

The road becomes darker as Alicia steers her new Mercedes across the narrow bridge that connects our small, rural town, Crystalbrook, to the rest of civilization. She has the air-conditioner on because of her hot flashes, but I can taste the summer night coming through the vents.

Crystalbrook advertises itself as “the friendly town.” Friendly, but not familiar. Friendlier if you are a Republican, and married with school-age children. I arrived here ten years ago when I was all of those things. We moved from Chicago to Crystalbrook because the housing was affordable and the schools adequate. Now, I am divorced, vote the Green Party and am a Witch.

Not that anyone else in Crystalbrook knows the last part. I don’t wear flowing robes, pointy hats or tie-dye. I’m a pleasant looking woman with brown eyes and light brown hair, in reasonably good shape for my forty-nine years. I kind of drifted into Wicca when I was searching for a spiritual path to follow after my divorce. Wiccans are ordinary people: real estate agents, teachers, doctors, homemakers, perhaps even the person sitting next to you in traffic. Of course, one doesn’t go around announcing to the world that they’ve become a witch. There’s no one around to defend our good name. No group standing up for the rights of witches to be treated with respect. Even in the new millennium certain prejudices endure. Particularly egregious is the expression, “Cold as a witch’s tit.” How would anyone know? Why not warm as a witch’s tit? No, we are portrayed as cold, devious, evil cohorts of Satan, which, if you believe in God at all, is an amazing concept because how could there be anything that matches the most powerful

force that created the universe? Wiccans are ordinary people like you and me teachers, doctors, lawyers and homemakers. I could go on, but why? You've already drawn your conclusions as, Alicia would if she knew.

Anyway, except for an occasional wave as we walk down the road to pick up the mail, or passing in a car, my neighbors and I don't know each other. I tried breaking the ice with the neighbors by baking and delivering cookies to their doors. The sweets were accepted with surprised graciousness, but not once was I invited to step foot inside their homes. It took me awhile to recognize that most people move to the country to get away, not just from commuter traffic and perceived crime, but people themselves. Not till the kids graduated did I realize we had no social life. My husband and I decided to give a big barbecue and invite all the neighbors, about ten families in all. The Hippie couple that sold produce at the Farmer's Market were the only ones that came and they couldn't eat anything because my husband had refused to include tofu dogs in the menu. "Barbecue is for meat," he said.

A week later my husband told me he was moving to Alaska. I don't think it had anything to do with our failed party. He had been planning to go for a long time.

"Nothing personal," he told me, standing next to a duffle bag with his belongings packed in it. "I'll always love you."

"Strange way of showing it." I replied, wishing something more compelling had come to my stunned mind.

"It's just one of those things, Mandy." He hugged me and left to pursue his dream of becoming a gold miner in Alaska. The divorce yielded me two classic Chicago apartment

buildings that helped put the kids through college, and continue to support me in a modest but comfortable way.

My ex-husband went bust in Alaska. I can't say I wasn't happy to hear it.

Alicia is big and boxy like her car. We are driving back from the local community college where we met in a beginner's Spanish class. We live a half-mile apart, shop at the same stores and never met before we were paired off in class to practice.

“Buenos dias. Como estas usted?”

“Muy bien. Y usted?”

“Muy bien.”

Translated this means: “Good day. How are you?” “Very well. And you?” “Very well” The instructor, a gabby woman in her sixties, assures us this is how all Spanish conversations begin.

Discovering we live not far from each other, Alicia and I decided to car pool. We are on the cusp of friendship not yet friends, but no longer strangers. Alicia is in her fifties with lovely straight honey blonde hair. You can tell my hair is curly because only curly haired people think that straight hair is wonderful.

“You know,” she says, adjusting the air-conditioner dial to a sub-zero temperature, “A friend of mine met her husband in a grief group.”

Ever since I told Alicia I was divorced, she is always coming up with suggestions for how I can meet a man. Admittedly a challenge in a town as small as Crystalbrook. Alicia

married the man she dated in her last year of college and cannot imagine my life as a single woman.

“What was she grieving?” I fold my hands over my Spanish lesson books.

“Nothing. She went there to meet a man.”

In our first trips driving downtown we exchanged histories. I told her about my daughter who lives in New York and works as a speech therapist for autistic children. I am hoping she will come visit for Winter Solstice, or what she knows as Christmas. My son works as a marine biologist off the shores of Australia.

Alicia’s life has been a series of hair-raising calamities that have befallen her or those she knows. It give me pause about becoming her friend. Some people seem to be magnets for more than their share of problems. I wouldn’t like to become a statistic in her life, more proof of how ghastly her life can be. For example, her best friend from high school needs a kidney. This, while harsh, is not an isolated incident for Alicia. Her husband left their dog in the car one day last summer and forgot to open the windows. Awful. Her uncle’s wife was murdered two weeks after their honeymoon. I could go on, but you get the point, it’s like listening to *Tales From The Crypt*.

It would be tempting to create a protection spell for Alicia in which only wonderful things came to pass for her and those she knows, but I may not, it is against Wicca rules. Riding with Alicia gives me ample opportunity to practice detachment.

“So what did you think of class tonight?”

“I don’t know,” Alicia says, which means she does.

The reason I am studying Spanish is because it's a Romance language. I plan to rent a house in Spain next summer where I trust I will have a chance of meeting a romantic and kind man.

Alicia is taking Spanish in order to communicate more effectively with her housekeeper, who has a twin. Alicia is never sure which woman is cleaning her house.

"I think she shows too many videos," Alicia says. "I'd like to spend more time practicing words."

"I agree. " I feel a perk of delight in finding an accord with Alicia. Progress in increments.

"I mentioned my friend going to a grief support group because I was thinking of you," she says, reverting to the topic I had hoped to leave behind. "I mean it does seem like a good way to meet a man."

"It feels kind of dishonest to me." I feel our accord slipping away.

I see her smile in the reflected light from the dashboard. "Mandy, men really don't expect honesty. No relationship would last. My husband is a little boring, but I don't tell him that."

I think she probably tells him in a million little ways. In her attitude, in the way she speaks to him, in the way she rolls away from him when she goes to sleep. But who am I to judge?

“I want to meet someone to share life with,” I say, recognizing how hackneyed this sounds. “Not some depressed guy I trick into thinking we share something in common.”

“Have you tried the Internet? I’ve heard of people who met the person of their dreams on the Internet.”

One person’s dream is another’s nightmare, crosses my mind as I think of the men who have replied to my picture and profile, and were so pointed about sex that I quailed before their expectations. Call me sentimental, but I’d like a little more in a relationship than friction and a bottle of Viagra.

“Yes, I tried the Internet,” I say like a guilty defendant.

“Maybe you’re too picky.”

“What did your friend’s husband say when he found out she lied?”

“He thought it was funny. Actually, she didn’t lie. Her grandmother died. She was a hundred and four. It was in the newspapers.”

Longevity is a matter of great pride in Crystalbrook as if residing there was akin to living in Brigadoon. The town is not without its charms. Farmers’ markets and art galleries abound, but no dancing or singing takes place in the hills.

You might be thinking if I can make spells why not bewitch some man into my life? Yes, I could do it, but it’s a Wicca Rule that we not interfere with another’s free will. Besides would you want someone who had manipulated you to be your companion? *Love Potion Number 9* is not just the title of a song. There are dangerous side effects to putting the whammy on people, as

has been noted in history. It is not always best to fall in love with the first object you see when you open your eyes. The benefits of free will cannot be underestimated. And besides I have ethics. All Wiccans do.

I've begun to wonder why I stay in Crystalbrook, and where else I could live. I have tons of home equity, like everyone else who bought a house ten years ago. I could use the money to start a new life somewhere. Late at night I surf the Internet researching different communities considering if I would enjoy living in a yurt, growing organic vegetables and composting my leftovers, or perhaps somewhere in Europe like Spain or Italy? I haven't made any decisions yet.

"Did I tell you about my second cousin?" Alicia asks.

"I don't think you did. He's the one whose wife was murdered."

"No," she sounds annoyed. "That was my uncle. This is a cousin. A second cousin," she sighs, a signal that nothing good is about to come out of her mouth. "His son died in a car accident. It was really sad."

What else could it be? Is there such a thing as a happy car accident?

Alicia continues, "He was a talented violinist on his way to join the New York Philharmonic and an 18 wheeler on the New Jersey Turnpike crushed him."

I am momentarily speechless, not so much at the news but at the bland matter-of-fact way it is delivered. "That's terrible," I mutter. A loss of a child. I would never survive if it were one of my children.

“He sold everything; his car, his house and bought a piece of property in Minnesota.” She makes a sound like she’s caught a bug in her throat. “He’s building a park.”

“In his son’s memory?”

“No. The statue’s of himself.”

“He must be brokenhearted,” I say thinking he might be deranged with grief.

“Oh, his son died twenty years ago,” she says in a dismissive tone. “My cousin’s in his seventies now.”

“So your cousin’s alone?”

“Well, not really. He has a daughter, but they don’t get along.” She pauses.

I’m not even going to ask , why?

Alicia steers her car past the new workout place for women only. I have been promising myself I’d join, but can’t seem to get around to doing.

“I wonder where he found a sculptor?” I muse aloud.

“On the Internet.”

Here I spent a year and a bunch of money looking for a man, and her second cousin finds a sculptor. I was obviously seeking the wrong thing.

“How much did it cost him?”

“About a million dollars.”

“For the statue?”

“For the park and the statue.”

I imagine a place where children can play and family reunions take place in summer.

“My whole family thinks he’s crazy.”

I do not know why, but I feel the need to defend her second cousin.

“I don’t know, I kind of like the idea. I think there’s something nice about giving a park to a town?”

“Well, yes if you’re a philanthropist, and you’re being responsible.”

“Maybe, I’ve missed something, but I don’t see who he’s hurting.”

She makes a sound like she’s just swallowed a bug. “Well, your situation is different.” I can see she wants to say more but is afraid she’ll insult me. “Not everybody sees things the way you do. I mean he could fall down, break a hip, then what would happen?”

“So you’re afraid that somehow you’ll have to take responsibility for him if something happens?” Alicia’s voice is clipped as if she’s run out of patience. “Your situation is different.”

“You mean because I don’t have to work.”

“Because you don’t have a big family. You don’t know what it’s like.”

Guilty as accused.

“His grand unveiling is next June.”

“Are you going?” I ask.

She shoots me a look like I’m as crazy as her second cousin. “No,” she draws out the vowel. “I never heard of such a crazy thing.”

“Ohmigod,” Alicia tenses, brakes and pulls on the wheel. We spin onto a shoulder at the side of the empty road. “Did you see that?” she pants.

“What?”

“In the road. Ohmigod, I can hardly breathe my heart is racing so fast.” She holds her hand to her chest and rests her head on the seat back.

I turn and squint through the rear window. There is something white in the road. It looks like a body.

“I better go take a look.” I say.

Alicia’s head snaps up. “No, don’t get out of the car.”

“But someone might need help.”

“Listen, that’s an old trick. Someone lies in the road and you get out to help and they run out and rob you.

“Where does this happen Alicia?” I have no patience for paranoia. I reach for the door handle.

“It’s true. These things happen.”

“Not to me. And not to you either.”

“There’s robberies all the time. I’m shaking. You’re going to have to drive.”

I open the car door and step into the night air.

“Where are you going?”

“Alicia, stay calm. I’m going to see what I can do.”

“If you don’t get right back in this car I’ll leave you here,” she says.

“You do what you have to,” I say, believing she is bluffing. I close the Mercedes’ door and start walking along the shoulder. There are no street lights in the country but there is a half moon in the sky and I can make out a white blob in the middle of the road. I am wondering what I’ll do when I get there. Do I remember CPR training. What if the person’s dead? I’ve never actually seen a dead person outside of Lenin’s tomb in Russia, and he looked like a big doll under glass. My heart is doing a weird thump thing like a kid beating a drum. I feel the damp air on my bare legs. I’m wearing sandals and a loose summer dress. I am not appropriately dressed to deal with an emergency. There are rattlesnakes in this area, coyotes and wildcats. The sensible thing would be to get in the car and use the cell phone to call the police or fire department. I glance back at Alicia’s car and am amazed to see her driving off leaving me in the dark.

An unexpected primitive fear radiates through me shaking my bones. I stop in my tracks. There is no room now for falseness. Whatever I have chosen to meet in the road waits for me. I look up at the moon and feel reassured. The moon is in the half cycle, a time of balance between the dark and light. Taking a deep nourishing breath of the sweet night air, I feel a luminous sensation rise up from the earth, an attunement. I step forward touched by a strengthening confidence.

A soft sound comes from the thing in the road. There is just enough moonlight for me to see it is not a person, but a white owl whose wing splays across the center divide. An owl not a person. I approach the wild bird quietly, wishing I’d paid more notice to things that matter, like

avian culture, than to learning new salsa recipes. I slip off my pink shawl, the one I bought at Anastasia's Thrift shop on Main, and drop it over the owl's head. The owl bristles and quiets.

"Come on, baby." I gather the bird gently into my arms. It is heavy with life.

"You'll be fine," I say.

Headlights appear on the opposite side of the road. I recognize Alicia's Mercedes and have a dizzy feeling of elation at her return. I take it as a sign of a leap in friendship. My mind flashes forward to Alicia and I sipping Martinis at the country club and laughing over this incident, a danger overcome. The car lurches to a stop across from me. Alicia's window is open and she is not smiling. No sign of welcome.

"What is it?"

"An owl. It's wing is hurt."

"Are you crazy?"

There's that word again. "Alicia do you know that everything you don't agree with is not crazy?"

"You can't come in my car with that thing," she says.

"I can't leave it in the road." I say. There we are in a conflict in values. What's an owl's life worth? "It's fine. You can go. Someone will come along."

"Who?"

"I don't know who, Alicia, I haven't exactly thought this through." I feel the owl's heart beating against mine.

“So you’re just going to walk home in the dark? By yourself? Carrying an owl?”

“Okay, you’ve made your point. I’m not being practical, but if I leave this owl here because it’s inconvenient, what does that say about me?” Wiccans are sensitive to our responsibility to our fellow creatures.

Alicia makes that hacking sound in her throat again. “Get in,” she says. “There’s an emergency animal clinic about twenty miles from here.”

I back into the passenger seat holding my gift from the heavens. “You’re a good person, Alicia.” I feel a communion occur with the owl as it nestles against me.

“The air bags didn’t inflate when I braked before. Don’t you think they should have? I’m going to have to take it back to the dealer,” Alicia says as if I have not spoken.

In that moment I realize that Alicia will never speak to me again. I have a feeling of loss, and then the message the owl brings becomes clear. My life is not about the past or the future.