



White Magic

THE NEXT MORNING I WOKE TO A DARK, OVERCAST SKY that burst into a pelting rain by the time I finished my liquid breakfast. I was already concerned about the “appointment” I had scheduled for the evening, and the foreboding, wet, miserable weather had me pacing back and forth in the house, stopping frequently to look out a window. I spent as much time in my office as I could, but seemed to only shuffle papers back and forth, start something then set it aside, and generally remain preoccupied and unfocused on my work. Every so often, I looked out at the garden, wishing I could be pulling weeds out of the broccoli beds or transplanting tomato seedlings, but the rain kept me cooped in.

I was becoming increasingly apprehensive about going to some strange place out in the country, and the gray, oppressive weather seemed to stimulate my imagination in a negative way. I imagined, among other things, a meeting with toothless, tattoo-covered, sex-starved, biker women in the middle of a sea of junk cars and junkyard dogs. The mental image of me sloshing into a deep swamp in the night, beating back mosquitoes and snakes, while a troupe of crazy women led the way with brooms and torches didn’t help either.

About the time my imagination would really start to get carried away and I could see myself being jerked through the dark woods on the end of a chain hooked to unmentionable parts of my body, my empty stomach would groan and remind me that I hadn’t eaten anything. I had

never fasted before, and did my best to alleviate my hunger by sipping on tomato juice. A fat steak would have hit the spot right about lunchtime, but I couldn't eat anything solid, thanks to Cynthia, so I tried to put food out of my mind.

I managed to keep myself busy in my workshop all afternoon, cleaning up from the last woodworking job I had done, and setting up for the next. Finally, around six o'clock, the rain stopped and the sky brightened. Before dark, the clouds parted and the setting sun streamed through the widening gap on the western horizon. The wind shifted out of the north, dropping the temperature to an unseasonable coolness. When I finally gathered my stuff together, said goodbye to Annie, and got in my truck to head west on the interstate highway, I had to lower the sun visor to keep the setting sun from blinding me. The only thing predictable about Pennsylvania weather is its unpredictability.

After an hour and a half of driving, I found Cynthia's place back a narrow country road. A towering oak woods wrapped around her small brown cape cod house; a red barn, sagging with age, sat across the road. A weathered split rail fence extended along the road in front of the barn, and an old black horse stood inside the fence, its shadowy head hanging over the rails, watching me intently as I slowed to a stop.

I swung my truck into what I assumed was Cynthia's driveway, parked alongside a road-beaten Ford van, and made my way up the gravel drive toward the house. "Hello!" shouted a woman's voice. She sat on a porch swing behind an overgrown grape trellis, waving. "Are you Joe? I'm Cynthia Bernard!"

I walked the hundred feet or so up to the house. "Yeah. Hi. That's me." I complimented her on her place, which was quaint and rustic, but impeccably maintained. A porch light revealed white and purple pansies bursting from flower boxes mounted below the porch windows; a newly seeded garden appeared to run the length of one entire

side of the house. I could hear goats bleating somewhere out back. Small children peered from behind a window curtain, giggling.

Cynthia was thin and lanky, her flaming red hair tied back into two long pigtails. She reminded me of Pippi Longstocking as she looked me over, then stood up and took my hand as if to shake it, only to gaze straight into my eyes as if looking for something. “Did you have any trouble finding the place?” she asked, letting go of my hand.

“I drove straight here. You give good directions.”

“Well, now that you made it this far, would you care for some water or juice?”

“Oh, no, I don’t think so. But thanks anyway.”

“Well, we should be going anyway,” she said. “Want to ride with me? That way we can talk on the way.”

I wasn’t sure I really wanted to leave the security of my pickup truck, but found myself saying, “Sure, why not?” Initially, we drove in an awkward silence, passing fewer and fewer houses as we progressed deeper into the countryside. I watched the scenery become engulfed in a cloak of darkness as woods finally extended on either side of the road, uninterrupted. We broke the silence with small talk as we began to ask each other questions about our personal lives. Like me, she was married and had several children. Her husband was a carpenter, about my age. She was probably in her early forties, I guessed. I asked her about her birthing clinic.

“I’m a midwife. A lay midwife. Do you know what that is?”

“A midwife delivers babies, right?”

“Well, not exactly,” she said with a smile. “We like to say we *catch* babies, we don’t deliver them. They deliver themselves. In many instances, we don’t even catch the baby, the father does. Then, we’re just there to help. But, if the father doesn’t want to be involved in the birth, the mother can rely on her lay midwife instead.”

“What do you mean — *lay* midwife?”

“That means I’m trained through experience and independent learning rather than through a formal school. I apprenticed under an older lay midwife who’s attended over a thousand births; I’ve attended over 400 births myself. We’ve never lost a baby. Or a mother either,” she said matter-of-factly. “Lay midwifery is one type of midwifery, another is nurse midwifery. That’s what Sandy does.” Cynthia had both hands on the steering wheel and kept her eyes straight ahead, quickly glancing at me from time to time as she drove on the narrow, winding road.

“Sandy Riding?”

“Yep. She’s a nurse trained in a hospital. Some people prefer nurse midwives, some prefer lay midwives, so we make a good team.” Cynthia turned off onto a narrow, gravel road.

“How did my aunt know you and Sandy?”

“Lucy has been active in the women’s movement for decades. She was a founding member of the Circle of Sisters and always a staunch supporter of midwives. I met her at the Starglade Festival in New York about ten years ago. She was conducting seminars on the relationship between nuclear physics and Wicca.”

“What?”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Nuclear physics and Wicca!” Cynthia laughed.

“I mean, what’s Wicca?”

“Oh! You’ve never heard of Wicca?”

“No.”

“Gee. You’re greener than I thought. You’ve never heard of *Wicca*?”

“Never.”

“Okay, well,” she furrowed her brow, searching for a way to explain. “Well, Wicca is what some people call witchcraft.”

“Oh great,” I whispered under my breath, covering my eyes with my hand and realizing that maybe the witch rumors I had heard in Montana were true, that Lucy *was* involved in this stuff.

“I heard that,” Cynthia said. “Most people don’t understand Wicca, and you’re obviously one of them.”

“I *know* what a witch is.”

“Really? Did you know that ‘witchcraft’ means ‘craft of the wise’? In the not so distant past, so-called ‘witches’ were the wise ones of their village. They knew about natural healing; they handled legal matters, and spiritual ones. They were the doctors, the lawyers, and the priests!”

Even in the darkness I could see that Cynthia’s face was flushed. “I’m sorry if I sound defensive, but people are generally so ignorant about this sort of thing and they keep perpetuating the same old myths. Wiccans aren’t ugly women on broomsticks with black, pointed hats and warts on their noses cackling over cauldrons of boiling bat lungs. We’ve been unfairly portrayed that way by religious and medical zealots for centuries. Actually, Wiccans are both women *and* men. They’re intelligent and kind people who believe in a spirituality that’s inextricably connected to nature. And it’s the spiritual connection to nature that puts off the religious fanatics. They want to call us heathens, pagans, and satanic because we don’t believe in *their* god. But they’re just boneheads. Most people don’t know that, and I have to spend a lot of my time setting them straight.”

I realized I opened a Pandora’s Box when I asked Cynthia about witchcraft. She was getting a little too worked up and since I wanted her to keep her hands on the wheel and her eyes on the road, I attempted to steer the conversation in a different direction. “So let me get this straight, my Aunt Lucy was teaching seminars on the relationship between nuclear physics and witchcraft? I can’t say that I’m too surprised about the witchcraft part anymore, but I didn’t know she had an interest in nuclear physics.”

“Your Aunt Lucy was a nuclear physicist.”

“Excuse me?”

“You didn’t know that?”

“Of course not.”

“How could you *not* know *that*? She was your aunt!”

“I didn’t know *anything* about Lucy. She was the black sheep of the family. The only time I saw her was at a funeral, twenty years ago.”

“Lucy had a Ph.D. in nuclear physics and she taught at the University of Montana in Missoula.”

“And she was a witch, too?”

“We don’t call ourselves witches,” Cynthia replied curtly.

“Oh, so you’re one, too?”

“Lucy was deeply involved in Wicca, and so am I. We dabble in what you might call ‘white magic.’ I think you could really benefit from a short history lesson. It might help you understand where I’m coming from.”

“Okay. I’m all ears.”

“Midwives and herbalists have traditionally been in direct competition with the medical establishment, mainly because we provide health care services without drugs or invasive procedures,” she explained. “Some people in the medical establishment consider this a threat to their ability to make money. Historically, those types of people played a big role in branding us as witches, attempting to eradicate us. Even today, midwives are sometimes persecuted by unethical people in the medical establishment. Whether you realize it or not, childbirth is a big business, and they don’t like us cutting into it. It’s pretty disgusting, especially when you consider that midwife-attended births are statistically far safer than hospital births, and a heck of a lot cheaper, too.”

Cynthia’s passion was a little overwhelming. I searched for the right words to reply, but decided again to try to change the subject. My nagging doubts about this whole trip persisted, and it seemed like we had been on a dirt road for an awful long time. “So exactly where are we going?”

“Our coven is meeting tonight, strictly for your benefit, and that’s where we’re headed. We’ll be there in about five minutes.”

I started to feel a little nervous. “What do you mean ‘strictly for my benefit?’”

“Look, Joe, I don’t know what Lucille had in mind when she chose you to carry her torch, because I don’t see — well, I don’t know how to say this, but you seem a bit naive about all this. For chrissakes, I know more about your own aunt than you do. Lucille was a genius; besides that, she was very psychic and sensitive. As I understand it, she was working on a very important project with a group of scientists and lay-people scattered all over the world. I can’t quite fathom it, but I think that’s where you come in. I guess we’re going to try to find that out tonight.”

“Do you know what her project was called?”

“If I remember right, she called it the *Balance Point*.” I recalled Lucy’s letter that I had found in the lockbox. She had mentioned something about me finding what she called my “personal Balance Point.” She hadn’t mentioned it had anything to do with an international research project. I was beginning to feel like an involuntary guinea pig, and not sure whether I wanted to resent it, or to accept the challenge.

“I know this sounds strange, but I can’t explain what the project is exactly. According to your aunt, it was extremely important. At least that’s how she explained it to me, and I believe her.” Cynthia turned her head and looked straight at me. “Did you fast today as I requested?”

I was pondering what she had just said, the balance point and all, and I didn’t hear her question.

“Well, did you *fast*?”

“Huh? Yeah. And I could really go for a big chunk of food right about now, like some ribs or something. My stomach is doing cartwheels. Will there be any food where we’re going?”

“There’ll be food, but no meat. They’re mostly vegetarians. In the Coven, that is. But we’ll have some food after the ceremony.”

“And what ceremony would that be?” I asked tentatively.

“The one our Coven is doing tonight — just for you. The divination ceremony. Looks like you’re going to experience witches firsthand,” she chuckled.
We turned down a tree-lined lane.
“We’re here.”