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Spells

Beth Mattson

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Spells

Not all of the nurses' assistants sitting and chatting by the northwest living room know that they are magicians. They won't receive a letter or invitation. I have seen some who know, though, by now. A tough, round young woman with a long brown braid takes ferocious care of the elders here. She knows that Jeanne is sweet, and to speak gently to her while thumbing the cancerous frown wrinkles away, and to acknowledge how awful it feels to have the hoier lift net fastened too soon before the weightlessness of suspension from chair back to bed, for a terrible but necessary change of pants and horizontal rest. There is one environmental assistant with leather wrinkles, and multiple bands tying back her long ponytail (maybe elaborately restrained hair is a spell to look out for), and the rough voice of a smoker who has been through some things—not many of them formal education—and she is good to us, as well. She tells us that she loves us, even when Buddy hits her for trying to help him to a toilet or shower before he has finished an even number of laps through each of the four corner living-room-holding-pens, which is itself a very effective spell for soothing. I wish they knew. There is so much they do not know. They scold us for folding too many napkins into too many clenched fists, laugh when they think we aren't listening, and they laugh even when they know that we are listening. The one with the mean jaw, the one with the vacant eyes, the one who has sold her soul to multiple technology giants, the one who flees the actual nurse that is her flawed but superior teacher. Those who do not wear the ordered pandemic masks.

They do not know that I am a witch. They see a sad slippered shuffle, around and around, slowly trudging the filthy carpets, not a high priestess who is taking care of them in their ignorance. Here we are, seventy, eighty, ninety, accepting what offerings are available to us, and trying to spin them into our final songs to the gods above and below. We are the lucky ones, who have made it to our ending choruses, reprises reckoning before we take flight into the final ecstatic oblivion. I stop to let Cathy

clench my hand in her own. She is wrestling hard, grappling with all of the makers, singing to them of her triumphs and sorrows before she crosses over. I give her a less worried corner of fleece to grip until I can return. She is too busy to respond. Her song is light and buoyant, marked by grasping hands in the air above her head and eyes wide, leaping with her vocals. She is not as sad as they think. Disappointed, maybe, but firm and active beneath safety belts and vinyl headrests caked with spittle and food. It makes me happy that the assistants at least know to feed and wash those who are still singing, those without personal time for food and water consumption.

I understand that my children have put me here. It's not ideal. But who has ever heard of an old woman finishing her life carried on a litter from a perfectly kept rustic cabin to sandy beach shore each and every day, by youth with nothing better to do? They do have important things to do. They aren't wrong. They have found me a place where I will have some services provided, where I can still wander, where I can still love and struggle, where I can still serve my Goddess of Ferocious Empathy and Natural Sciences. I have served Her in worse places. The abusive man was worse; the negligent justice system was worse; burying children was worse. She has many faces, not all of them gracious. Some of them as mean as the nurses' aid who flicks us when we try to share our coffees with each other. My face is not always kind, either.

It must be a difficult kind of joy to have been raised by an artist like me. My children know to keep their night eyes sharp by avoiding flashlights, to breathe through their feet on the Earth, how to laugh with a face full of mud, and the solace of paint and other wide open spaces. I gave those gifts and instructions. It must have been frustrating to not know if they would find the rational technical reporter who would cite data, pen policy, and debate political unrest, or the wild animal heart yelling that despite all of our righteous studying, we know nothing and that the mere tardigrades are more magical and capable at thriving in the universe than humans. We are all hurtling through space right now. The planet spins on her molten core, we rush around the closest star, which is but a speck dancing in galaxies, ripping their ways towards the next black hole and banging rebirth.

"Yes, just like that Richard," I say. "Those spoons you have collected are the best model. Don't worry if they take them from you now. You can get

more at supper. I see. You can fly. You've always been flying, my darling. We are flying through space right now. I know."

I stop at the alarmed front door and hold Lizzie's face between my crone's knobby knuckles. I kiss each cheek. She cries, and that is all right. "We are all going home, Lizzie, we are all going home." Nobody knows what it is like until they live it. "Some did not get to live this far. Yes, sing to me. Belt out about the surprise that our toenails are horns and we have poop under our fingernails, just as our ancestors did. It is not my favorite part, either. We are all going home. Come, walk to the fish tank with me. Look. We have the same memories."

Lizzie pleads with the fish. They are good listeners. They have always been deep in flowing emotions, sometimes cooler, sometimes hotter. The lucky fish don't live as long as the lucky humans. Smaller, tender animals are sensible to begin singing and screaming earlier in each life. It takes a long time to get it all out. I wish the last note for all of us. Another easy spell, a simple wish.

The overly precious but kind Life Enrichment Coordinator gives me wireless headphones playing digital tunes that I can in fact register with my worn eardrums. I don't mind the new music on the staff's streaming devices, but I'm also not immune to the old hymns. How Great Thou Art has always been stuck in my head as much as Hava Nagila and wailing at the heavens with my fists. Darling Coordinator still believes that she serves only the Christ. This is fine. I don't mind including old druids' tales in my prayers. She may learn otherwise or she may not. Some never learn better. What could a perpetual virgin know of all humans' full lives lived? A stupid interpretation of the great mysteries. Oh, a woman conceived the night that she first enjoyed carnal worship with a god metaphor? It's not so hard to understand. Flashes of faces. Salute a sacred mother, a dying child, an angry father, geology, pharmacology, mushrooms, faeries, and essential oils all at the same time. You make too much of it, Sweetheart. I bite the headphones to show her. Look, child, it is soft foam covered by vinyl over hard plastic surrounding wires and jumping electrons. All synthetic but showing you wilderness, everything all together at once. Maybe someday.

I open the door to Diane's room in the northeast hallway. She is upset that her husband has left her here. She does not enjoy my advice to lock her door, but I have seen Tom in here when she is unable to physically or

emotionally fend him off. Staff are conflicted; it is right to let adults of all ages enjoy human urges and needs for contact, but the staff girls have been harassed by Tom, and a few other men as well. For those strong enough to pull away and joke the old men back into their places, it is not such a big problem that after they apply perineal care cream to Tom's scrotum rash, he repeats on and on for days his obsession with describing where he'd like to apply cream on the women. Tom insists that a clitoris is up inside a vagina and that a penis can rub it best. Jim asks all the young women to sit on his lap. When Lyle has tired of asking them to sit on his face, he switches to asking them to sit on his bare feet, and watches their faces change under the power of an old man leering. I don't care; I'll hit the old men. Incompetent wizards. Always thought they were the best. I'll show the young women what's true. Let them write their Incident Reports. It is a witch's place to fight when she can. It is an act of instruction. I remind Diane that she can forget about the men, and join with the ladies at any time. She's not ready. I lock her door on my way out. Keep your stale tea mugs hoarded in your own room, Tom. So many easy spells.

The internal courtyard garden is one of my favorite spaces here. They leave the doors open to us, as is our right. Don't doubt that some are moved to follow-through on civil and human rights protests, reports, and examples set. Unrest is a powerful spell. Some kitchen worker has potted mint, thyme, oregano, chives, sage, tomatoes, cucumbers, and strawberries in this furnace with no trees. I only have a few moments to cast outside, until a young woman, trying to be helpful, will see me sweating and insist I return to the air conditioning. Such thoughtful foolishness. Soaking in heat is marvelous magic.

I told my daughter so often that she became sick of it, "Remember this summer feeling. In the dead of winter, when you are so cold you know that it will hurt to warm up, remember that you were hot to your core in the summer. Summer and seasons live in your bones. You have been warm, and will be again." She would roll her eyes, but I still smile to know that she is not without magic. You have it, too, you know. It is so easy. You never needed to attend a school that called it such. You do not need to know all of herb lore. Who does? Some other granny, perhaps. But if you don't know willow bark, dandelion leaves, Queen Anne's lace, wild parsnip, ground

cherry pits, and bittersweet nightshade down by the creek, shame on you. Go looking.

Why break and maul sporilla, hydrangea, and black-eyed-Susans with bare fingers? I stoop to look at the landscaper's offerings, for a stone that would be good for skipping across water, except that it is broken. This makes it a tool. The curved end will rest in my thin palm and the jagged edge will scrape the stems to snap when and where I will. This is a good time to gather rocks. In purchasing a cheap mixture to dump around flowers, this facility has given me a solid mix to pick through. I dump a whole handful on the patio table, on the side without umbrella shade. There, a rough white quartz, striped sedimentary, speckled granite, soft sandstone. I cast them with relish for Pat. We giggle. She casts for me on the electric piano in the lounge, when it is plugged in. I owe her. And it is a good reading. The stripes of sedimentary fall even with the quartz and sandstone. Pat will have peace and comfort sitting beside her complex journey. The chaotic granite lands farther from her. Good. She smiles and chatters a lovely word salad. I bring her a larger limestone. She presses it to her lips.

"Yes," I say. "It is summer. We must know summer before winter comes again. Feel it. This too shall pass. Hold it in your bones."

I hold a tiny dimple of granite to the corner of my smile.

A niece once asked me if I minded when she touched my tarot cards. I laughed and pushed them across the table to her. She worried that she would interfere with my own magic, deplete my cards. It is important to laugh with and at youth, for their development.

"If my magic was so easily broken as that, it was lousy magic in the first place!" I shake my head, my limp gray hair again. If your faith in any lord or lady can be broken by carbon dating, rather than including mathematical proofs and satellites in your religion, it was a garbage hope in the first place. They are all the same. The signs are all around you. Read them.

The idiot assistant with the too-tight bra curse on her scolds us for trying to eat rocks. Dumb girl, these are too big to swallow; we are only driving heat into our molten centers, and you cannot even be rid of the easiest curse ever laid upon you. But she lets me pick flowers and a sprig of mint on our way in, maybe only because she is stuck holding Pat's hand through the door, which she locks until we are well down the southeast corridor. Breaking rules is a jealous spell. Pat and I find a cup of drinking

water in Rosa's room. Rosa always calls for her mother, and we always answer. I laugh with my Goddess that I am still playing The Mother, so deep into The Crone, but it has always been my favorite role. She fits.

I help Pat remember which end of the flowers go into the water first, and then she arranges them, packed from glass wall to glass wall. We offer the feel and scent of them to Rosa, who is crying at this point in her reckoning tune. At least she can feel summer snow, white and green and meant to be crumpled for relief to this old woman caught now in a recliner. The recliner is not bad. Well-loved and used often mean the same thing. Synonyms for places and times. Her several chairs all smell like her. I sit in the kitchen-y chair with a thick pad on it. My pants grow damp, but a damp bottom is no large price to pay in this line of service. I pet Rosa's hair from her face.

"Mama loves you," I coo as Pat strays back towards the door and the setting sun, "I am so proud of you, Rosa."

"Whyyyyy," Rosa asks me, so earnest I could almost weep with her to reveal the clear and obvious truth.

"I am so proud of you because you are brave and strong and beautiful and smart. You are such a good girl. Mama loves you so, so much. So much."

Some spells have the most obvious words. Use them, solid and dense. Borrow this one. No need to write it down. This is something you could have gleaned for yourself. Anyone in the throws of serenading their ancestors and makers and the sky and the worms can be served easily by you. Why do you delay?

Pat wafting out the doorway was a signal to the staff to check on Rosa. It is the young, round woman with the twin French braids under her face shield and mask. Her walky-talky crackles. Another confirms that Rosa will be tended. Twin braids lead me to my own room in the southwest wing. I smell sour. She will change my pants, perhaps add some aluminum to my pits. I don't begrudge her intentions. Many of these young women are still disgusted by their own bodies, and so are repulsed by ours as well. I once chided a young cis-hetero man for never having tasted his own semen by the age of thirty. He loved me, but did not want to date me anymore, either. To be comfortable with the mess of the human body is often to be seen as pitious rather than empowered. So it is with the assistants, and some of the nurses themselves. Barely initiates into the realities of cells,

tissues, and spirits. This is what life smells like. Why did you think that heaven would not reek a bit, too?

I lean heavily on the bathroom door with my pants around my ankles. Do you think wizards' staffs are only of spiritual power? They are also good for balance and for violence. I do not regret the murders or corrupt wishes I have committed, but I will not bang this poor girl on the head with my door today. She is trying hard. I like her. She is not a man groping at me in some alleyway. She faces those, too. She is not a child abandoning an elder into a rusty trap. She is just learning. I admit, I didn't know before now either.

Her face is red and sweaty with the effort of me. When I am a little bit cleaned off and in a fresh pair of absorbent underwear products, she sits down on my shower chair with a sigh. She lifts her clear plastic face shield and lowers her fluffy gauze mask.

"It's so hot under here," she tells me.

I sway a bit on my feet. I will be her priestess, too, my hand raised, one palm ejecting and spewing undeserved, whispered blessings to her. I close my eyes and concentrate. *Shh. It's all right, I see you. You are learning. I am proud of you because you are strong and brave and smart and beautiful. Humans have always faced plagues. This pandemic is nothing new to we delicate, persistent creatures. You are doing well. You have a shield and a mask and youth to resist the new virus. You will live with your stories intact. You will accept the gifts of other dead women who have held radiation, scrubbed their skin, and stuck us all with needles to bring us this far. You are precious, as you see that we are all precious. Thank you for your ferocious dedication to my final days. I forgive your resentment. Mama loves you. Go girl, keep learning.*

"Oh, you're having one of your spells. Here."

She gifts me as well. A small cup with a tiny pill inside, and a bottle of fortified lemonade. I love these potions. My sisters, the doctors, and the addicts know these tiny vacations as well. When I lay down after my hike, I'll sleep and dream powerfully tonight. Learn to read your dreams and your aches. Work with them. They are maybe the easiest magic to mistress. Loosen up. Be free.

I find Betty sunken into the too-deep chair by the front door fish tank, on my way to the northwest living-room-play-pen, for another full loop of

the floor. I sit on the sticky upholstery with her, give her my yellow, lemon potion to share. She can use these electrolytes.

“Here, Aunty.” I say her favorite title. “It’s Kool-Aid. Try a sip.”

Excited for her favorite, she drinks the false juice of good salts and sugars.

The assistant with the clenched jaw scolds me again and snatches the refreshment from both of us.

“Mel,” she frowns with real ire, “You should know better in a pandemic! You were my favorite biology teacher!”

Foolish child. She’s right about the germs, but the secret words to someone’s favorites, to get them to take their medicine is another easy spell. If you are too basic to be able to balance your spells, I pity you. Pity is not all bad. There is an easy middle ground between telling your grown children the self-evident truths that you have learned in your crazy years and comforting them that you still know how to speak of current events and other trivialities via Skype. Maybe someday they will know that all magics, pasts, futures, creatures, and technologies—they are all the same, all soft, bendable, and potent. But sing, sing your own song, chorus and reprise. I am here for it. You will forget all of the wrong notes someday, too. Wait. I know a difficult spell. So do you. Let’s sing it.