

FANTASY KIT

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For Brian Leung

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For Witches

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Here is a language for witches. No. Here is a language for high school. No. Here is magic in all its occult guises. No. Here is high school in all its occult guises. No. Here is a hallway in a high school. The floor is gray linoleum. Lockers line the walls. On the doors of some of the lockers are footballs cut from construction paper. Jersey numbers are written on the footballs in black felt-tip marker. At the end of the hall is a banner that reads: "Go Bobcats!" A bobcat with black ears and yellow eyes is painted in one corner of the banner. No. Here is a path in the forest at midnight. The path is lined with gray trees. Nailed to the trunks of the trees are the long dark tongues of cows. The tongues were removed from the animals with a knife. At the far end of the path is a banner with a symbol drawn on it. No. Here is a high school student named Tom. He lives in a small town in Ohio. For the past three years, Tom has been in love with his best friend, Jason, who plays football. Jason has no idea Tom is gay. Or maybe he has an idea. But it doesn't matter. Tom wishes there were some spell or even a curse that would make Jason fall in love with him. No. Here is a figure in the forest. The figure passes through the trees, touching the bloodied cow tongues with the tips of its fingers. No. Tom stands in the bathroom of the high school and looks at his face in

the mirror. He supposes it is a handsome face. He supposes that doesn't matter. No. Here is a figure crawling like a horror on a path between the trees. No. Here is Tom waiting for Jason after football practice. Usually, they walk home together, but Jason has been more distant lately. They're both going to be seniors next year. No. Here is Tom walking home alone. No. Here are all the trees in the forest attempting to speak with their cow tongues. Blood runs from the tongues as they twitch and curl. No. Here is a hallway in a high school. Someone has torn down all the paper footballs and thrown them on the floor. Someone has torn down the banner too. Ripped it in half. The bobcat stares at the ceiling with vacant yellow eyes. No. Here are the voices calling. They are not the voices of the trees. They are not the voices of the cows. They are the voices of other things. Disembodied. Moving through darkness. And they speak, all at once, in a language no one has ever heard before.

There's Someone at the Door

Barbara is reading a novel.

It's Sunday, just after nine p.m.

Her husband enters the living room, drying his hands on a dishcloth.

He says: "There's someone at the door."

Barbara lowers the novel. She looks at her husband.

"I heard a knock," he says.

"I didn't hear anything," Barbara says. She lifts a glass of wine from the table beside her chair and takes a sip.

"Well, you weren't listening then," her husband says.

But Barbara has been listening. She's quite sensitive to sound. And she would know if someone knocked on the door, especially if her husband heard it all the way from the kitchen.

Now her husband is walking toward the foyer, as if he means to answer the door.

Barbara considers the fact that her husband might be pulling some kind of prank. He used to do that sort of thing when they first met. They were in college then. He sat behind her in astronomy class. Every time she turned around, he was smiling, as if he knew some secret.

Barbara's husband reaches the front door and begins to unfasten the chain.

"Wait," Barbara says. She doesn't know why she tells him to wait, other than the fact that it simply doesn't seem right to answer a door if no one has knocked.

Her husband pauses, turning to look at her. "Wait for what?"

"I don't know," Barbara says. "Just—"

"What if it's Mrs. Miller?" her husband asks.

Barbara considers this. Mrs. Miller is their neighbor. Her husband died in a car accident years ago. She never remarried. Mrs. Miller knocked on their door last month when she was locked out of her house. She wanted to use the telephone to call her sister.

"It isn't Mrs. Miller," Barbara says.

"How do you know?" her husband asks.

"Because she hides a key on her porch now. She told me."

Barbara's husband nods. "Well then," he says, "I'll just look through the peephole. Will that make you happy?"

"Alan," Barbara says. But before she can say anything else, he's looking through the peephole. He glances back at Barbara then. His face is pale.

"What's wrong?" Barbara says.

"It's Mrs. Miller," Barbara's husband says in an uncharacteristically soft voice.

"What do you mean it's Mrs. Miller?"

"Mrs. Miller is standing out there, but—"

"But what?"

"There's something wrong with her," Barbara's husband says.

"What's wrong?"

"She's—well, she's bleeding,"

Barbara drops her book and stands from the chair. She moves toward the foyer, brushing past her husband. She begins to unfasten the door chain.

"Wait," her husband says.

Barbara turns to look at him. "Mrs. Miller is *bleeding*, Alan."

"She is," he says. "But it's not just that. It's—it's the way she's bleeding."

"What way?"

"All over," her husband says. "From everywhere at once. Eyes and nose and mouth and—"

"My God," Barbara says. She turns and looks through the peephole. But there's no one outside. The yellow circle of light on the porch is

empty. Barbara hears her husband laughing. She's angry at first. But then she turns to look at him. And she realizes he's laughing like he used to when he was young, when they were at college together.

"Alan," she says. "That was awful."

"Your face," he says.

"You told me Mrs. Miller was bleeding all over," Barbara says. "How was my face supposed to look? The poor old woman."

Her husband is still laughing.

"What made you decide to do a thing like that?" Barbara asks.

He shakes his head. "I was washing the dishes. My hands were down in the warm water. And it just sort of occurred to me. It seemed like it would be funny."

Barbara shakes her head. "You're funny all right," she says. She thinks she might slap him like she used to. Not hard, of course, but in a playful way.

Then there's a knock at the door.

Barbara turns to look.

"What?" her husband says.

Barbara listens, wondering if it will happen again. "Didn't you hear it?" she says.

"Hear what?"

Barbara studies her husband. "Is this the second part of your prank?" she asks.

"Prank? Barbara—"

"Someone just knocked on the door, Alan," she says.

He looks surprised.

"How did you do it?" Barbara asks. "How did you make it sound like someone knocked?"

"I didn't do anything," her husband says. "I was standing here talking to you."

"Did you tap your foot?" Barbara says, looking down at her husband's shoe.

"I didn't even *hear* anything," he says.

Barbara turns toward the door. She puts her hand on the chain.

"Wait," her husband says.

“Why should I wait?” Barbara says.

“Because this doesn’t seem right. I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have tried to trick you like that. It wasn’t nice of me. And if you’re playing a trick on me now, I deserve it.”

Barbara thinks her husband looks sincere. He’s a good actor though. He used to act in college. Once, she saw him in a play. He kissed her afterwards in the alley behind the theater. He still had his costume on, and Barbara felt like she was in the play too. She realizes now it’s entirely possible her husband is not afraid at all.

Barbara turns and looks through the peephole. There’s no one standing in the yellow circle of light on the porch. And there’s no one in the shadows of the yard either.

Barbara makes a sound at the back of her throat.

“What?” her husband says.

Barbara shakes her head. She walks back to her chair in the living room. She sits down calmly and takes another sip of wine. Then she picks up her novel and starts to read.

“You’re *reading*?” her husband says.

“I am,” Barbara says.

“But you said you heard—”

“I know what I said,” she replies. “Why don’t you just go back and finish the dishes?”

Her husband doesn’t move from the foyer.

Everything is silent.

Then Barbara hears her husband unfasten the door chain. She hears him turn the door handle. “Alan,” she says. She realizes she wants to tell him to wait. But there’s no time for that. He has already opened the door. He’s walking outside onto the porch. “Alan?” she says again. He doesn’t answer. Barbara stands and walks into the foyer. She looks out onto the porch. There’s no one in the pool of yellow light. She looks into the darkened yard beyond. There’s no one. She wants to call out, to tell her husband this isn’t funny. When he used to pull pranks in college, they were always harmless things. But this—

Barbara pauses. She knows what she has to do. She steps back inside the house and closes the front door. Then she waits.

Finally, there's a knock.

Barbara goes to the peephole and looks out. Her husband is there. He's smiling.

"Alan?" Barbara says.

He doesn't respond.

When Mrs. Miller knocked on the door last month, it had been Barbara who went to answer. She peered out through the peephole and saw Mrs. Miller, small and shivering, in the pool of yellow light. Barbara had opened the door. Mrs. Miller told her that she'd gotten locked out of the house. It had been such a foolish thing. Barbara looked at Mrs. Miller and thought about what it would feel like to be so old and alone. She felt sorry for Mrs. Miller. But, more than that, she felt glad she herself was not old and alone. Barbara was thirty-seven. She had Alan. Cheerful Alan who always was kind and often thoughtful.

"I'm not going to open the door, Alan," Barbara says, standing in the foyer. "You can stay out there in the cold."

She looks through the peephole again.

Alan is in the same spot in the yellow pool of light, still smiling. He looks like he did when they were young. In fact, Barbara realizes, he looks *exactly* like he did when they were young. He doesn't look like her husband anymore. He looks like a photograph of the boy she met in astronomy class. The boy who would smile at her as if he knew a secret.

"Alan," she says through the closed door. "What are you doing? What's wrong?"

He doesn't answer. He only smiles.

Barbara thinks of Mrs. Miller then. She thinks of Mrs. Miller's husband who died in a car accident. Barbara never met him. He died before she and Alan moved into the neighborhood. She wonders what his name was. She wonders if she's ever heard Mrs. Miller speak the name out loud.

Barbara realizes her husband has now come closer to the door. He touches the door handle. He moves it back and forth.

Barbara thinks about something her husband once said to her in astronomy class. He said: “What if we get married, Barbara? What if we get married and live together like an old man and old woman?”

It was Barbara’s turn to laugh then. She told him not to be silly.

“I don’t know if it’s silly,” he said.

And then he made a face: mouth open, eyes wide.

Like he was surprised by something terrible.