the other theater kids were calling her his "evil twin."

He really liked her. She *scintillated*, that's the word he liked to use for her. She sparkled. She was

MISS MARY MACK

funny, she had style, she had interesting obsessions, had taught him about Arthur Rimbaud. She was probably his best friend. She didn't ever seem to think of him as a dating prospect, which hurt a little, but he liked being with her so he decided to just live with that. He didn't allow himself to have sexual fantasies about her: why make himself crazy? He couldn't fan any fire in his heart where he felt there was no hope at all. She liked him, but not that way. Well, it was enough that she liked him. And, it had to be confessed, he also liked the status of being seen with her. People sort of assumed that they were going out, and that gave him a little more street cred. Even though Emily wasn't popular, she was still a girl, and having a girlfriend automatically elevated you to at least human status.

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“So how does this work?” asked Dieter, letting the Hathor pendant swing on its chain from his fingers.

The four friends were back at the Pyramid, for an after-school planning session.

“The theory is,” said Jenny, “that there are correspondences between the gods and things on earth. Associations really. Like, Venus is connected with copper, Mars with Iron, Jupiter with Gold, and so on. There are also correspondences between the gods and colors, herbs, perfumes, types of music, everything really. By assembling the right combination of things into an amulet, you have something that will channel the influence of a deity to help you with whatever your intention is.”

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

“And this will work?” Dieter asked.

“Oh yes, it works,” said Jenny confidently. “Not as reliably as a science experiment, but it works. With about the same success rate as an art project. Say, a collage.”

“OK, I’m with the program,” said Todd. “But three questions remain: what is the intention we hope to put into effect, how do we actually invoke Hathor, and what do we know about her?”

“At last, some logic and good order!” laughed Dieter.

“Hathor is the Egyptian goddess of music, love and fertility, but she is also mistress of the cemetery,” explained Dieter. “The Egyptians had a romantic view of death, and they viewed the whole process of embalming and burial as we would view getting ready for one’s wedding night. It was to enter eternally into the arms of the goddess.”

Todd said, “She sounds a little like the Inuit goddess, Narrivik, who lives in the dark Arctic undersea, and is both the goddess of fertility and scarcity. She inspires shamans, so she has a connection with ecstatic music as well.”

Emily looked at Todd with new interest: Eskimo folklore, of all things! And he really was kind of cute, in a skinny unwholesome kind of way. Those beaver teeth gave him a certain offbeat charm.

“How do you know all that?” asked Jenny.

“I don’t know,” Todd lied. “Must have picked it up somewhere.”

“Her name is Narravin?” asked Jenny.

MISS MARY MACK

“Narrvik,” said Todd. “She’s quite important, and her legends are told throughout Greenland, Labrador, and the Arctic. Sometimes she’s known as Sedna.”

“My god!” said Jenny, “I know about Sedna! We were talking about her in science class! She’s the tenth planet!”

“Now you’ve really lost me,” said Todd.

“Astronomers just discovered her. She’s the furthest planet in the solar system, three times further off than Pluto. Of course, you can’t see it with an amateur’s telescope, but they found it with the big ones they have at Yale. I remember, because I was already angry about the name. Sedna, I thought, what a dumb name for a planet. Probably the name of the astronomer’s cousin,” said Jenny.

“I’m with you there,” said Emily, “After giving us names like the Big Bang scientists are pretty well established as illiterates.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Jenny, “but then I found out that they named it after the Eskimo sea goddess because of the cold and darkness of her location, sort of in the utmost arctic sea of the solar system. I thought, wow, that is so poetic!”

“Do you think,” asked Todd, “this could be a continuation of the Mary Mack manifestation? I mean, she’s a woman in black who ‘jumped so high she reached the sky.’”

“And didn’t come back till the fourth of July?” asked Dieter, ever precise.

“Well,” said Jenny, “Sedna takes a long way around too. The earth circles the sun every year, Sedna circles once in ten thousand earth years”

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

“The parallel seems to me a little strained,” observed Dieter.

“It’s a sign!” said Jenny. “In magic, amulets are charged by directing the energy of the gods, but they associate the gods with the planets. The pantheon in western magic is basically the astrological one, the old seven planetary powers, from Mercury to Uranus. But now with the discovery of Sedna, it’s like our invocation of Hathor, lady of the Burial Ground is legitimized. Todd figures out the connection between Hathor and Sedna, and she promptly appears in the sky.”

“But can we really equate Mary Mack, Dark Hathor, and Sedna? They’re not the same,” said Dieter.

“Well, why not,” asked Todd, “they could be the same goddess as she appears to vastly different cultures.”

Emily was liking Todd better by the minute, the way he got around narrow logic, like Dieter’s. She made a note to draw him out about Eskimo legends. What a pity he was gay! What a waste!

“So, we have a mandate to go ahead with the invocation,” said Emily. “The question is, how do we do it?”

“This is where Dieter will have to help us,” said Jenny. “One of the principles of magic is what they call ‘Sympathy.’ Like produces like. We need some bit of myth associated with Hathor that we can re-enact, or imitate in some way, to actualize her presence.”

“That will be relatively simple,” said Dieter. “She is the Mistress of the Burial Ground. All we

MISS MARY MACK

have to do is go to a burial ground, this one should do” he said with a laugh, nodding up towards the Pyramid monument, “at nightfall, with offerings for the goddess. Bread and beer would be traditional. I will see if I can find a hymn from Egyptian literature we can use. Then, if she is well disposed to us, she should be quite compliant.”

“If my parents knew I was planning a pagan ritual, they would be so pleased,” said Jenny, “really kind of skeeves me.”

“If my mother knew,” said Todd, “she would look at me blankly.”

“If my father knew,” said Dieter, “he would angrily insist I was joking.”

“Gee,” said Emily, “I feel so charmingly old-fashioned. My parents would be suitably horrified and demand to know why I couldn’t act like a good Catholic for five minutes.” She turned to Dieter : “I guess we have a certain amount in common there: our parents wouldn’t accept it at all.”

“This is the truth,” said Dieter. “My father, if he believed I were serious, would be very annoyed, though he would be more likely to send me to a shrink than to a priest. Still, a priest might understand it better.”

“You haven’t talked to a lot of priests,” said Emily with a grimace. Dieter smiled warmly in response. Dieter’s full and sympathetic attention, which Emily was thoroughly enjoying, was interrupted as Jenny said to him: “You know, I think we should get together to look over the Egyptian poems you’re thinking of using. I’ve had a

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

lot of experience with pagan rituals, and I have some ideas about what would work.”

“For that, you should come over to the house. There are a lot of books and things, and some of the information is tucked away here and there in larger reference books. Too much to carry around.”

You bitch! thought Emily. Well, she wasn't going to show she was jealous of Jenny's managing to get an invitation to Dieter's house, to work with him on the invocation. She consoled herself with the thought that she still was the one who walked to school with him each morning. She'd worm out of Dieter how this meeting with Jenny had gone, and make sure he saw it in the right perspective. But for the time being, she had to make it look like she didn't care.

“So Todd, what are you doing for the rest of the afternoon?” asked Emily.

“Nothing,” he said honestly, completely unaware of the little tempest of emotions of which Dieter was the storm center.

“Want to go to the mall?” asked Emily.

“Sure!”

Jenny was already asking Dieter questions about the Hathor hymns, which he answered in detail, completely oblivious to Emily's backward glances. Not even Todd seemed to notice. Boys were stupid.

Chapter Three

The act of getting on the bus to go to the mall with Emily brought home to Todd that there was nothing but nothing to do in Laconia. Suddenly he realized what a welcome disruption this occult interest had been. He shared his insight with Emily.

“I don’t see how it can be a disruption if it isn’t disrupting anything,” she replied.

“Well, a diversion then,” said Todd as they took their seats on the bus. “All we ever do is go to the mall, or hang out in the park or at home.”

“In another year we’ll all have cars, or be figuring out how to get cars. And then you boys can divert yourselves figuring out how to fix them.”

Todd wrinkled his nose. “Hardly. I hate those guys who spend all their time with their heads under the hood. That manly car culture thing is just moronic. I’d rather think about how to decorate my car.”

The bus made one of its stomach-discomforting lurches as it turned the last corner onto the entrance ramp for the highway. Emily raised an eyebrow.

“You’re thinking about how you want to decorate it? You mean like with a colorful air-freshener hung from the rear view mirror?” Emily was a little surprised at how nasty she was today. She couldn’t stop thinking of Jenny at Dieter’s house, encouraging him to play the professor, explain things to her, with his books of Egyptian mythology open on the table. Admiring his knowledge, stroking his ego, asking him to tell

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

her more. No doubt when she had told Jenny it was only a general kind of love spell, Jenny must have known she was drawing a bead on Dieter, and decided to beat her to the punch. The little mouseburger was cunning after all.

“Not exactly,” said Todd, oblivious to the venom in her tone. “I was thinking of getting an old jeep and welding Tiki lamps over the headlights, and having the horn blow through a conch shell affixed to the side of the hood, and hanging a big plastic shrunken head from the rear view mirror.”

Emily was visibly impressed. “I am visibly impressed,” said Emily. “That’s a cool idea. That would sure turn heads in the school parking lot.”

“Yes,” said Todd, pleased to have scored a point with her. “I’d be the only one with a Hawaiian party jeep.”

“Chariot of the Pot-Heads.” laughed Emily.

“The Phat-mobile.” corrected Todd.

Emily got caught up in the project of decorating Todd’s imagined jeep, and was suggesting where he could get *leis* and appropriate fabric to cover the seats, but her mind kept returning to Jenny and Dieter. It was just so totally not fair. She was the one who walked to school with Dieter every morning, and she really knew something about European culture, she should by rights be as close to him as France is to Germany. But Jenny always seemed to outdo her knowledge and attainments with something she’d picked up on the fly, like that Mary Mack poem, or the new planet, Sedna. By the time they got to the mall,

MISS MARY MACK

Emily was pissed off again, and Todd had to scramble to keep up with her.

The Mohawk Mall was a good one, with classy anchor stores like Nordstrom. It was two stories of gleaming glass arcade, all glare and gloss, mirrors and mannequins. Like a shop window you could walk right into. Even the air was different: recirculated processed air like that on an airplane. A different, purer world where everything was brand name and brand new. Usually this made Emily feel better, and for a moment the pricey din of mall life had its soothing effect on her.

Todd hated malls. The mirrors and lights and airplane air practically gave him a headache. He only went there when he needed to get a pair of Dockers or something, and left as soon as the specific objective was realized. But he was prepared to be patient if this meant hanging with Emily.

As they walked along they were delayed by a slow moving couple in front of them. Emily hated them. Today she hated all girls who had boyfriends. She scanned the mall ahead to see how many of the enemy girls in view had boyfriends.

Todd's attention was taken by a huge advertisement for Victoria's Secret. The length and height of an entire store, it showed a thinly clad woman on her side, the pupil of whose eye was bigger than Todd's head.

"Wow," said Todd, "she's as big as a brontosaurus."

"Probably has the brains of one too," said Emily.

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

They turned the corner and there before her was the celebrated lingerie boutique. Todd cast an appraising glance at the window. He was already well familiar with their wares. Occasionally one of their catalogues would come in the mail, and he had made a thorough study of their product line, though it must be confessed he was edified primarily by the pictures.

Emily also looked in the window at the Victoriana. But hers was a more critical gaze : some of the stuff was nice looking, but the high prices and shoddy materials pretty much killed her interest.

They had both stopped in front of the window, and they made rather a picture: a teenage couple looking in the window of a sexy lingerie shop. No doubt some other girl across the way was staring at them and hating Emily for having a boyfriend. Thus the Empire is maintained.

Emily and Todd looked at each other. It was suddenly embarrassing, though Todd seemed, boy that he was, oblivious.

“You want to look inside?” he asked, trying to be obliging and responsive to Emily’s show of interest. And, admittedly, because, boy that he was, he wasn’t *that* oblivious.

But while Todd imagined Emily holding a lacey thong up to her waist and asking “How do you think this would look on me?” Emily was imagining Todd, who might well be planning to come out to her while they had cokes at the food court, taking a bra off the rack and holding it up

MISS MARY MACK

to himself at the mirror. It was too embarrassing for words.

“I don’t think so,” she said, “but I know what would be fun for me.” She led him off to Torrid.

Torrid was the punk clothing store for plus-sized girls, and though Emily was certainly thin enough to get all her clothes at the chain’s regular half, Hot Topic, she found an unending pleasure in watching other girls buy clothing which someone who cared should have prevented them from even trying on. Emily’s malice was instantly rewarded by the sight of a size 26 girl trying on a just-above-the-knee 80’s dress in green and black diagonal stripes that made her look like a clearly labeled biohazard. The spaghetti strap top ensured that the young lady’s adipose arms were fully revealed to the gaze of gods and men. Emily felt as attractive, happy and empowered as an evil Barbie from another dimension.

All of this was wasted on Todd, who was amusing himself looking at the accessories: the studded wristbands, the skull rings, and buttons with rude or amusing mottos. He had to scratch his head at the omnipresence of Tinkerbell. The bug-girl with the Flintstones dress and hair-do had recently become an icon of teen-irony.

“Did you know the story about the real Tinkerbell?” he asked Emily.

“Noooooooooooo . . . but I think I’m about to.”

“I don’t know if this is true, but when I was a kid I heard that she was Walt Disney’s mistress, and that he kept her prisoner in the highest tower of Cinderella’s castle in Disneyland, and every evening

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

at twilight he would strap her into her leather wing-harness rigged out with pulleys, and send her out the window to slide down a cable over the Enchanted Kingdom screaming in terror.”

“Really?” Emily encouraged.

“Yeah, and he is supposed to have repeated to her every night his inevitable joke: ‘all you need is trust, and a little bit of pixie dust!’ then shoved her down the cable cackling evilly under his moustache. And all the fans on the ground would say to their kids: ‘Look, there goes Tinkerbell!’ and everyone would look up at the distant winged figure all dewy eyed, too far away to hear her pathetic cries and screeches.”

“Wow,” said Emily, imagining Dieter shoving Jenny out the window of a Ludwig of Bavaria Castle, to soar in terror on a cable over the swamps of New Jersey. “If I thought that was true, I’d get a Tinkerbell button myself.”

Finally the delights of Torrid paled, and they made for the food court. On the way they saw an Occitane en Provence, a high-end shop for perfume, soap and beauty products. Emily wanted to go in, and so they spent the next fifteen minutes rolling up their sleeves and sniffing spritzes of perfume. Emily said she liked the amber, but that all the amber was artificial today, and ended up smelling somehow like playdough. Todd tried a number of colognes and, to Emily’s surprise, expressed a preference for the classically masculine scent vetiver. She herself liked the patchouli *eau de toilette* but decided she couldn’t really come up with the thirty dollars for 1.7 fluid ounces.

MISS MARY MACK

“It’s worth it,” she said with a sigh, “but I’m not.”

After an hour of pert and cutting chatter, that defeated little sigh hit Todd like a slap. It was really less usual for Emily to seem vulnerable. He tried to put the bottles they’d been testing back into the right places, but made such a mess of it that the shop girl finally had to come and good naturedly restore things to order.

The food court was pretty crowded and quite noisy as they sat drinking oversized sodas. Emily felt Todd tap her knee gently under the table. She leaned back to get a good look: he was passing her the bottle of patchouli from the store. He had stolen it for her!

“You’re worth it,” said Todd.

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Dieter’s house was immaculate. Even the leaves of the potted plants had been wiped clean of dust and gleamed virtuously. Oma Itten sat on the couch in the living room in front of the television, bolt upright, her hands folded in her lap. She was watching a daytime talk show about unwed mothers whose boyfriends cheated on them with their best friends. Her brow was furrowed in awful thought. As Dieter and Jenny came in, she swiveled her head towards them and asked: “Dieter, what is ‘mad banging?’” Then, noticing Jenny, she rose, turned off the television, and came to greet her. “And who is your friend?”

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

“Oma, this is Jenny, from school. Jenny this is my grandmother, Oma Itten.”

Jenny stuck out her hand. Oma stuck out her face. Dieter explained: “You don’t shake hands with a good friend’s grandmother, you kiss her on both cheeks.” Oma Itten stood there, neck craned forward and patiently smiling. Jenny complied.

“Jenny is a nice name,” said Oma. “Jenny, what is ‘mad banging’? I am watching television to improve my English.”

Jenny looked perplexed. Dieter helped out, “*Es bedeutet angenehm, nett oder so was.*” Then, for Jenny’s benefit, he added, it means ‘very nice.’ ”

“Ach!” said Oma. “It is mad banging to make your acquaintance, Jenny. It is so pleasing for me to learn the up-to-date English.” Turning to Dieter “I hope Jenny’s ass can stay for dinner with us?” Oma continued brightly.

Up in Dieter’s room they both let loose their laughter.

“She’s really a very sweet old lady,” said Jenny.

“She’s really a very insane person,” said Dieter.

Dieter’s room evinced the same order and tidiness that had characterized the rest of the house. The room was strictly masculine, even spartan, in its appointments. Bookshelf, desk with computer, on the walls were framed museum posters from Egyptian exhibitions in Europe and America. He also had a number of museum reproductions of Egyptian gods and artifacts. “They’re all made in China,” Dieter observed with a grin. “Egyptian art,

MISS MARY MACK

manufactured in China and sold through a company in California.”

Dieter showed Jenny some pictures of Hathor in various books, and ran through the surviving myths relating to her. In one she was ordered by Ra to punish rebellious mankind, she did this with such fierce efficiency that she nearly eradicated the race. She was only stopped when Atum tricked her into drinking beer: while she slept after a day of slaughtering humanity, a huge pool of beer was poured out beside her and colored red so it would seem like blood from the previous day’s work.

When Hathor woke the next morning, her attention was drawn by what appeared to be a small sea of blood. Examining it more closely, she observed her own reflection in it, but tinged a marvelous red. So entranced was she by the image of her blood-colored self, she leaned forward and kissed it. She licked her lips. The freshly made beer tasted delicious. She took a sip. Then another.

“And by the time she got over her hangover the next day, she had completely forgotten about wiping out mankind,” said Dieter.

“A great story, but probably not something we can use,” said Jenny. “What we’re looking for is something we can use as a pattern of action. Something she did in a myth that’s like something we want her to do now.”

Dieter furrowed his brow. “That’s kind of a problem. The Egyptians didn’t write out their myths systematically like the Greeks or Romans did, as literature.”

“Why not?”

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

“Well, the ability to read and write was not all that common, and the writing they had was elaborate and relatively expensive to produce. In terms of difficulty, it was more like copying out a comic book than like transcribing a manuscript. Also, they didn’t feel a need to write the things down, since it was still a living religion and everyone already knew the stories. Things like mythology don’t usually get documented until they’re on the verge of disappearing.”

“Then why did the Bible get written down?” Jenny asked.

“There,” said Dieter, “you were dealing with a literate culture where writing, not speaking, was already the primary means of communication. The core of the New Testament is Paul’s *letters*.”

“So what you’re saying,” said Jenny, “is the Egyptians weren’t sophisticated enough to make a religion out of somebody’s junk-mail?”

Dieter laughed: “I wouldn’t put it quite that way, but yes.”

“If the people who go to my mom’s store had any idea,” said Jenny, “they’d be very discouraged. The pagans think the Egyptian gods are very knowable, very —*approachable*. They think Isis or Thoth or Atum can be called up easy as e-mail, that the gods are interested in intervening in their lives to get them cabs when it rains or cure their colds.”

“What do *you* think?” asked Dieter. “It’s not something I would ordinarily ask you, but since it could have a bearing on what we are attempting, I will be a little nosey.”

MISS MARY MACK

"Well, as you know, I was raised pagan," said Jenny, "and so it probably isn't any more interesting to me than the religion you were raised with is to you."

"That I can understand," said Dieter. "Being a German Lutheran is not very exciting. It's about showing up at church a few times a year, and always being polite."

"Well, being a pagan is a little funnier than that," said Jenny, "and maybe a little more interesting, but not much. I mean, it's nice, because it doesn't have a lot of crazy rules, so no one is concerned about women having abortions or gays marrying each other. It's pretty cool that way. Though I don't know that I need a religion to tell me people have the right to live their own lives."

"I understand," said Dieter, "Yet Christianity seems to be about telling people they don't have the right to live their own lives, and everyone saying yes, how very true, and then doing what they like anyway, but at least feeling guilty about it."

Jenny laughed. "You're a lot harder on the Christians than I could ever be."

"I know them better."

"Paganism," continued Jenny, "is just the stupidity I was raised with, a kind of local embarrassment, like a kooky relative you have to be nice to on holidays. I certainly never had a religious experience with it before, and — I'm not even sure I've had one now. I mean, what really happened? A candle fizzled and I got a raise in allowance."

"What about what we felt, what we experienced, together at the pyramid?"

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

“That was something else, something other,” Jenny conceded. “OK, I believe there’s something out there. I’m cool with that. So long as my parents don’t find out and start thanking the goddess all over me.”

“Not an experience I’ve ever had,” said Dieter. “But let’s get back to our ritual situation. We don’t really have a myth. That story about the beer is the one complete Hathor tale we have. Beyond that we have record of her role as goddess of dance, love, birth and burial.”

“Well, we’re working on kind of a love spell,” said Jenny.

Dieter raised an eyebrow. “This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“Emily and I had the idea. I mean, we don’t want to carry out a ritual and raise psychic energy just to say hi to the gods.”

“Isn’t that what religion is supposed to do?”

“Yes, ”said Jenny, “but this isn’t religion, it’s magic. Isn’t there someone you’d like to attract, or be attractive to?”

Dieter looked very uncomfortable.

“Oh, come on, there must be someone you like. What about Emily? You walk to school with her every morning.”

“Yes, but it’s not like that, she just lives a few houses down, we run into each other. I’ve never even had her over here. I’ve never had anyone over here.”

“But *I’m* here.”

MISS MARY MACK

“And you’re the first. Oma must think you’re my girlfriend, that I brought you home to meet the family.”

Jenny looked at Dieter for a long moment. He looked at her. He *did* like her. What was not to like? She was pretty, and smart, and was opening a strange world to them all with her knowledge of magic. She wasn’t seeing anyone, hadn’t ever really been seeing anyone: that meant there was a chance she wouldn’t reject him. What if he just hadn’t met the right girl? The chatrooms he went to with assumed names, the sites he looked at on the Internet and then carefully deleted all trace of from his computer’s history, what if he wasn’t really like those people? Maybe it was a phase, maybe he was normal, maybe Jenny was the solution.

All this passed through Dieter’s mind in that long awkward instant while Jenny was looking at him.

She was thinking that Dieter was a cute guy, and really smart even if he was in some ways kind of a stiff. He was always so polite and respectful and considerate, she hadn’t had a moment’s hesitation about going to his house, or about being alone with him in his room. She felt, well, safe around him. She somehow knew he wasn’t going to put the moves on her; there was never that kind of sexual tension, that sense of pressure around him. What would it be like to have a boyfriend, to be in the corridor in school by her locker, talking with him while she got her books and he leaned against the next locker and everyone who walked by saw they were together? Not to put on a public show, like some kids did,

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

hugging and sucking face, but just to be seen, and have all the girls who walked by, OK, particularly Tiffany from her English class, see that she had a boyfriend; and a tall masculine-looking guy with a brooding look and a faint German accent.

Their sight returned to their outward eyes. The pause would have really been awkward, but they'd both been thinking, and the perfect synchronicity of their very unparallel ponderings made it seem as though the sympathy between them was perfect. Jenny tested, "*Did* you bring me home to meet the family?" She'd meant it to sound very flip, so she could beat an easy retreat behind a laugh, but her words just kind of hung in mid-air.

Dieter paused. He was completely unprepared for this. This was the moment he knew would come someday, a girl was making a pass at him. If he let a few seconds go by, she would know he wasn't right, *he* would know he wasn't right. What if he was gay? What if he wasn't? It was all so complicated, and the solution was so simple. He leaned forward and kissed her.

Her lips were soft against his, he could feel that, though he did little more than graze them. His lips touched hers, and she didn't draw away. He puckered his lips against hers to apply something that was just a feather's weight more than brotherly, and pulled back.

"Dieter!" said Jenny, in surprise.

They looked at each other for a long moment. What should he do? Kiss her again? Apologize?

"Dieter!" the door swung fully open and Oma bustled in carrying a tray with a small white coffee

MISS MARY MACK

pot, some cups, and a plate of cookies. She strode in and set it down beside the stack of open Egyptology books.

“You are doing your homework. Now you will drink coffee. Dieter is such a good boy, but he does not eat.”

Jenny stared blankly at Oma Itten. Dieter expressed his thanks for the coffee and suggested that they had a lot of work to do. He glanced at Jenny, realizing that, in context, this sounded a bit awkward. They both laughed.

“These cookies look marvellous,” Jenny volunteered. “Did you make them?”

Dieter rolled his eyes.

“Yes, these are cookies like I make at home. Not from a box.”

“Delicious,” said Jenny.

Oma beamed at Dieter in triumph and asked in perfectly enunciated English: “Now who is your daddy?”

Dieter and Jenny laughed and Oma departed, head high, her triumph total.

The tension was dispelled. Dieter opened an illustrated copy of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* and showed Jenny the closing prayer to Hathor, Lady of the West, that is, the burial ground. It was illustrated with an image of Hathor in cow form, with necklace and crown, emerging from the sand hills on the western bank of the Nile. Here, at the beginning of the desert, just beyond the cultivated land watered by the Nile’s flood, the dead were brought and interred.

“It’s a great invocation,” said Jenny, “we can use this for our ritual, no problem. But look at the

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

style of the drawing. It's like something out of *Yellow Submarine*."

"It seems that the *Book of the Dead* illustrations, like the artwork of Peter Max, were drawn on by the creators of that Beatles film."

"Do you think," Jenny asked, "it's significant?"

"If Emily were here, I'm sure we'd learn it was," answered Dieter. Jenny laughed. Emily's penchant for coming up with false, insane, but weirdly plausible information was well known to both of them. Dieter interlaced his fingers just as Emily would, and said in Emily's best school-teacherly voice, "The name 'Beatles' is believed to refer to the *Kepri* or scarab beetle sacred to the Egyptians, itself an emblem of the sun. The Yellow Submarine which flies through the air is, of course, an updated allusion to the Solar Barque on which Ra sails across the day sky. Thus the use of Egyptian motifs in the well-known animated film is not only explicable, but, I might say, an inevitable choice."

Jenny was shaking with laughter. Dieter was awfully good at this. He put on Emily's expression with her voice, and even oddly looked like her while he did this imitation.

Dieter folded his arms and looked stern, and said in Emily's wearily disappointed voice, "Well, believe what you like. I'm *not* making this up. But if I *were* to make something up I couldn't come up with anything odder than the truth."

Jenny was weeping with laughter:

"You do Emily frighteningly well. Really, a female impersonator couldn't have done it better."

MISS MARY MACK

Dieter's smile of triumph froze. He *had* been a little too good at this. Embarrassed, he diverted Jenny's attention back to the picture, explaining the symbolism, the conventions of drawing, the Nile landscape represented by a few iconic details. Jenny leaned forward to look at the picture, totally absorbed, and apparently oblivious to the embarrassment that was powering this high-speed excursion into art history. But Dieter was still blushing at having shown how easily he could put on a feminine persona. He reached forward and put his hand on Jenny's as they both looked at the picture of Hathor.

The hairs stood up on the back of his neck and calves. A sense of exhilaration, a feeling of forward momentum came into him, replacing in an instant all his confusion and embarrassment with a sense of meaning and coherence. So this was it, what it meant to hold a girl's hand! It felt true, it felt real: how could he have not understood this before?

They both stared at the picture of Hathor among the sand hills: her bovine head slowly swung round to face them. It went from being a profile image to a frontal portrait. The papyrus reeds that framed the image swayed aside in slow motion to give them an unobstructed view of the cow-headed goddess now facing them from the page. The red sun-disk between her horns glowed dully, her golden hide sparkled. In the left foreground of the picture was a little white tomb with a pyramid-shaped roof: this gleamed a matte white, seemed to take on a rough texture. The image in the

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

book was taking on depth, like a diorama. Jenny saw it too, and reached out to touch it.

As her fingertip approached the paper the image flattened back into thin printed reality. An unchanged Hathor in profile stared off at some point beyond them with her wide and sightless eye.

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“If you can’t stop chattering, you’ll have to leave the library,” cautioned Mrs. Sturgis wearily. Jenny and Emily looked up at her and whispered “sorry.” It had been quite a gab-fest, but there had been a lot of news.

Emily had engineered the meeting (they both had fourth period free) primarily to find out how things had gone, (and how far things had gone,) the day before, with Dieter. She knew how really artless Jenny was, and that it would be easy to get the whole story from her. Jenny had never fully realized that information must never be given freely to anyone. People cause most of their own social problems by letting their desire to talk about themselves get the better of their prudence. Giving people information about yourself was giving them power over you. And, Emily reasoned, no one really wants to hear about anyone else anyway, so the mere fact the you make people listen to you talk about yourself makes them look for some kind of revenge. Emily protected herself with a shield of patter which was as amusing as it was uninformative. By always being funny, when she

MISS MARY MACK

did let slip any of her real opinions, people reliably thought she was joking.

She had come to school determined to worm all the information out of Dieter. But since he had been infuriatingly diplomatic on their walk to school, Emily turned her espionage skills on Jenny.

Jenny was quite forthcoming about Dieter's feeble attempts at making a pass: the kiss, the hand-holding. As far as Jenny was concerned, these were of no significance beside the psychic phenomenon, the animation of the book. In fact, it was only by careful questioning that Emily was able to piece together all the events leading up to the Hathor vision.

"I don't understand it," said Jenny. "Why are all these things going on around me? The activation of my parents' ritual, the moment we had at the pyramid, and now this. It's like I'm some kind of conduit for these things, but I don't have any control over them. I don't particularly seek them out. Everyone else seems to be hot for spiritual adventures, and I get dragged in. Now Dieter really wants to carry out the ritual, to explore the Egyptian otherworld. I'm not sure I want to go any further with this. What if I end up like the girl in *Carrie*? What if the history teacher is talking about the Salem witch trials and I make the other kids start vomiting pins?"

"Oh, I wouldn't mind watching Tiffany vomit pins," said Emily, "though she'd probably like it: she'd figure it would help her stay thin."

Jenny smiled politely, but she was really pretty upset. Under guise of being sympathetic, Emily got

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

all the facts about Dieter. Emily didn't take Dieter's evident interest in Jenny that seriously. Boys never made the decision in how these things went. Sooner or later they'd paw anything within reach. And it sounded like Dieter wasn't moving very fast. The question here was Jenny, and what she wanted. Emily asked her how she felt about him.

"I don't know," said Jenny, "I mean, he's very nice, but I never thought of him that way. I don't have a crush on him. If he were serious about me, I would probably go along with it for a while to see what happened, see if I really felt anything."

Emily was now quite sure she could control the situation, that Jenny posed no threat.

"I think you should just slow the whole thing down," Emily advised. "I'm concerned about the psychic phenomena too, and I'm thinking, maybe we should visit my aunt Zora again, just the two of us, and see if she can give us a little guidance about your ability. Maybe you can learn to control it in some way."

"I agree. Dieter wants to go ahead with the Hathor ritual this Friday night, and I'm afraid of what might happen. That too much might happen."

Though Emily wasn't entirely at ease with the way Jenny was giving Dieter's wishes such prominence, she *was* pleased with the confidence Jenny had in her. That was a valuable advantage. And she'd see to it that Jenny didn't use the love spell on Dieter. That would be no problem. The question was, would Dieter try and use love magic on Jenny?

MISS MARY MACK

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Dieter and Todd popped the tops of their beer cans in the evening light by the pyramid, well-screened from cars by the height of the hill and then by the trees and bushes of the small cemetery. Todd, as something of a stoner, was only too familiar with the place, and it seemed the logical refuge. Their mutual girl problems had drawn them together in the most venerable and archaic of male bondings: the drinking session. Now they sat before the Pyramid, each one leaning against the flank of a stone sphinx, between them a brown grocery bag with two sixes of tall Japanese beers in it. There was enough to get them good and blotto.

For Dieter this was kind of ordinary. In Germany it was a normal thing to get together with the family of an evening, sit out in the backyard if the weather was nice, and drink beer till everyone was pleasantly buzzed. Not drunk, just sociably relaxed. Just as an American family might get together around the television and batten on junk food.

For Todd, any time was a good time to get drunk. The present object of his life was to keep at bay the boredom of being carless in the suburbs. So, for neither of them was a private party in the woods on a nice autumn night that odd. Only the circumstances which prompted it were out of the ordinary.

“So,” said Todd finally, unable to match Dieter in silent brooding, “what happened with Jenny?”

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

“We were preparing for the ritual, looking at books, my grandmother was there bustling about, making coffee and talking like a gangster, and she seemed to think Jenny was my girlfriend. And, I don’t know, suddenly it was like she kind of *was* my girlfriend. We kissed.”

Todd lowered his beer can. Dieter now had his full, even grim, attention.

“I mean, I kissed her.”

“Then what happened,” asked Todd, trying to keep the tones of jealousy out of his voice. He wasn’t jealous about Jenny, whom he wasn’t attracted to. He was jealous of Dieter’s success in general. Suddenly he worried that he wasn’t keeping up.

“Well, there was an occult phenomenon of some sort: an image of Hathor in *The Book of the Dead* came to life. It turned and looked at us.”

“Forget about that,” said Todd. He was getting used to the idea of occult phenomena, he wasn’t used to Dieter kissing Jenny. “How did she react, when you kissed her I mean?”

“I don’t know. We were interrupted by my grandmother. She came in with coffee. Then when she left we were interrupted by Hathor. There were a lot of interruptions. It was difficult to form an impression,” said Dieter. “And today at school it was all rather awkward. We haven’t talked about it at all, but it’s there, like a problem.”

Todd, relieved that things weren’t going that well for Dieter and Jenny, felt he could be magnanimous: “Do you like her? I mean, do you like her like that?”

MISS MARY MACK

“I don’t really know how I’d know.”

“This,” said Todd, becoming a bit more candid as he finished his second tall beer, “is one of the weirder conversations about girls I’ve ever had.”

Dieter looked a little hurt.

“I mean,” said Todd, “usually when guys talk about girls, it’s ‘How far did you get?’ or ‘Think she’ll put out?’ ”

Now Dieter looked non-plussed.

“I guess it’s that European thing. More civilized or something. Hey, have another beer,” said Todd, reaching Dieter a can, “at least you kissed her.”

“You like Jenny then?”

“Oh, just as a friend. The one I really like is Emily, who you walk to school with every morning.”

“Have you ever kissed her?”

“I wish. It just never seemed a good time. I always figured that with a girl, she’ll pretty much let you know if you’ve got a green light. I never got that signal from Emily. So I just hang out with her. I like being with her. It’s better than not seeing her at all.”

Todd fell silent, thinking about the episode with the perfume. Emily had been very touched, she had told him how sweet he was, and it certainly improved her mood. But she’d never looked at him like a girl looks at a guy she’s interested in. She might have just come right out and said ‘You’re really nice, but . . .’

Dieter saw the way Todd’s face fell, and handed him the last beer: “I think maybe you should try using the love magic on her.”

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

Todd's eyes narrowed in inebriated reflection: "I believe I will." Then, looking up at Dieter, "and what are you going to charge your amulet for?"

"I'm not really interested in love magic," said Dieter, "I really wish I didn't have to deal with these romantic complications, and kisses that need explanations. What I'm really interested in is the otherworld I've read about. It seems like it's opening to us. I want to go there. To see it. I don't understand why you're not more interested in it, why these occult rumblings don't excite you more than the prospect of fumbling with a girl's buttons."

Dieter was surprised at how bitter he sounded. He had realized what a gulf there was between himself and Todd, how unbridgeable was the difference. Todd was basically and fundamentally normal, while he, Dieter, was making a mess of even going through the motions. That kiss, that awful ambivalent kiss! How he longed to escape, for some kind of an occult crack in reality he could walk through, to enter a world with rules he could play by with some success. Rules he could understand intuitively. He felt he understood the Egyptian otherworld, that made sense to him, as the otherworld of American dating did not.

Todd caught the tone in Dieter's voice. He tried to respond to it, to do something for his friend, "Maybe you have a different kind of a gift. Maybe Jenny is a better match for you than you think. Among the Eskimo there are some people who have the calling to be shamans. Most Eskimo just look on the myths as entertainment, and their

MISS MARY MACK

spiritual interests go no further than having enough magic to succeed at hunting and knowing what kind of taboos you have to observe to avoid disasters. But there's always one member of the tribe who doesn't quite fit in. Who, on some deep level, doesn't *get* the rules. They prefer being alone to being with the group, they're more interested in ghosts than they are in the living. They don't bang their heads against the ice walls of their igloos because they can't find a wife. In fact, many of them are gay, or even odder."

"Ouder?" asked Dieter

"Yeah, they end up marrying seals or whales or striking features of the landscape. That's pretty hard to explain to your parents, I guess, why you are going off to live with an ice formation instead of a nice obese woman whose fat hands flense blubber with professional skill."

Dieter nodded sagely, pondering it. Jeez, thought Todd, these German's don't have much sense of humor. He tried to imagine Dieter laughing. He couldn't. He closed his eyes and worked at it: pictured Dieter atop the alps with one of those little hats that have a shaving brush as a feather, belching and farting and slapping his lederhosen with glee, and laughing like this: "Hyawk! Hyawk! Eez goot, ja!" Todd snorted with laughter at his unexpectedly vivid imagining and opened his eyes. Dieter was gone.

Todd figured Dieter had gotten up to attend to nature. Todd stared up at the autumn sky. It was getting on to seven, he figured, and the stars were all clearly visible through an opening in the

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

tree-cover above them. He leaned back against his sphinx and studied them. Then he heard Dieter calling him. He followed the voice to the other side of the sphinx Dieter had been leaning on. Dieter was on his knees examining a plant.

“Look at this, this is really weird.”

At first Todd could barely make it out. The plant was some sort of night blooming flower, though it was strange for flowers to still be growing in late autumn. Stranger still, the plant was entirely white. A sickly semi-translucent grayish white.

“Look at this,” repeated Dieter, “this isn’t good.”

“Isn’t good?” queried Todd.

“It’s a bad sign, a plant blooming out of season, and a plant all white like this. That means a death,” said Dieter.

“According to what?” asked Todd.

“I don’t know,” said Dieter, “I heard about it when I was a kid in Germany, just like you heard about it being unlucky to step on the cracks in the sidewalk.”

They looked at each other, then looked around. The cemetery was dark and silent, illuminated only by starlight and a quarter moon. Everything looked silvery-gray and indistinct. It was beautiful, but a little spooky. Actually, a lot spooky. Todd felt the hairs rising on the back of his neck.

“We ought to go.”

“Why?” said Dieter, “What’s waiting for us more interesting than this?”

Todd thought about his trailer-like home, his mother getting back dog-tired from work to make

MISS MARY MACK

some stovetop macaroni and cheese and turn on a reality show on television. He could see Dieter's point. Even if it was a creepy one.

"May as well finish the beers," said Todd, buttoning his coat all the way up against the chill, clearly resolved to stick it out. "Just a wierd plant anyhow."

They sat facing each other once again in the walkway before the Chickering tomb, leaning against the sphinxes. We'll finish these beers, thought Todd, then go.

"Here's to Love and Death!" offered Todd, raising his beer can.

Dieter leaned forward and clinked his can against Todd's.

"Love and Death."

They took a deep slug from the beers.

"Do you smell something?" asked Todd.

"Noooooooo . . ." answered Dieter cautiously. "Wait, maybe I do. Something like a perfume, a flower smell?"

"Yeah," said Todd. "Smells like carnations."

"Maybe it's that night-blooming flower?"

"Maybe. Dieter, I don't like this. This place is messed up. I don't think we need to see what comes out here at night."

"Well," said Dieter, "we need to know if we're going to have our ritual here. Anyhow, you've been out here partying before, nothing happened."

"Yeah," said Todd, "but that was before stuff started happening. What if we see a ghost or something?"

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

“I always wondered about that,” said Dieter. “In ghost stories the people always run like hell the second the ghost appears, so you never find out what would have happened. Do the ghosts just want people to stay away?”

“I don’t think so,” said Todd, “a lot of times they want help. They want someone to listen to them, to hear their story or bury their bones or something, and the scaring is just kind of accidental.”

“Is this place supposed to be haunted?” asked Dieter.

“Not that I know of,” said Todd. “The haunted place in town is that ravine by the highway. Some girl is supposed to have died there one prom night when her car crashed. It went out of control and went all the way down into the water. On prom night they dare you to throw a coin down to her. Sometimes, they say, she’ll catch it and throw it back.”

“Will she make change?” asked Dieter.

They both laughed. They noticed then that both their beers were finished, and Dieter was setting about picking up the cans and putting them back in the paper bag. Todd stood up and looked at the sky. Long gray and black clouds streaked it, some of them slicing across the moon. It looked very witchy, very Halloween. He breathed in the cold night air. The smell of carnations was back again, really strong now. He heard a sound from the front of the cemetery.

“Someone’s coming, get behind the Pyramid.”

MISS MARY MACK

They both ran behind the tomb, Dieter clutching the paper bag of beer cans. They had left no evidence.

“Probably one of the cops checking to see that no kids are out here partying,” whispered Todd, “Stay in the shadows.”

Footsteps were approaching. Rapidly. From the clicking sound on the flagstones of the path, a woman’s footsteps. There was no light, no flashlight beam raking across the headstones. Todd and Dieter both peered cautiously out from behind the pyramid. The smell of carnations was powerful, choking.

A woman was walking rapidly up the paved way that led by the Chickering tomb. She paused at the gateway that led to the path between the sphinxes and to the tomb’s door. She seemed to be looking for something, she was turning this way and that. Slowly she entered the gateway, *she was walking backwards, jerkily, like a figure in an silent movie played in reverse*. She took a few more steps in reverse to where the boys had been sitting and stood there. She stooped and touched the stones where they had sat, as if drawn by the warmth their bodies had left where they’d leaned. She was still facing away from them, and they could see a long line of silver buttons gleaming up the back of her long black dress. She stood, turned around, and stared right at them hiding in the shadows. Her black hair was tied severely back in a bun, and for a moment they clearly saw her calm evil face, an oval of malign satisfaction over a high collar with a brooch. She

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

turned and ran backwards towards the tomb. The click of her heels abruptly stopped.

Dieter was the first to move. With a determination and bravery that astonished Todd, he rose and walked around to the front of the tomb. Todd followed. There was nothing there. The smell of carnations began to come back. They ran.

Chapter Four

Monsieur Grevisse briskly swabbed a section of cafeteria bench before sitting down, careful not to let his elbows rest on the table surface. There he carefully set down his grade book and a pile of quizzes. Ordinarily he had no duty, he taught a sixth, upper-level, honors course instead, but today he was filling in for the regular second teacher in the caf. Smithson was glad of the company and the change. His regular partner there was a math teacher who began every sentence with “well, basically.” Grevisse was a little more amusing.

Actually, Grevisse was plenty amusing. With the dense accent of a stage Frenchman, Grevisse remained obstinately Parisian despite his years in New Jersey. He always wore a neatly pressed suit (of which he had quite a few, in marked contrast to Smithson’s two tweed jackets and one blue blazer, which did him for the autumn and spring weather.) Grevisse was always meticulously coiffed, shined of shoe, and reeking of expensive cologne.

“Bonjour, Monsieur Smithson, how are our little monsters today?” he said, looking up as Smithson approached. Smithson joined Grevisse at the one table drawn up to the front of the room as a kind of observation post.

“Well enough,” said Smithson, “this spate of warm weather seems to be helping. If it’s cold, they’re calm. When the weather heats up, they go a little nuts, but when it really gets hot, like in this stretch of Indian summer, it finally subdues them.”

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

“Yes, I find this also,” said Grevisse, “when they are warm enough one can mold them a bit. How long is this heat supposed to last?”

“All week,” sighed Smithson. “A dispiriting prospect.”

Across the cafeteria, Jenny and Dieter sat together, drinking black coffee, trying to form a plan of action.

“It was your Mary Mack,” said Dieter. “Exactly as described in the song, with silver buttons all down her back. I no longer think you or we are calling up these phenomena. I think they are calling to us.”

“Why us?” asked Jenny.

“I don’t really know,” said Dieter, “but I want to find out. I’m really sorry we ran last night. Todd ran and I followed him. I should have stayed. I could kick myself for not staying.”

“You weren’t scared?” asked Jenny.

“Yes, of course I was scared. But when I think back on it now, I feel more excitement than fear. It was something *real*. Todd was telling me about shamans, how they become shamans because something calls to them. They don’t fit in, they don’t understand how the social structure of their society works, or if they do understand it, it just never makes sense to them. They stray out to the edges of their social world, where everyone else agrees it’s too scary to go. And they find what they were missing here.”

“What are you missing, Dieter?”

Dieter took Jenny’s hand. “I don’t know how to say this. Even when I kissed you the other day:

MISS MARY MACK

something was missing. Not in you, in me. You're a beautiful girl, you're brilliant, you're everything I would wish. But if not even you. . . I'm sorry, I've hurt you, " said Dieter looking up and noting Jenny's expression, "But tell me, honestly, how did you feel when we kissed?"

Jenny paused, then: "Do you like someone else?"

"No," said Dieter, and took a long breath. "I'm not really attracted to any girl."

Jenny's eyes widened and suddenly Dieter realized how much he'd said. He looked up at Jenny, to whom he had just admitted what he had never really admitted to himself. He tried to decipher her expression. At first she looked a little relieved, then she smiled at him, with an almost maternal softness in her eye. She gave his hand a squeeze.

"It's OK."

Dieter suddenly felt distinctly uncomfortable: "No, that's not what I meant."

"No really, it's very OK," said Jenny. "In fact, it's kind of cool."

This was a surprise to Dieter.

"You never told anyone, did you?" asked Jenny.

Dieter shook his head, then: "You won't say anything?"

"No, of course not. It's up to you to tell who you want to. I really like you Dieter, I always have. But you have to be who you are. Growing up as a neo-pagan, I got to know a lot of gay people, and the only people who aren't normal are the ones who think there's something wrong with being gay."

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

Dieter looked pensive. He said: "You're the closest I ever came to having a girlfriend."

Jenny leaned forward and kissed Dieter on the forehead.

"Jenny, I love what you're wearing," came a strident voice from behind. Tiffany, long fingernails gleaming, dyed hair brassily blonde, in a pair of hip-huggers so tight they made her thin legs look like matchsticks. "Getting a German lesson?"

Jenny was wearing what she always wore, a neo-hippy mix. Today it was wide bell-bottoms, a Bob Marley T-shirt, and an army jacket: dress greens, improved with some patches she'd picked up at the Guggenheim's Matthew Barney *Cremaster* show. She wore vintage John Lennon glasses, with the lenses tinted very faintly green.

Jenny replied, without turning her head: "'Shouldn't you be off in the bathroom poking your anorexic tonsils, Tiff?'"

Dieter was shocked. He'd never heard Jenny get nasty. Tiffany was even more shocked. She'd never gotten a rise out of Jenny before, and generally felt that goading the somewhat mousey neo-pagan was her prerogative. This time however, she'd walked onto a land mine. All the frustration and hurt pride that Jenny was too mature and caring to turn on poor Dieter was still in her as free and fiery energy, looking for release.

"Oh, the flower child has thorns?" asked Tiffany, looking around to her friends at a nearby table for backup laughter. "That officer's coat is very becoming on you. Gives you a nice *masculine* look."

MISS MARY MACK

“Masculine?” asked Jenny. “You know you’re never going to get a girlfriend using words too long for you to spell.” Here Tiffany winced, almost imperceptibly. Her spelling, alas, was not all it could be.

Appreciative laughter from the now growing flock of girls: Tiffany’s long-haired hip-huggered friends were getting up from their table for a closer listen, and heads were turning at the other nearby tables. In fact Jenny *did* look a bit mannish with those severe wire-frames and the dress greens jacket, while Dieter happened to be wearing a black commando sweater with the reinforced shoulder and elbow patches. Together, they did give a military impression.

Jenny looked up at Tiffany’s gathering supporters. “This is starting to look like Pharaoh’s dream, the seven fat cows and the seven lean cows. Relax, you’re one of the lean cows, Tiffany Lamp, they’ll probably use your milk to make Ex-Lax.”

Most of this went right over Tiffany’s head, but at least she realized she’d been called a skinny cow, and in point of fact, she had done some experimenting with chocolate Ex-Lax to undo the effects of some incautiously eaten pound cake.

“That’s envy talking, you flat-chested little witch. Did you put a spell on poor Dieter so he’d think you were a girl?”

“Can I help it if boys like girls who can spell?”

At this point a ring of listeners had developed around the two girls: mostly other girls, but a number of boys were joining in, since a girl-fight was universally acknowledged to be “the coolest thing.” At the other end of the room Grevisse had

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

nudged Smithson, who nodded. They both got up and started walking towards the girls like a couple of plainclothesmen.

Jenny had made a tactical error by taking up the spell theme. Her neo-pagan background was a vulnerable point, and Tiffany homed in on it.

“I’m sure spelling’s been your favorite subject since the first time they brought you to school in the little van with tinted windows. Tell us, *special* girl, is Dieter going to be your date for Halloween? Do you plan to be broom-mates?”

“Oh, Halloween, that reminds me, I ‘ve just *got* to know, what are you going to go as, cow-girl, a quarter pounder with cheese?”

Tiffany had been holding her lunch tray through all this, now she brought it down with a crash on the table in front of Jenny.

“Try it again, a little harder,” said Jenny, “maybe you can break a nail.”

Tiffany reached out with a ringed finger and smacked Jenny across the face. The bezel of her ring made a cut across Jenny’s cheek, not deep, but it immediately filled with blood.

Jenny drew her arm up suddenly, catching Tiffany under the chin with the point of her elbow. While Tiffany staggered back, Jenny caught one of Tiffany’s ankles with her foot and tripped the girl backwards, onto another table.

Tiffany picked herself up and made for Jenny. At this point Grevisse and Smithson arrived and grabbed the two girls. Grevisse steered the spectacularly bloodied Jenny immediately to the nurse’s office, while Smithson took Tiffany out to

MISS MARY MACK

the hall and briefly instructed the hall monitor to cover for him while he steered her into the vice principal's office. Both he and Grevisse had seen Tiffany begin the fight. Had they heard the exchange that preceded it they might have had less certainty about who was at fault.

No one else knew exactly what had happened, but all were certain something great had occurred. The the story spread in ripples from the cafeteria to the rest of the school. The girls received the news with morbid fascination. Tiffany's friends said "Did you see how she fought with those kung-fu moves? She really must be a dyke." The girls who liked Jenny talked about Tiffany's "psychotic break." The boys just crowed out the facts as they knew them with open triumphant delight.

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*From the Journal of Amalasantha,
Daughter of King Theodoric
September 23*

It appears I am the sole voice of reason here. All my friends have gone right round the bend. And Jenny has gone right round the bend with Dieter. Actually, Todd is still pretty much sane, if you can call it sane to show puppylike devotion to me, when he isn't even interested in girls and I'm a total bitch. But let me compose myself and begin confusedly in the middle.

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

Jenny's got a an oversize band aid on her face from a set-to with Tiffany in the caf. Apparently they were fighting over Dieter! Why does every girl in school suddenly have a crush on Dieter? Why didn't I end up getting him? I walk to school with him every morning being more than usually fabulous: I honestly don't see how he could resist, he's only a man, and hence infinitely to be manipulated by any girl who knows how to shake her tail feathers. And yet somehow that granola-eating, bellbottom and army-jacket wearing slut sunk her claws into him. While I was off in the mall with Todd, she snagged him. And she acted like she wasn't sure it was what she wanted when we had our little girl-to-girl talk in the library. I never would have credited her with that much duplicity. Well, good for Tiffany for letting her feel the talon — saves me the trouble.

As a minor sidelight to the all-consuming matter of boys, our brave little band is set upon by occult phenomena. My personal theory (admittedly this owes more to my taste for science fiction plotlines than anything else) is that the new planet Sedna is somehow casting an influence over us. That has a tight, Stephen King-like logic to it, and doesn't require any difficult old-fashioned belief in God or spirits. It could all be scientifically based, and maybe we could draft one of the science nerds to make us a spirit-inhibiting mechanism out of a cell phone, some computer parts and an old Enya CD.

But things were not to prove so simple . . . While Dieter tottered around distraught and

MISS MARY MACK

teutonically, stoically, wildly, cutely silent and dramatic-looking — sick with concern about Jenny, and me less than a memory, Todd was telling me about his experience with the Mary Mack apparition last night. We decided to take the matter to Aunt Zora, who had said all we needed to negotiate the spirit world was a smattering of mythology and an open mind.

Aunt Zora was very nice, like she always is, and we were up to our throats in herbal tea and home-made cookies, while the African masks stared down at us. She listened very carefully, like she always does, until Todd described the ghost. But then she started fiddling with her necklace of animal teeth and looked worried.

“I’m sorry I didn’t guess this might happen,” said Aunt Zora. “It’s almost impossible that it did. People who get interested in the occult rarely get any results at all, or if they do it’s nothing but an occasional pointed coincidence, a cold current of air where there’s no breeze, a poetic mood or a blur glimpsed out of the corner of their eye.

“But you’ve woken something up, or more likely, something’s woken up and found you. That’s not wholly surprising. You’re the right age. Around puberty people become a little unbalanced, no offence meant, but these are the facts, and there’s a few years of confusion while the personality you had as a child adjusts to who you are now. You’re much bigger and stronger than you were then, for the first time can actually have the potential to be violent, and now you have sexual feelings too. That’s a lot to learn to bring under control, and

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

sometimes you don't succeed. While you're learning to keep your balance you're in a condition that often amounts to a paranormal state. Like a mystic or a medium. That's why teenagers often have very real and deep insights into life, and become obsessed with ideas and ideals which their elders have long since dismissed as beautiful but too impractical. But this condition can also make people your age very attractive to supernatural entities. For example, when a poltergeist appears, there's almost always an adolescent living in the house, and usually they disappear as the kid grows up.

"Now poltergeists are actually quite rare, and the kind of ghost phenomena you're describing are rarer still."

"Are they dangerous?" asked Todd.

"That depends," said Aunt Zora. "It depends on what you bring to the table. It's just like in a combat situation. Most men come home from war pretty much mentally intact. The ones who return psychologically disabled came to the situation with a previous problem that the stress of warfare brought to a head. There's probably little to be feared beyond a bad scare if you're just thrill-seeking. And a bad scare like the one you've had persuades most people to back off, to put away their ouija board or stay away from haunted houses or whatever. But there are some who seek the occult looking for a way to fix or escape from something hurt or damaged in themselves, and these are the ones who can be harmed."

MISS MARY MACK

Then I wanted to know if it could be because of Sedna.

Aunt Zora laughed at this and said her astrologer friends would insist it was, and they might have a point, but that she herself never really held with astrology beyond reading her horoscope in the paper. But Aunt Zora did think the Chickering monument was a place we should stay away from. There was a story behind it, which she thought we'd need to know, and which we'd have a hard time finding in the library.

Aunt Zora told us that this Chickering guy, the late nineteenth-early twentieth century specialist in lunatics and amateur Egyptologist had also been involved with a secret society called The Golden Dawn. It was originally from Germany, but its secrets were conveyed to England around 1890. It was supposed to be a Rosicrucian order, and to go all the way back to ancient Egypt in one form or another.

So there we are, under the gas lamps of Jack the Ripper's London, with Queen Victoria sitting ponderously on the throne of empire, and all the men smoke cigars and the women wear these strange little heeled booties with buttons on the side and cameos on their collars. Everybody's in morbid fear that someone might be having sex, and everybody, morbid fear or not, is having an incredible amount of it in the pantry with the servants. Séances are the hot new thing, and so are mystical societies, and there's an awful lot of important people who sneak out at night to

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

exchange mystic handshakes and address each other by arrogant earthly titles.

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn is not that unusual for the period, but it has a lot of interesting characters in it, like the Irish poet Yeats, and the writer of short stories Arthur Machen. (A lot of the occult current shoots through their books, and I really must try and read some.) And then there's this really evil guy named Aleister Crowley, who's also incredibly funny, a great conversationalist, and a black magician, so no one can resist him, and no one knows what to do about Crowley.

But even before Crowley shows up, they were all squabbling with each other about who was in charge of what, like a high school girl clique, so it may not have taken that much black magic or irresistibility on Crowley's part to set everyone at each others' throats.

Before you know it they're divided into hostile camps, Crowley against his buddy the former head of the Order, now in Paris, and they're firing baleful spells and deadly currents of will and such across the channel. This is when Chickering shows up, on European holiday, to attend the International Conference on Dementia to be held in Brussels. Somehow he gets wind of the psychic gun smoke and, as the Friend of the Insane, he fits right in. The question is, which side is the internationally renowned Alienist and amateur Egyptologist going to be on? He attends the London lodge, is initiated into the order. An envoy from the evil Mr. Crowley approaches Chickering. What will he do? All decent

MISS MARY MACK

people are with the London lodge. Crowley, he of the delicious conversation, is in Paris where the food is really good. In England they eat like, eel pie. The choice seems simple.

Once in Paris, Crowley furthers Chickering's psychological researches by giving him hands-on experience with a number of intoxicants. Particularly hashish and absinthe. Chickering proves to be a natural, and Crowley, stoned out of his gourd, initiates Chickering into giddy-making grades of psychic power with plenty of time left over for the Conference on Dementia. A very stimulated Chickering returns to New Jersey and begins a series of experiments.

He built a "witches' cradle," a crude antecedent of the sensory deprivation tank, in the hydrotherapy wing of his institution, and attempted to induce in himself altered states resembling those he had experienced with Crowley. He also continued his experiments with drugs, which was easy enough since the entire pharmacopoeia was at his disposal: and at that time none of it was illegal. No prescription needed, no FDA, no kidding.

Having spent his entire life helping people out of madness, now, in his sixties, he decides he wants to see it from the inside. He studies the medicine of the Middle Ages and antiquity, and begins to use astrology and invocations in Egyptian in his treatments. Gratifyingly, the occult approach to mental illness is successful. Discouragingly, no more so than any other approach.

There is one patient, a young psychotic woman, named Mary McCandlish, who responds unusually

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

well to the new style of treatment. It may be that Mary McCandlish was actually one of Crowley's girlfriends who couldn't take the pace of Paris life and occult battles and deadly currents of will and what not, who Chickering decided to take back to his private bin for some therapeutic rest. It may have been that Chickering sacrificed his confirmed bachelorhood at the altar of this overcooked young noodle. However it came about, Chickering soon decides that Mary is an inspired woman, a prophetess, a sibyl! An underground temple is constructed on the grounds, on the model of an Egyptian tomb, and there Chickering and McCandlish meet in the dead of night to conduct their explorations of the Otherworld. (Most of the building complex of the Chickering Institute was burned to the ground through a fireworks accident on the Fourth of July 1928. The magazine *Weird New Jersey* did a story on it though, as part of their series on ruined madhouses. In the pictures you can see traces of Egyptian motifs, lotuses and reeds, in the stonework of the remaining outer walls.)

Chickering died in 1905, during one of his more galvanic experiments. They found Mary McCandlish, or Mary Mack as she was generally known, in her customary black dress, sitting next to the body, in a state of shock, keening like a loyal hound.

Chickering provided well for Mary in his will, and left papers authorizing her discharge from the institution. Though taciturn and forbidding, she knew the year was 1905 and Theodore Roosevelt was president, and was able to keep her mouth shut

MISS MARY MACK

about the gods of Egypt and not treat her examiners to any delicious Aleister Crowley conversation. No one disputed her sanity, and she left Laconia, New Jersey a very wealthy young woman.

Was she Chickering's lover? Aunt Zora didn't know but I can't imagine how she could not have been, I mean, that's pretty romantic, don't you think, carrying out midnight rituals in the Egyptian sub-basement of a nut-farm? And Chickering, the lifelong "confirmed bachelor," who finds himself in an intense partnership with a good-looking and psychotic twenty year old who communes with the dead? What's not to like?

Mary moved to north Jersey, where she set up a business in hoodoo products, lucky oils and rabbits' feet and the like, and did Tarot card readings. A "Reader and Advisor." Apparently she became rather friendly with the Jackson Whites.

I've heard about the Jackson Whites since I was a kid. They're north Jersey's own indigenous six-fingered banjo-playing bad-chromosome hillbillies. Supposedly descended from American Indians, runaway slaves and Hessian deserters from the British side in the Revolutionary war, the community was founded by prostitutes thrown out of the first Dutch colonies along the Hudson River. Those pipe-smoking herring-for-breakfast babes seemed to have been real matriarchs, since all the Jackson Whites still have Dutch last names, like Van Dunk.

Anyhow, Mary McCandlish got on better with this shiftless, unemployed, moonshine making lot

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

than she did with decent people, and that's the last anyone heard of her. The hoodoo supply company continued until the early sixties when she died, in her eighties. The shack where she lived was demolished to make room for yuppie condos.

Aunt Zora had known about this all the time! Why didn't she warn us?

Aunt Zora furrowed her brow, she said she knew it was a remote possibility, but that all we had when first we spoke was a couple of coincidences. And if she'd given us the whole story then, would we have believed her? Wouldn't we have thought she was bats, or trying to scare us?

Aunt Zora had a point. When it comes to the occult, you can't go volunteering information. Even though sorcery isn't prosecuted as a crime any more, parents take a very dim view of crazy old spinsters telling their children ghost stories without permission. Aunt Zora got on well enough with her neighbors, but a suburb is not a very tolerant place. They call the cops if you leave the lawn unmowed for a month.

Todd immediately saw that Aunt Zoras was right. Todd, with a single mother who didn't live like a nun, had some first-hand experience of what it's like to have the neighbors disapprove of you. The other parents on his block would stand on the sidewalk with their baby strollers and dogs and point to their house, very clearly discussing them, falling ominously silent whenever he went out and walked by them.

I was interested in what Aunt Zora had said about unquiet spirits being drawn to kids our age,

MISS MARY MACK

and about how a problem we have could make it dangerous. Was there any way of knowing which one of us is drawing Mary Mack?

She said that was something only we and our other two friends could answer. It could be that it's a matter of all four of us being together, that there's some kind of chemistry that takes place. Her only advice now was to stay away from that tomb, and stop playing with the occult, at least for a while. If Mary Mack didn't leave us alone, there were things we could do, but nothing we'd want to if we didn't have to.

So, here I am, wondering who's at the bottom of it all. I don't think it can be me, because I've never had these experiences by myself, only with the others. And I'm about as spiritual as a tree stump. It could be Todd, because he's gay, and maybe he can't accept it, and that's making him unhappy and susceptible? That would explain the drinking, but, nah. I just can't picture it. He isn't like a drug addict or anything, he really just likes having a good time, and his mom lets him do anything. And he's never had an occult experience on his own either.

Dieter is much too rational for any of this. He's so well balanced and together he'd be boring if he wasn't such a hottie. And he too has only had these experiences with—

Jenny. It all comes down to Jenny. She had the first Mary Mack experience. Her parents are neo-pagans and she knows all this stuff about it. She moved in on Dieter and snagged him right out from under my claws. She's a witch all right. She

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

kissed him during that study session: I wormed that information out of her. It all comes back to Jenny, always back to Jenny. Now how can I use this to pry her off of Dieter?

* * *

“So good is it!” announced Oma Itten as she placed the tureen of soup on the table. “So kickin’ good.” Her small wrinkled face gleamed from the steam, which smelled strongly of garlic. Oma had certain fixed ideas about the properties of foods, and was convinced that eating a great deal of garlic enhanced one’s creativity.

“Momma, you must use no more of these gangster expressions. Many of them are quite coarse!” Dieter’s mother warned.

The Lieutenant Colonel helped himself to the soup and ate it absently while Dieter’s mother narrated at him a tale as complex as a bedroom farce, leading up to some bitchy remark someone had made to her,

Oma sat down next to Dieter to watch him eat.

“It’s delicious, Oma. *Es schmeckt so gut!*”

“Darling Dieter, these recipes have a proud history.” She reached into her purse, and produced a leather photograph-wallet. She flipped it open to a page with a serious looking young man with wire framed glasses whose head was shaved entirely bald. He was wearing a strange robe with a wide collar. He looked like a very young Uncle Fester.

“This, my Dieter, is your cousin Itten, the great color theorist of the Bauhaus, who discovered the

MISS MARY MACK

secrets of biologic diet and garlic mush. It is to him we owe the goodness of this soup.”

“*Bastard.*” thought Dieter.

“*Mutter,*” Dieter began, trying to get his mom’s attention and avoid another lecture on his diet.

Oma slyly looked at Dieter’s mother, to see that she was safely preoccupied with her story. “*Die Mutter! Mutter! — ’s klingt so wunderbar!* Mother, mother, how odd the word sounds!”

Dieter looked at Oma in dismay.

With a merry smile she pointed to the soup and continued,

“ . . . *magst ins Tiefste Schlürfen;
Du selbst bist schuld, das ihrer wir bedürfen.*”

“Go ahead and slurp it deeply down,
it’s really your fault we need it at all.”

Oma was quoting lines from Goethe’s *Faust*, from the scene where Faust must descend to the non-world of the Mothers, *Die Mütter*, powers that inhabit chaos and emptiness, more ancient than the Devil and feared even by him. But she was subtly changing the words, making them apply to him and the soup.

“That’s Goethe, Oma!” said Dieter’s mother, delighted to see Oma sufficiently in her senses to quote poetry.

Oma was in her glory.

“Really, Oma, that’s marvelous. You have a great memory,” said Dieter.

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

Oma leaned over and kissed Dieter on the forehead. Then suddenly her face darkened, lines of anxiety appeared across her forehead. She seized Dieter's head by the temples, held it firm and sniffed his hair.

*“Du spartest, dächt' ich, solche Sprüche;
Hier wittert's nach der Hexenküche,
Nach einer längst vergangenen Zeit . . .”*

Spare me your chatter. I smell witchcraft,
the scent of a time I thought was long past . . .

quoted Oma. Dieter's eyes met Oma's. Her pale gray irises seemed to bore into his own, it was as though she was reading his mind. Did she know about it all, the occult adventures, the appearances of Egyptian gods, Miss Mary Mack? As if warning him against the path he was upon, Oma continued the quotation,

*“Nichts wirst du sehn in ewig leerer Ferne,
Den Schritt nicht hören, den du tust,
Nichts festes finden, wo du ruhst.”*

There's nothing for you there in that eternal empty distance,

you won't even hear the sound of your footsteps
where nothing's firm enough to let you stop or stand.

Oma said this in such sad and resonant tones that the entire family was silent for a moment. Even Dieter's father, the lieutenant colonel, put down his

MISS MARY MACK

paper. Then Dieter's mother and father applauded! They thought Oma was only acting out a scene from the drama. Dieter slowly clapped along with his parents. He knew that in some way his daffy old Oma had sensed his spiritual situation, perhaps better than he had. Old people often remember the distant past better than the present, and out of her childhood she had drawn out these lines from Goethe's drama, probably memorized for a literature class, but which were so oddly appropriate to Dieter.

That night Dieter lay in bed pondering the scene from Goethe. He got down the book and read it over. Here Faust wants to call up the ghost of Helen of Troy: Mephistopheles explains that he has no power in the pagan hell, that Faust will have to bring his request to The Mothers, the primordial goddesses older than God or the Devil. Faust, of course, very bravely undertakes the journey which Mephistopheles reluctantly proposes, through the trackless nowhere of ancient chaos.

Dieter thought back on the scene in the cafeteria. He had more or less come out to Jenny, and immediately after, she and Tiffany fought. He knew he was responsible. Jenny must really have hated him for not being able to respond to her as a man responds to a woman. She said it was OK, but her flare of temper right after showed it absolutely wasn't. Then the girls had fought and he had done nothing, just sat there, numb. He should have come between them, done *something!* Jenny had been led out covered in blood and he had sat there useless,

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

less than a man, less than a person, less than anything.

She had said it was OK. People always say that, they mouth the liberal lies no one believes. He would always be looked on as mildly ridiculous, less than a complete person. Well he hadn't chosen any of this and he didn't want any of this! Supposing he didn't accept being less than, supposing he refused to be anything at all!

Dieter re-read Faust's conversation with Mephistopheles, pausing at the point where Faust overrules Mephistopheles' caution and good advice:

*“Doch im Erstarren such' ich nicht mein Heil.
Das Schaudern is der Menschheit bestes Teil;
Wie auch die Welt ihm das Gefühl verteuere,
Ergriffen, fühlt er tief das Ungeheure.”*

I've never chosen to do nothing, to stay safe,
the thrill of fear's the best part of being Human,
whatever usurious price it costs,
at least when you feel terror, you feel something great,
something great enough to be real!

Dieter felt like Faust: brave, wise, subtle, incomprehensible, doomed. Doktor Faustus! He wasn't gay. He wasn't anything that other people could understand. And he was leaving now! Dieter hastily dressed. It was getting near to twelve. He could still make it to the Chickering tomb before midnight. A sliver of waning moon showed through the window. He felt fear, and in

MISS MARY MACK

that fear, greatness. He opened his bedroom window and swung his legs over the sill. It was only a six foot drop to the ground. It was dark and cool and the air reeked of moisture. It had been raining lightly earlier and Dieter's sneakers and trouser cuffs were soon soaked.

He didn't notice this or anything as he loped along across the blocks, cutting through backyards to save time, until he reached the high school. He circled around to the woods behind it, then along the old road leading steeply uphill. Dieter was in pretty good shape, but he was panting as he sprinted. He liked the pain of his cramping stomach muscles and his raw throat: it was good to feel and not to think! He reached the cemetery at the top of the hill and slowed to a jog, then a walk, catching his breath. It was a quiet October night after a rain. The sliver of moon was very clear in the cloudless black sky, and by its light the grass glistened. The headstones and monuments glimmered greyly against the black. Dieter stood in the midst of the graves and waited. His breathing and heart rate slowed, he felt the warm sweat under his clothes and the cold air outside. Now nothing mattered. He was far from everyone, from Jenny and Oma and Todd and his father, from schoolwork and what was expected, and feelings he wasn't supposed to have. He felt nothing. Not even the fear he had come at a run hoping to feel. Supposing it was just an October night and nothing more, and he had to go back with nothing more than wet feet and a head cold?

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

Dieter looked towards the Pyramid. "Please," he thought, "Please.. *Bitte*."

There was a faint smell of carnations on the air. Fear shook Dieter. He made his feet move forward one after the other. The smell of carnations intensified. He heard dogs barking in the distance. The paved path seemed to shift beneath his feet, as though it were composed of flowing layers of darkness. The smell of carnations grew even stronger as he approached the tomb. In the shadows on either side of the path things seemed to be moving, Dieter imagined serpents coiling and slinking alongside the path. Now he stood before the door to the tomb. It opened slowly and soundlessly inwards. Everything was happening in slow motion now. The howling of the dogs slowed as well, until it sounded like a low continuous roar. It was a very long way across the threshold of the tomb. In the dark interior of the Pyramid he saw the face of Mary Mack. Calm, gray, somewhat wizened, the great pupils of her narrow eyes gleaming evilly with unnatural intelligence. She took Dieter's hand and led him in. As he passed the threshold of the tomb, he found himself in a broad ruinous structure, like an abandoned railway station, which arched overhead on rotting girders into a lofty vault that could have held a hundred Chickering pyramids. It was night inside there too, at least there was that much continuity with the world Dieter had left. The interior darkness was illumined by occasional dangling electric lights that gave equivocal illumination with their few dirty unbroken bulbs. There were some people on the

MISS MARY MACK

platforms, huddled among their luggage. Homeless people, bag ladies, hunkered down beside their bundles, arms spread protectively over them as Dieter and Mary Mack passed. An obese woman in a filthy fake-fur leopard-skin coat from the 1970's slowly pushed a shopping cart with her things, weeping and talking to herself. A thick layer of grey dust covered everything, deadening Dieter's footfalls, so he walked along beside Mary Mack as soundlessly as she.

Between the platforms, where there should have been rails, there was water: an oily black water iridescing in shades of blue-black in the forty-watt twilight. In one of these inlets waited a boat: a shabby paint-chipped gondola. Once it had been enameled in the glossy and over-saturated colors of a carousel animal, but now it was worn, grimy, its glazing crazed and flaking away.

Mary Mack climbed into it and pulled Dieter aboard. The boat was much larger than had appeared. Once standing inside it, Dieter could only make out the ends with difficulty: it seemed to extend a great distance fore and aft, and also from side to side. Which was good, since his weight made the boat sink halfway to its gunwales.

"You are a heavy cargo for this boat, because you are alive. It wasn't built to carry great hulking breathing things like you, just souls," said Mary Mack.

In the general reversal of space and proportion, Mary Mack's change from boding silence to speech didn't seem particularly odd to Dieter. Rather, he

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

was glad to find she felt like talking. It made the whole affair seem slightly less sinister.

Dieter looked at his guide: she no longer looked wizened and unreal. She now appeared to be a young woman in black, very presentable though turned out in the manner of the last century. Her waist was pinched in very narrowly above a long skirt that reached down to her buttoned boots with sharp toes and square heels. Above the waist her dress puffed out at the bosom and in the sleeves, giving her a distinctly hourglass figure. She wore a high collar, and her hair was pulled back very tightly, covered with a round hat held in place by a long cruel looking hatpin. Her expression was disdainful and impatient. Dieter gazed at her with a fascination he had never before felt.

“What is this boat?” asked Dieter.

“This is the barque of Ra you’ve been reading about. Clearly, your studies have done little to improve you,” snapped Miss Mack.

“That is the ship the Egyptians called ‘the boat of millions’ because it held all who have ever died,” said Dieter, anxious to show he had indeed learned something, and weirdly, in spite of himself eager to please this imperious creature. If she heard him, she ignored him.

Looking back, Dieter saw the shrine in the middle of the boat where Ra stood, a Ram-headed human figure with a gleaming sun-disk on his head, holding a tall staff. Around him stood the gods of his entourage, Horus, Hu, Sia, Maat, though all of them looked rather unwell. Their faces were green and white, they were not like the splendid figures

MISS MARY MACK

one sees in museums. They were a pantheon of the living dead, visibly decaying. Some of the gods were already mummified from the waist up, their bandaged arms stuck helplessly at their sides. Ra was making his nightly voyage, and the way led through death and corruption. He and all on the boat of millions would have to die before they were reborn.

“This is the journey to regeneration isn’t it?” asked Dieter, “Is that why everything is falling apart?”

Miss Mack looked at Dieter with disgust.

“You really are quite a stupid person, aren’t you?”

Dieter looked at her with puppy-eyed embarrassment. Miss Mack didn’t seem to notice. She took a deep breath and said, to no one in particular:

“Ideas from the day world only make a muddle down here. Try to understand. Up there, you have material things, which are held together by their spiritual essences. Mostly matter, with a minim of spirit to make it go and hold the physical element together. Once the soul leaves, the creature dies and falls apart, resolves into the elements that constituted it. That little flicker of soul goes, and you’ve nothing left but rubbish.

“Here the proportions are reversed. Mostly soul, with just enough matter to give it form. That’s why everything here looks half-built or dilapidated up close: this is the backstage of the world, where the stage machinery of the cosmos is kept. *Out there*, in the day world, everything is as material, as real, as

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

it has to be. Down here, there's only as much material being as leaks in from the day world. *Out there*, there's only as much spirit as leaks out from here. You might think of it like this: here we're very literally on the seamy side of reality, where all the welds and stitches and carpenters' marks show."

"I see," said Dieter. "But if this is the 'Boat of Millions,' aren't we moving towards regeneration?"

"It's the dead who are regenerated, child. You are still living. You can't be restored to life. You can only lose life. And that is precisely what you want, isn't it? You want to be with me? To be here with me always?"

Dieter looked at Miss Mack. She would take away his life. He wanted her to. As she spoke her face looked cruelly beautiful and beautifully cruel. He wanted to be with her very, very much. It must have shown in his eyes, for she patted him on the head like a dog.

"What a good boy you are."

The boat slid forward over the greasy Lethe, slowly leaving the station. They emerged onto a vast black waveless sea,

Dieter thought of Edgar Allan Poe's poem, "The City in the Sea:"

"For no ripples curl, alas!
Along that wilderness of glass —
No swellings tell that winds may be
Upon some far-off happier sea,
No heavings hint that winds have been
On seas less hideously serene."

MISS MARY MACK

“You’ve been here before,” said Miss Mack.

“No, I only read about it in a poem,” said Dieter.

Miss Mack gave him a disgusted look.

Across the waters, little funereal islands were scattered. Improbable cemetery architectures rose from each in turreted stalagmites, adorned with urns, wreathes, angels pointing upwards, Greek and Egyptian mausoleums, tombstones projecting at angles like mushrooms from the thick gray fern that seemed to cover the base of each island.

Miss Mack placed a large box on the seat between them and opened it. Inside were large chocolates. She indicated that Dieter should eat. They were excellent, the best he had ever had, richer and finer even than the best Swiss. The milky richness of it melted slowly on his tongue, coating it thickly in sweetness.

“Here in the world of the dead, all we ever eat is candy,” explained Miss Mack.

“That can’t be very wholesome,” observed Dieter.

“I have lived on sweets alone for the last ninety years!” hissed Miss Mack.

“But you’re, well, dead, aren’t you?” asked Dieter.

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s rude to make personal observations?”

“I — I’m sorry,” said Dieter.

“Don’t be trying. Sit still and eat your chocolate.” said Miss Mack in a tone that indicated

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

the discussion was over. Poor Dieter! Even in the world beyond, people were telling him what to eat!

The islands became more sparse as they glided on, until there were none at all, just the obsidian expanse of the waters reflecting the night sky. Too-probable stars were mirrored in it: silver and apparently five-pointed. Looking up, Dieter saw that the sky was sprinkled with just such stars, made from silver foil with candles in front of them. Looking down, he saw the same child's drawing stars, reflected with frightening clarity. He reached his hand over the side of the boat: there was no water there now, only more night sky extending illimitably downwards.

“Stop fidgeting!” said Miss Mack.

Dieter sat upright again. They were floating in empty space amid stage stars in a boat piloted by Egyptian gods who looked like bad taxidermy. Dieter felt dizzy and unwell. Perhaps the chocolate Miss Mack had been feeding him wasn't agreeing with him. He closed his eyes. The world swung from under him, and he lost consciousness.

Chapter Six

Smithson's English class fell silent as Jenny entered. She had a long bandage across her face, which she didn't like wearing, but at least it covered the ugly cut underneath. Even though it hadn't required stitches, it was still an impressive wound. It made her look, she thought, like Frankenstein's kid sister. Her parents had been all in a twitter about the fight: they had immediately taken her side. Mrs. Kilvert wanted to phone the school, the superintendent. Mr. Kilvert wanted to call their lawyer, to photograph the injury with their digital camera. They had to be stopped. What would Emily have done? thought Jenny.

"Digital camera? What are you going to do, put up a Web site devoted to my face? Just leave me alone."

"She's upset," said Mrs. Kilvert, caught off guard by Jenny's acid remark, but clearly not enough so to drop the project. "And she has every right to be."

"Leave it alone. Leave me alone. Leave it all *the fuck alone!*" shouted Jenny. "It's my face, and my problem, and my school I have to go to every day, and it's not your decision to make me look any more idiotic than I already do. Kids fight, kids forget about it. The doctor said the cut will heal without a scar. I want the whole thing to heal without a scar. So just don't fucking pick at it!" said Jenny, her voice rising to a scream. She ran upstairs to her room and slammed the door.

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

Downstairs, her father said: "She's upset."

"She's upset," agreed Mrs. Kilvert.

"Quite upset."

But at least they were finally prevailed upon to let matters rest. Even though her parents couldn't really understand that being made a spectacle at school was worse than actual injury, they did comprehend that a deep scratch that would leave no scar was nothing they could parlay into satisfying retribution. A discreet call to their lawyer had revealed that years of expensive litigation stood between them and a dubious decision. Jenny's counterblow, though gratifying to perhaps everyone (except Tiffany), had changed matters from a clear case of assault to a girl-fight in the cafeteria.

Jenny's elbow-strike to Tiffany's jaw was certainly gratifying to Jenny. As she entered the classroom the circle of girls around Tiffany ooh-ing and ah-ing turned and looked up to get a good eyeful of Jenny. Now Jenny could see that Tiffany had a big purply lump on her chin. Two girls who hadn't noticed Jenny's arrival, who still had their backs to her, continued to horrify and delight each other with expressions of vicious pity:

"Oh Tiffany, it's like a plum or something."

"It's like, a deformity. You poor thing!"

"Definitely disfiguring. How awful for you."

Compared to Tiffany Jenny looked positively rakish with her strip of tape and gauze. She settled herself down in her seat in front of Tiffany, silent and smug. It was turning out to be a very good day.

MISS MARY MACK

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Dieter awoke in his own bed. He had overslept and he was exhausted. What a peculiar and wearying dream that had been! The effect of too much Goethe with dinner. He dressed hurriedly and made it to school about five minutes after first period began. He checked in at the attendance office, entered his first class, and took his seat flashing the pass. No one noticed. Good. Then, in his second class, the teacher skipped his name as he went through the attendance roster. The same thing happened third period. He was a little concerned—had he already been put on some sort of absent list? He had never been late before, so he wasn't sure how this worked. He spoke to the teacher afterwards, who rather absently scanned his grade-book for Dieter's name. He put a check in a box on the page and said nothing.

The same thing continued throughout the day. Most of the teachers seemed to have forgotten he was in the class. Even the other students ignored him, or rather didn't quite see him. No one spoke to him. He wasn't called on, even in classes where the teacher called on everyone to read their answer to an exercise, going up and down the rows. It all began to make him nervous. Was he in some sort of trouble? But there was no hostility shown him, and when he spoke to anyone, they responded, though a little absently.

He would see what his friends thought about this when they met in the cafeteria. Then it occurred to him: maybe this was all about the scene

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

with Jenny and Tiffany. Maybe everyone had expected him to intervene and part the girls before they damaged each other, not just sit there uselessly.

They all met at lunch, and Dieter was relieved to find that he received no reproaches for his want of gallantry the day before. In fact, he was ignored. Jenny's bandage drew a certain amount of admiration. Her elbow-strike even more. Todd had wanted to know where she had learned that move. It was left over from some Tae Kwon Do classes she'd had at a YMCA summer camp years ago.

Then Emily related what she and Todd had learned from Aunt Zora.

"So one question we need to ask: is one of us messed up or psychically talented enough, or both, to give Mary Mack an opening?"

A long silence as they all thought it over. Dieter decided it was him. The dream had been real! Mary Mack had taken him with her into the first hour of the Egyptian otherworld. He had eaten the sugary food of the dead. His non-experiences of the morning now made sense. He was no longer all here. He looked pleadingly to Jenny. Her gaze met his but blankly. He wasn't really registering with her. Emily was of a different opinion. It seemed to her that Dieter and Jenny were staring soulfully into each others' eyes.

When's the wedding? thought Emily. *I'm not going to fight her for him. If Tiffany couldn't win, nails and all, what's the point,* she continued to herself, as her fingers drummed the table and her jaw set.

MISS MARY MACK

“Emily and I don’t think it could really be either of us,” said Todd. “Neither of us are really what you’d call spiritual people.”

“So you think it’s all my fault?” asked Jenny.

“No,” Emily lied, “it’s not like that at all.”

“It’s my fault,” said Dieter. “I am responsible.”

None of them responded to Dieter. Then Emily pointed out “But Jenny, you did have the first contact at your parents’ ritual.”

“And I wasn’t there when Dieter and Todd had their encounter at the Chickering tomb,” added Jenny. “I don’t think it’s any single one of us that’s responsible. Mary Mack was looking for any person she could use, and who that is has kept on changing.”

“Maybe what we should be asking is, what does she want?” said Todd.

“She wants to experience life again. Some ghosts long for life as some of the living long for death. She wants someone who wants her. Who wants what she has. Who wants to come with her,” said Dieter.

It was as though Dieter hadn’t even spoken.

“I don’t really even care who Mary Mack is looking for,” said Todd, “I just want this ghost to leave all of us alone. Aunt Zora said all we have to do is stop. We’re like a bunch of kids playing with a Ouija board: we contacted something, we got our big scare, now we should be satisfied and leave it alone.”

“Yes,” said Dieter, “Leave it alone.”

“I’m cool with that,” said Emily, and got up. “I need a cigarette,” she said. She gave Todd a look,

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

and he obediently got up too. He was like her dog. It was embarrassing. But not embarrassing enough. If she didn't have any hopes for him romantically, at least she wanted him around. He looked at her as she got rid of her tray and strode down the hall to the side exit where they could leave the school for the woods out back till the end of the period.

They sat on a fallen tree, half up the hillside, well screened from the school by brush. Todd fished a pack out of his leather jacket, lit two of the menthol cigarettes he liked, and handed one to Emily. She didn't really smoke, so she coughed, desperately, pathetically. Todd pretended he didn't notice and inhaled gratefully: he hadn't had a smoke since he got up. He always really wanted one after a meal. He studied Emily as she sulked and spasmed. It was kind of gratifying to see, in a cruel way.

Emily was thinking about how much she hated her shoes. And her jeans. And her body. Especially her body. Especially her breasts. She wore a push-up bra and a low-cut blouse to try and make the most of them — the blouse was in a demure Victorian cabbage-rose pattern so the low-cut wouldn't look too slutty. Jenny, she thought, was a cow.

Todd thought Emily was beautiful. The praeternaturally clear air and gold sun of an October noon shone on a face and figure without flaw. Her skin was clear and perfect: it would be twenty years before she'd have any real need for makeup. She was angry, she was upset. She was turning green. He was grateful that he smoked, it spared him having to think of what to say. While

MISS MARY MACK

Emily, self-absorbed, nauseated, stubbed out her Salem, he blew slow smoke-rings toward her unattainable body. The hoops of vapor hung for a long time in the still air. What were they doing on this hillside? Finally he started to twig. It was the same as when they went to the mall, when they left Jenny with— with— what was his name?

“This is weird,” he said to Emily. “Just now I couldn’t remember Dieter’s name.”

“You can’t be having a senior moment, you’re only a junior.”

“Very funny. But think back. Can you remember anything Dieter said during lunch?”

“He didn’t say anything.”

“OK, what was he wearing, how did he look?”

“I wasn’t paying attention.”

“That’s just my point,” said Todd, “none of us were. It’s like he wasn’t really fully there.”

“He was for Jenny.”

“What’s that supposed to mean.”

“Nothing.”

“You’re jealous!” said Todd, triumphantly putting it together.

“No,” Emily lied. “It’s not like that.”

“No, it really *isn’t* like that. Because there’s nothing for you to be jealous about.”

“Oh?” said Emily, her interest suddenly piqued.

“They’re not going out together, or even thinking about it.”

“Then what was that study session at Dieter’s house about? And why did Jenny have a fight with Tiffany over him? “

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

“I’m still not sure what that fight was about,” conceded Todd, “but nothing’s going on between Dieter and Jenny. I know from Dieter. It’s not happening.”

Emily looked at Todd with renewed interest, her whole face brightening.

“So you’re really hot for Dieter?” said Todd.

“No,” said Emily “It’s not like that.”

“I think I know pretty damn well what it’s like,” said Todd, “and I’m really sick of it. I don’t know what the deal is with Dieter, but he doesn’t seem that interested in anyone. And you’re fluttering around him like a moth. And you drag me around after you like a pet dog, just for company, when you see you can’t have him and you don’t want to be seen to be alone. Well, fuck that. I’m not your lapdog!” Todd’s eyes flashed, his shoulder’s hunched forward, his teeth were bared. He really looked like a cornered animal finally giving fight.

“What is *with* you?” asked Emily, really taken off guard. “Ratchet down! What’s it to you anyway if I make a fool of myself? I’m the one who should be angry, I’m the one who looks stupid, panting — very obviously it seems — for someone who isn’t interested.”

“I got you beat there.” said Todd, “I’ve been looking stupid for two years.”

“You mean you’ve had a crush on Dieter too?”

Todd gave her a baffled look.

“Then I really don’t get it,” said Emily.

MISS MARY MACK

“I’ve been — I wanted — I was— you, it was about you.” Todd looked up. “All I wanted was you.”

“But I thought you were, well — ” here Emily wisely paused and said nothing.

“A jerk? Well, you were right,” said Todd, throwing down his cigarette, stamping out the embers. He thrust his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “I gotta go,” he said.

“Wait,” said Emily.

“I guess it’s pretty funny.” said Todd humorlessly, not leaving, but not looking up from the ground either.

“I’m not laughing,” said Emily. Todd felt her hand on his shoulder. She massaged him there, then moved her hands to the anger-tightened muscles of his neck. She was standing behind him, but he wouldn’t raise his head and look back at her. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked.

“Is this where you tell me I’m really nice, but?” asked Todd sharply.

Emily pulled on his shoulder, turning him around so he faced her. He could smell the patchouli on her neck.

“No,” said Emily, holding his face in her hands “I never thought you were nice at all.” She pulled his face to hers and said “You’ve always been a very nasty boy,” and then she kissed him. A real kiss, not a dry sisterly it’s OK kiss. A real kiss, a nasty kiss, that drew their bodies together. They held each other and were warm in the cold afternoon.

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

“Nasty, nasty boy,” said Emily, and kissed him again, feeling her tongue against his as he gave himself to her.

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“Jenny? Jenny” Finally she looked up at him. Dieter was getting worried. “Why is everyone ignoring me? It’s like I’m not even here. They don’t even call my name for attendance in classes.”

Jenny squinted at him.

“Sorry Dieter, it’s weird. I’m trying to listen, but my mind keeps wandering. I guess I’m not all here.”

“No,” said Dieter firmly. “*I’m* not all here.”

Jenny smiled, but saw he was serious. “What do you mean.”

“I’m fading. I was in the tomb last night. The Chickering tomb. I went with her, with Mary Mack, or Sedna, or whatever she is.”

“How did she get you there.”

“She didn’t. I went to her.”

“Oh Dieter, why?”

“I don’t belong here, at this school, in America, on this planet. I don’t want to be here. And I’m not gay.”

“OK, you’re not gay,” said Jenny, hoping this would help. “My mistake. But what would be wrong if you were?”

“What would be wrong is that people look at you with pity and condescension, and they use that special phony politeness they save for cripples. And they feel so morally sufficient that they don’t mind at all that someone is gay — of course they aren’t

MISS MARY MACK

and they never would be, but it's alright if someone they know is. Their gay friend. Like their Black friend or their Jewish friend. But never just their friend. I couldn't stand to be that. Never to be just Dieter, but Dieter-who-is-gay. That's what would be wrong with it. And that's why that's not what the problem is."

"OK," agreed Jenny pacifically. "Then what *is* the problem, Dieter? Why did you go there?"

"I don't like it here, I don't want to be here, in this century, in this country. I don't make any sense here, and none of it makes any sense to me. Remember you once told me about staying up late when you were little, to watch horror movies, and how you believed they had to be real somewhere? Well this is my chance to go to that place, not just wear out the seat of my pants in classrooms until I'm old enough to have a mortgage and car payments and children and all the other serious responsible good reasons adults have for not having anything real or meaningful in their lives, for turning their backs on poetry forever."

"But Dieter, what if you can't come back, ever? You said people are failing to notice you, and you're right. Even when we all sat here together at lunch you just weren't showing up on radar. Maybe I'm not your girlfriend, but I always paid attention to you. But now it's weird — it's like, to keep you in mind is like, like swimming upstream somehow. I have to concentrate so my thoughts don't wander. Dieter, if you go back there again, you may not return. There might be nothing left of you but a

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

ghost, a rumor, a folktale about the high school boy who disappeared in the old cemetery.”

“And what if that’s what I want? To *be* folklore, not just read about it. Isn’t that what your parents want with their neopaganism?”

“They *say* that’s what they want,” said Jenny, “but it isn’t that at all. What they really want is *stuff*. They don’t want to visit the Egyptian world of the dead: they just want to stop at the giftshop so they can get the T-shirt.”

“Well, I want to go there, to *see*.”

“And I don’t want to lose you. What if you didn’t come back?”

The bell rang for classes. They got up from the table. Dieter felt a weird sense of power because Jenny was worried about him, she cared about him. She took him seriously. He felt safe: no one thought he was gay. And he wasn’t, he was a poet, an explorer, and adventurer into the beyond. He was Faust. Being Faust, he would escape the flesh-crawling embarrassment of being *tolerated*, being the recipient of an acceptance that was no real acceptance at all. He felt sick. He had to get out. Tonight. He would leave all of these problems and this high school behind him. *Wohin der Weg?* Where? asked Faust in Goethe’s great drama. He thought of Mephistopheles’ answer:

*Kein Weg! Ins Unbetretene,
Nicht zu Betretende; ein Weg ans Unerbetene,
Nicht zu Erbittende. Bist du bereit.
Nicht Schlösser sind, nicht Riegle wegzuschieben,
Von Einsamkeiten wirst umhergetrieben.*

MISS MARY MACK

Hast du Begriff von Öd' und Einsamkeit?

There is no path. Where never foot has trod,
that's where we go, to that which none attain
or could have. Are you ready for this journey?
It's not a matter of picking locks and shoving back bolts,
this passage. No. It's the *Nothing* keeps you out.
What drives the traveler back is sheer Nothingness.
Have you any idea how empty *Empty* feels ,
the painful greatness of *Alone*?

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Jenny found Todd and Emily after school, and they all went to Todd's house to plot. His mother would be at the convenience store for hours. Despite the mild disorder, the overflowing ashtrays and stray laundry, it was a comfortable enough place. The overstuffed couch faced a gigantic TV screen, the one unfailing luxury of the poor. An off-orange shag carpet that must have dated back to the 70's was underfoot, and a scary silver space-age chandelier of the same vintage hung from the ceiling. The walls had a faded but still alarming paisley Mylar wallpaper. Todd was a little embarrassed by it all, but Emily admired it wildly. She actually loved that late sixties-early seventies style. For the first time in his life Todd felt maybe he didn't live in an absolute dump.

He got some sodas out of the refrigerator for Emily and Jenny, and after a moment's reflection, a soda, not a beer, for himself. It wasn't that he was afraid of Emily's disapproval, he just didn't feel he

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

needed it. He was enjoying himself, really enjoying himself for the first time in years. He wasn't used to not feeling like he was dirt, and he wanted to experience it. Just to know he'd walk out of that kitchenette and Emily's look would meet his. That he was automatically important to her now, that he didn't have to keep earning her attention. Todd took a deep breath and felt himself relax. And he didn't just immediately light up a cigarette because he had nothing to say and wasn't sure what to do. He was relaxed. He liked being in his house. For once.

"I'm worried about Dieter," Jenny began. "More than worried. He's in real trouble now. Last night he went all the way down the rabbit hole."

Todd and Emily looked at her blankly.

"Like Alice in Wonderland. He went to the Chickering tomb and followed Mary Mack into it."

"How could that happen?" asked Todd. "In a dream? Did she hypnotize him somehow?"

"No," said Jenny, "he wanted to."

"What do you mean he *wanted* to," demanded Emily.

Jenny looked weary. "I can't really explain. Dieter's having some problems, sort of identity problems I guess you'd call them."

"Identity problems?" asked Todd, "could you be a little more specific?"

"No. I'm not even sure he could. But whatever his problems are, he feels this is the solution."

"That's like saying suicide is the solution," said Emily.

MISS MARY MACK

“Exactly,” said Jenny. “And he’s already, well, *fading*. It’s like he didn’t entirely come back from the Otherworld. People don’t seem to see him, notice him any more. His teachers don’t even call his name for attendance. It’s like he’s disappearing.”

“What can we do?” asked Emily.

“Maybe your Aunt Zora has some ideas?” Todd suggested.

“If she doesn’t, I don’t know who would. I think she’s our last shot,” said Emily.

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“Go in after him,” said Aunt Zora after thinking it over for a very long time. The three friends looked at each other in dismay.

“What do you mean, go in after him?” demanded Emily. “You’re the adult, you have all kinds of magical experience. Maybe you could, but we sure can’t.”

“I wish I could,” said Aunt Zora. “I would dearly love to satisfy my curiosity about a few matters in the Otherworld. But I can’t. I never came as close to it as you have. Sure, I’ve read a lot, had a lot of non-ordinary consciousness experiences, but I never broke through to the other side, to the further world. I didn’t even think it was possible. The best I ever did was see real things bathed in supernatural light, or rather, shining from within with their own supernatural light. But I never saw things that *weren’t there*. Now don’t frown at me, I’m not saying your experiences aren’t real. I just mean they aren’t *here*. And I’ve never gotten

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

beyond the *here* that all physical beings walk around inside of. If I could, I would very gladly go with you. But Dieter is your friend, you know him, these are your experiences, this is *your myth*. I've read a lot, but only experienced a little."

"But at least you've read a lot," insisted Emily. "You'd have some idea of what to do."

"Oh, what to do is very easy. Find your friend and drag him back."

"But *how?*" asked Emily, desperately.

"I don't know," sighed Zora. "I just don't know."

"This is all my fault," said Jenny, "I started this whole thing and dragged my friends into it. I thought it was going to be fun. I didn't think anyone was going to die!" She was crying.

"No one's died yet Jenny," said Zora, stroking the girl's head and giving her a handkerchief. "And no one needs to. It's not your fault. Maybe your psychic sensitivity opened this up, but it was no more than a hairline crack in reality. It seems clear enough that if Dieter has gone in of his free will, he must have some reason, some very sad reason for doing so. Something is making him so glum or angry that he doesn't feel there's any way out. And judging by how quiet he is, I'd say he was pretty angry. If we knew what that was about, we could probably help him more."

"Jenny," said Todd, "you're the closest to him, do you know what's bothering him?"

"I couldn't even try to guess," said Jenny, determined to keep Dieter's secrets, whatever the cost.

MISS MARY MACK

“But it could be important, his life could depend on it!” said Emily, looking to Aunt Zora for support.

“No, we don’t need to know exactly what his problem is, not if it would make him feel embarrassed. We’re not therapists, and I’m not even sure that therapy is reliably helpful — I’m sure it isn’t as helpful as having three friends who’ll stand by you. And having friends who’ll respect your confidences is more important than any amateur psychology. What we understand about his problem is not that important. It’s not our job to stick our dirty fingers in his wounds. Dieter will have to decide for himself whether there’s more love or anger in him, whether he wants to go down with Mary Mack or stay here with his friends. And you’re the only ones who can show him he has more to hope for here. You, not some adult who can’t remember what it is to be sixteen.”

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So, there they were at midnight, watching the Pyramid from behind some tombstones, waiting to see if Dieter came, ready to play it by ear. Emily held Todd’s hand. Jenny wrung hers. They were all very cold and very bored and very scared indeed.

Finally Dieter came to the tomb, and the dark woman emerged. She was wearing a Victorian riding habit with a little top hat. She had a riding crop in her hand which she used to give Dieter a little swat on the backside as she herded him into the tomb.

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

The three friends followed to the tomb door. It was open a crack, and Todd led the way, drawing Emily by the hand, and she in turn pulled Jenny. As they crossed the threshold they found themselves in the underworld station. Far ahead they could see Dieter being hustled along by Mary Mack toward the boat.

“What do we do now?” asked Jenny.

“Get a ticket?” suggested Emily.

“Makes sense to me,” agreed Todd, “We don’t want to start by making trouble with the conductor. Looks like there’s a ticket window up ahead.”

They advanced to a glassed in and grated window, behind which an old man in a fez, with a droopy moustache, dozed. Emily went up to the window and rapped at the glass until the man awoke.

“Hmmmmmph?” he grunted blearily.

“We would like to buy tickets,” said Emily.

“Well of course you would. This is the ticket window.” The man rested his chin in his hands again and closed his eyes.

“Will you sell us some tickets?” pressed Emily.

The man looked at Emily with some annoyance. “No.”

“But this is the ticket window, isn’t it?” asked Emily.

“Didn’t I just tell you that?” mumbled the man without opening his eyes.

“Well then, why won’t you sell us tickets?”

“You haven’t told me where you’re going.”

“We’re going where *they’re* going,” said Emily, nodding towards Dieter and Mary Mack.

MISS MARY MACK

“That’s where everyone is going,” groaned the man. “You need a ticket.”

“Exactly my point,” said Emily. “We need tickets.”

“No, you don’t.”

“You just said we did!” shrilled Emily, beginning to lose her temper.

“No, I didn’t,” responded the man in the fez placidly. “Now please step aside, other people are waiting on line.”

“They are not!” shouted Emily. “It’s just the three of us.”

“What about him,” said the fez, indicating a derelict poking in a waste basket beside the trestle. “He’s waiting. He’s been waiting for years now.”

“This isn’t working,” said Jenny.

“I should say not,” added the fez, and put a sign in the ticket window: *Closed. Back in an Hour.*

“The service here is really awful,” complained Emily to Todd.

“I don’t think you can expect too much from them” said Todd. “They *are* all dead.”

“We have to do something,” said Jenny, “Dieter and Mary Mack are already on the boat.”

“Let’s go,” said Todd. “We have to catch them up, and I have an idea.”

The three friends ran till, out of breath, they arrived at the stern of the boat. As they came very close to it they could see how extremely big it was. Mary Mack and Dieter were visible only as specks, far up towards the prow. They were about to board when they found themselves facing the crew of Ra. Thoht peered down at them, one round gleaming

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

eye on either side of a long ibis beak: he cocked his head to one side, as a bird will, and considered them carefully. Horus turned his profile to them, his curved hawk's beak glinting lethally.

"We don't have a ticket," whispered Jenny.

"Maybe some birdseed would be more to the point," said Emily, walking forward, trying to bluff and brazen her way through it.

Horus gave a sharp cry that made them all jump back.

Todd said "I think I understand what we need to do. This isn't just the Egyptian underworld, this is the underworld itself, and we only see it as Egyptian because we expect it to look that way. I don't know enough about Egypt to make my way through this, but there is something else I can try."

"Well try it," said Jenny, "nothing I know in Wicca will help us here."

"Yeah," said Emily, "and it doesn't look like these guys speak French."

Todd smiled, showing his teeth. He looked incredibly like a beaver in the bluish color-TV-tuned-to-a-dead-station light of the otherworld. His ears were getting round and the front of his face was sort of pulling forward.

Todd was carrying power. A lonely, fatherless childhood with Eskimo and Algonquin legends for his closest company had been a kind of suburban initiation. All the dead friendless time he had passed with books had changed him. He had lived too much in books and dreams, had died a little into them, sacrificing the irreplaceable hours of boyhood to the legends of a defeated people. But

MISS MARY MACK

he had bought power. He had become an *angakok*, a shaman. Not enough to be so in waking life, but enough to be one in his dreams, and here in the world of the dead they lived in dreams. Todd recognized this otherworld. It was what the Micmac called “the world of waters underground.”

Todd was calling to his real friend, his real self, *Kopit*, Beaver Person. Beaver Person was helping him find a path, like Beaver finds a path in the white snow-covered woods where the best hunter can become lost. Todd looked up at Thoth and Horus with the collegial eye of a shaman. Ibis Person. Falcon Person. Animal powers. Todd pulled out his pack of Salems and offered them to the gods of Egypt.

Thoth took one, then Horus, then Hu and Sia and Ra with his night-soul Ram’s head. They smoked in silence. Jenny and Emily took puffs off Todd’s cigarette. The holy tobacco filled them with calm. The blue smoke they breathed out was prayer. The gods nodded to them. They boarded the ship in peace.

As they proceeded towards the prow, they saw the death archipelago spread out around them, the scatterment of funeral islands with their monuments among the thick gray ferns. Jenny stopped to look, and quoted Poe’s lines:

There shrines and palaces and towers
(Time-eaten towers that tremble not!)
Resemble nothing that is ours.
Around, by lifting winds forgot,
Resignedly beneath the sky
The melancholy waters lie.

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

“You must have all gone to the same prep school,” came the voice of Mary Mack from behind them. “You all know that same little poem. Poe should never have been allowed to visit here. He really vulgarized the whole experience.”

Mary Mack stood before them on the deck, like an evil Edwardian lady pirate. She had her riding crop in one hand, while a rather sheepish looking Dieter, collared and on the end of a leash, was eating chocolates from her hand. She looked at Todd, who flashed his broad orange front teeth at her.

“I see you brought a pet too, Emily. It seems we are very much alike. I’m going to enjoy your company on this trip. I knew Dieter was mine from that first afternoon you sat around the tomb and felt the time-shift. I never guessed I’d collect the whole set though.”

There was a stomach churning lurch in the boat: they seemed now to be moving downstream faster.

“We’re approaching the second hour,” said Mary Mack. “The Place of Abundance,’ or *Wer-en-es* as the Egyptians called it. This is where crops come from. Oh come on, you don’t think you just bury a seed and it germinates automatically because of science or something? Every planting is a burial, and every new growth, a resurrection. All food comes to us from the world of the dead.”

Todd looked around at the phantasmagorically verdant shores which were now passing on either side of the boat. It was a land of surreal richness

MISS MARY MACK

under a lurid purple eternally sunset sky. "I know this place," he said, still in Beaver's voice. "The ancestors came here to learn the secrets of agriculture, but our tribe was so neglectful, we lost them," he added bashfully.

"Dieter," pleaded Jenny, "Dieter, come away from her. Come back with us!"

"Oh Dieter," said Mary Mack, giving the leash a little yank to get the boy's attention. "He's made up his mind. He knows where the fun is to be had."

Dieter looked up at his friends. His face showed a weird mixture of pride and embarrassment.

"Dieter is learning that in Hell there is all manner of delight," said Mary Mack.

"Dieter," said Jenny, going right up to him, putting her hand on the taut leash. "Dieter, I don't know what she promised you, but you have something worth coming back for. I know you don't see how things can work out, but you have three friends who are willing to enter the mouth of Hell for you. That has to be worth something. That has to be worth living for."

Dieter's face lost its bluish tinge and his eyes focused on Jenny. He looked into her eyes. She really did care about him, they all cared about him. This was what counted, this was worth more than all the illusory joys of Hell. He yanked at the collar.

"No you don't," said Mary Mack, brandishing the riding crop, "You know what happens to naughty little puppies."

Jenny drew back in fright. Todd bared his beaver teeth and got ready to spring. Emily tried

SONYA BADER-MEIN-HYPHEN

desperately to think of something really cutting to say.

“*Du bitch-ass Schlampe!*” It was Oma Itten, now apparently twenty feet high.

“Frau Sprengl!” shrieked Mary Mack in abject terror, dropping the leash and skittering like a frightened centipede down between the planking of the boat.

“Dieter!” continued Oma Itten. “All that chocolate is no good for you.”

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From the Journal of Amalasantha, Daughter of King Theodoric, September 23

We were all in detention today for having overslept and come to school so late and with such synchronicity and so dazed looking with such a total want of excuse that the Vice Principal decided we must have all been out partying and that was that.

What really happened? I’m not sure I remember it all, but however we got there, we came back through the gate of dreams. I don’t think we have anything more to worry about from Mary Mack. I remembered the name Sprengl. Aunt Zora had told us that Anna Sprengl was the woman who transmitted the secrets of the Golden Dawn to England. Which makes her the head of the entire mystical order, and in a position to demote Miss Mack to sub-wand-polisher. Which would also make

MISS MARY MACK

Oma Itten *née* Sprengl about two hundred years old. Which I don't think I even want to think about, much less explain.

What have we learned from all this? Of course I didn't have to learn anything because I was entirely on top of the situation from the very beginning. Jenny learned that sometimes popularity counts for less than a sharp elbow-strike to the chin. Todd has learned that strong teeth can be a tremendous asset in the afterlife. Dieter learned that being confused about your sexuality in high school is no fun, but still it's better than being dragged through the world of the dead by one of Aleister Crowley's ex-girlfriends. And that is a lesson we should all take to heart.

