

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Nia C. Stephens for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 11, 2003

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Tracy Daugherty

Scenes from the Tarot is a novella that explores the desire to control time. The narrator, Truth Aiken, spurred by fear of her own death, recounts the story of her sister Beauty's death and its effects on Truth's highly unusual family. Proceeding backwards through time, Truth describes her tumultuous relationships with sisters and brother, her husband Jude, who, like Truth and her three siblings, is a prodigy, and her brilliant, distracted parents. Woven into the narrative are real-time interactions with Jude, who reads the chapters as Truth writes them, discovering secrets about his wife that will inevitably alter their future together in ways even Truth cannot predict.

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Scenes from the Tarot

by
Nia C. Stephens

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University Libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Nia C. Stephens, Author

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DEDICATION

For my sister and brothers, living and dead.

Scenes from the Tarot

Key 0
The Fool

Divinatory Meanings: Wildness. Taking Risks. A Leap Of Faith.
Reversed: Hesitancy. Caution. Difficulty Trusting Your Own Instincts.

If you are curious about your destiny you could kill a wild bird or pig with your bare hands then slit it from throat to groin with a sharp knife, and find your fate in viscera. If augery is not to your taste you could scry in a crystal ball, a black mirror, or a bowl filled with water stained with ink. You can drink a cup of unstrained black tea and find pictures in the leaves that mean something or other, you can open at random a Holy Bible and let your god guide your hand, you can walk into the future with your eyes open wide, or you can consult a reader of Tarot cards.

I have dissected many animals and drunk many cups of tea. I once read Tarot cards for a nominal fee but now I teach literature to prison inmates in a small town in Tennessee. I live in a castle that's thirty years old, ten years older than I am now, built to amuse some British bride of a country music superstar. They broke up a long time ago.

My students don't believe that I live in the castle, they don't believe that I've already graduated from university, they don't believe that I'm married at all, and certainly not to a twenty year old nuclear physicist who looks like a porcelain doll with glasses. Some of them refuse to believe that I am black, and those that do not insist that one of my parents must be white. They think I dyed a streak of my hair white to look older than I am, and they're wrong about all of these things, or my name isn't Truth Ananda Aiken.

For my twentieth birthday, now nine days past, my husband gave me a young Irish Wolfhound that matches the house and a calico kitten that does not. My mother gave me an emerald set in gold that matches my coloring better than the platinum band I wear on my left ring finger, or the plain silver band on my right ring finger. My younger sister Charmed gave me a new birth certificate and driver's license, which may well come in handy, and my little brother a very old deck of Tarot cards. The cards and the kitten and the birth certificate, which says my name is Jane Hart, are on my desk right now, arrayed around my typewriter like planets. The emerald, which is so huge it looks cursed, is on my right ring finger next to the silver ring. The young Irish Wolfhound, whom Jude has named Jane Hart, is sleeping on my feet. Jude is in the house someplace, making important discoveries about the nature of the universe. For his birthday now eleven weeks past I gave him a set of rubber knives, for which he thanked me most profusely.

My father did not make the drive down from Nashville with my mother and siblings because he was busy writing a book. I found this very, very interesting, since he had never expressed much interest in memoir before. My brother says that he is writing a about being a black physicist in Oak Ridge,

Tennessee at the end of the Cold War, and about raising prodigies, about all the things he knows. His memoir is already three hundred and seventy six pages long, and he has only been writing for a week.

When my brother said this we all paused with our forks full of chocolate birthday cake halfway to our mouths. I shut my eyes because the world had shifted, very suddenly, to the left, then tilted right. Then I opened them. This was the sixth dizzy spell in as many days, but I did not invite my family up to the castle to scare them. I smiled at my family, and ate a bite of cake.

“Well,” my mother said, putting down her fork. “I for one am intrigued. What do you think your father knows?”

No one knows what my father knows. He does not publish articles any more, he has never spoken at conferences, he set the telephone pole across the street from his house on fire. He no longer really occupies the increasingly dilapidated farmhouse at the end of Tulip Tree Drive. He stays in his bedroom but he lives in his memory palace.

I do know what his memory palace looks like. He told me about his extensively, when he was teaching me to build my own.

“Don’t trust text,” he said, tying my shoe. We were at the Nashville International Airport, and I was about to fly across the Atlantic without my mother for the first time, to meet Mom and Beauty in Paris. I was afraid I did not have enough books for the flight, and was failing to convince my father to buy me a new journal.

“I like text,” I told him. “Especially my own.”

“That’s fine, as long as you remember that words lie. They are reductive. Their meanings shift. If you want anything to remain clear and precise you must remember it. Build a room for it in your memory palace, create for it the right symbol, and whatever you want to remember will always be there, unchanged.”

My memory palace is a house of cards, Tarot cards, of course, though you can’t tell that from the outside. In fact, if you were to see my memory palace from a distance at night you would see nothing at all. The backs of the cards are black and printed with constellations. It is bigger on the inside than it is outside, and each step forward takes you farther back into the past.

Down the hall from the bedroom and the kitchen there is a room with a gigantic red door. It is so tall I cannot reach the knob, but if I hit the door at a run the door swings open anyway. Inside is a library filled with books, with tooled leather covers and lovely gold and silver writing. There are lots of libraries in my memory palace, but this is the only one filled with books I can’t read. The books are all just a little bigger than I am. I could sleep quite comfortably in the card catalogue drawers, with a sheet torn from a book for a blanket, and an eraser for a pillow.

The oddest thing about this room, which I created as I was flying over Kentucky on that long-ago day, is that atop the glass desk by the window, which looks out on a garden of fruit trees grown as knot

garden, the way my grandmother once grew herbs, is a purple spiral notebook, which was my journal at the time, a pack of cards, with the ace of cups on the bottom, and a photograph of my family. We look great in the photograph—my mother, father, my sisters, and me—vital, cheerful, and we're standing close together. I, of course, am too small to inspect the photograph, which is essentially life-sized, but I see it clearly from the floor. It is not at all distorted by the glass.

I think the rooms in my father's memory palace fit him perfectly. Outside it looks like his farmhouse, and on the inside something like a sculpture gallery. The hallways there stretch forever, but most rooms are small, with a single object in the middle representing something or someone or other. I know he keeps the doors shut—are there drafts in his memory palace? Cats or goblins that rearrange things while he's elsewhere? I know there are rooms filled with obsolete scientific instruments arranged in complex ways. I know he spends a lot of time in these rooms, tinkering with these things, running odd imaginary experiments with results whose implications are far reaching and wild in the world outside my father's mind.

I don't know what my father knows. I wonder. I consult my cards. They say, The Hermit. The Heirophant. The Emperor. The cards are so old the edges are soft, the tops of the cards silky. I shuffle, I lay out a Celtic Cross. Strength. The Hanged Man. The World. I fold them back in and count cards, this time pulling Judgment and Justice and the Wheel of Fortune. I shuffle the cards again.

Jude believes the world is chaotic but comprehensible. He named the kitten Mary Catherine, and calls her Merricat. He thinks I don't know when he's pretending to sleep and refuses to believe he is bound to me by anything other than love. He is not above binding me to him with pets and affection and a castle in the woods. He will hang tapestries on the walls to stay warm in winter, and lurk in the tower to look at the stars. I will grow herbs in the solarium and place a moondial in the courtyard. We order our universes as best we can, foolishly, and with much faith.

Key I
The Magician

Divinatory Meanings: Power. Knowledge. Creativity. A Sense that Life is Magical.

Reversed: Weakness. Suppressed Energy.

All physicists juggle except my father. Usually they pick it up during their under-graduate days; it fills time in the lab, and it gives them something to do with their hands when they're thinking. My husband Jude is one of the best jugglers I've ever known. He can keep up to nine balls in the air with a partner, five by himself, and he can juggle knives though I seldom let him. When we drive into the city on Sunday evenings to visit my father at his house, my mother in her apartment, and Jude's parents at their commune just north of Nashville, sometimes on the way home to our castle sixty miles from town, I suggest that we keep driving until we find an old-fashioned circus and join up.

"I'll get pregnant and be a contortionist," I say, putting my feet on the dash, my chin on my knees, wishing I could tuck my ankles behind my head. I am not very flexible in the status quo.

"There are probably easier ways to get relaxin into your muscles than getting pregnant," he reminds me, adjusting his glasses with his eyes on the road. In the half-light of a mid-summer dusk, his hair and skin and eyes are all the same pale gray. "You could get your mother to write a prescription."

"She never writes useful prescriptions," I say, though there's one exception. When I first menstruated my periods were so bad I thought I was dying. My mother wrote a prescription for the pill when I was twelve that I have only twice allowed to lapse. There is no drug store near the castle, and I never learned to drive. "Maybe I'll hang out in the freak tent. I'll grow a beard. Or I could get tattoos all over my body."

Jude pauses a moment, and considers. At twenty neither of us can legally get a tattoo in Bern County, where we live, but we could in Nashville proper. I think he's thinking of what I would get, and where, but I'm never sure. For all that I've known him since we were three, and we attended Islington together, then Harvard, though he finished up at MIT without me, I don't understand him, and he does not understand me.

"You could tell fortunes again, you know."

"Too easy."

"You think?"

"Certainly," I sigh. "People are unlucky in love, they grow old, then they die. Or they don't grow old, and they die. That's all."

"You must have been quite a Tarotiste when you were gone."

"I was," I say, somewhat defensive. Reading Tarot cards is a better job for a runaway than prostitution or drug dealing, but it is not in any way fun. When I lived in New Orleans I rented out the back of a store that sold the implements of voodoo, everything from the dusty top hats and skeleton greasepaint to shredded snake skin, and blood-soaked dolls. I got along very well with the proprietress and she sent good business my way. I spread my cards for older men and young women and told them what they wanted to hear, that is, I told them the futures they would never know.

"I could be the woman spread-eagled on the target for the knife-throwing act."

"Let's not join the circus," Jude concludes after a moment or two.

We drive in silence, then we speak of other things.

Much later, after I have scribbled out my Monday lecture and Jude is through with signs and symbols for the night, we go to bed. He suggests, with a warm hand on my right hip socket, or his fingers tucked into the grooves between my ribs, "Maybe you should become a pregnant contortionist."

"Bad idea," I say. "Think what the child might inherit."

"As long as she gets your face I don't care what else she inherits."

"I don't want to give birth to any more freaks. The Aiken line stops with me."

"You have two little siblings who might have kids."

"Charmed and Strange? Are you joking?"

"They're still very young. It could happen."

"Not a chance. Not even another Islington kid would marry one of them."

"They're young," he says again. "And I promise not to name our children after the qualities of subatomic particles."

"Beauty and Truth aren't bad names," I say, in sudden, irrational defense of my father. "Charmed isn't bad, though Strange. . ."

"We could name them after seeds, maybe. Achene. Samarra."

"Samarra," I repeat slowly.

"We could name one after your sister, if you want." He pauses.

"And what if I am sick?"

"What do you mean?"

I take a deep breath and stare at nothing.

"I think I have leukemia."

"Nonsense." He kisses my hair, right at the point where black and white strands meet. "What are your symptoms?"

"Dizzy spells. Exhaustion."

"That could be anything from flu to morning sickness!"

"This has been going on for fifteen days, Jude. If I were just getting the flu then I would be seeing other symptoms by now. And look at this bruise."

He turns on his lamp and looks at my bruise, which is plum colored and covers much of my shoulder.

"What happened?"

"I slipped in the shower."

"And where did this come from?" he asks, nudging a scabbed cut running from elbow to shoulder.

"I had a razor in my hand when I slipped."

"Really?" Jude suspects that I was shaving my upper arm when I slipped. With the first chill wind of fall I sprout a pelt of fine white fur—lanugo hair, because I am underweight. I shave it off for Jude's sake; he thinks my body weight is alarming, a sign of barely repressed self destructive tendencies. In fact, I'm just not very hungry these days. However, in all honesty, I probably would not eat much more than I do even if I were hungry. I like my current body weight. I rarely menstruate, and I rather like the lanugo hair. When I catch my reflection, backlit, I have a delicate, pale nimbus. Jude does not see it that way.

Nevertheless, I do say, "Yes."

"Well. . . it's not an exceptional bruise, considering."

"Considering what?"

"That it took most of your body weight. Truth, if you had leukemia your shoulder would have shattered."

"Not if it's ALL."

"Even then wouldn't the bruise be a lot worse?"

I regard him quietly in the half-light.

"I'll take you to the city tomorrow to have your blood tested."

"I don't want to go."

"But with your family history—"

"I know it very well, Jude. And I'd rather not see a doctor. Not yet."

"What exactly are you waiting for?"

"I've started a book. I'd like to finish it first."

"If you really are sick, then wouldn't it be in your best interest to get treatment now, and write later?"

"It will only take a day or so. I type very fast."

"A book in a day?"

"It's a memoir. I don't have to invent anything. Just remember."

"Ah, Truth." He sighs again. "Are you sure you're not just pregnant?"

"Sure," I tell him. "Almost sure. Though I'm not sure that would be much better."

I would never say such a thing to anyone else in my family, except perhaps Charmed, who would reply that the chances of curing pregnancy are far better than that of any cancer. Everyone else always asks when I will have children, except, of course, my father. When we visit him he barely asks me any questions at all. He asks Jude his opinion on various issues of the physical world, and occasionally asks me for a sandwich. When he does I make him a cheese and tomato sandwich and talk with my brother in the kitchen. Strange is too young to remember our earliest days in our house, when it was stuffed with little kids, cats, a physicist, usually, a biochemist, rarely, a housekeeper, almost always, and two secret service agents, who spent most of their time playing Monopoly with Beauty, Charmed and me and bringing my father sandwiches Nana made. This was just before the Cold War ended, and the government wanted to keep a very close eye on my father. Also, they wanted to prevent my siblings and me from becoming pawns in international intrigue. Ultimately, this meant that when we drove Nana crazy on hot summer days Agents Coleman and Starks drove us to Baskin-Robbins in a very subtle, very safe black car.

Strange is thirteen and completing his education at The Islington School, where all his sisters matriculated. He says he wants to be a diplomat, which surprises me not at all. Since he was seven he has immersed himself in a game called The World, played on the internet with odd characters from numerous countries. When the game began Strange was a minor ambassador to the United Arab Emirates, and now he rules The World. He exchanges emails with the dean of the Kennedy School of Government and under-secretaries at the Department of Defense. The under-secretaries think he should change his name and stop eating so many Ho-Hos, since Strange is on the way to becoming the first unbecoming Aiken. I don't know if the dean agrees, since Strange has never told me.

At my mother's apartment people ask me lots of questions. She lives with her mother and my sister Charmed, who is fifteen now and lots of trouble. We often say that if she doesn't change sometime soon I'll be teaching her literature behind bars, but that is just a joke; I teach at a men's prison, and if she gets arrested it will be for violating federal electronic privacy statutes and she'll be off to a federal penitentiary in Virginia. She agrees that I ought not to have children, but my mother and my mother's mother both think it would be interesting to see what another generation of our line might be like. They draw Punnett's squares in spilled salt on their kitchen table and argue about alleles until Jude and I go.

Jude's parents just like children. They are everywhere at the commune, running wild in the goat pen and in the kitchens, picking fruit before it's ripe and making themselves sick. It gets annoying after a while, all those dirty little children, though I have no doubt that they are happier than any children I knew when I was young.

It is impossible to imagine Jude growing up at Wildwood. Every time we're there Jude rocks too fast in his rocking chair and spills iced tea on the floor and on his neat white shirt. He wears his Oxfords with jeans and sneakers on Sundays, but he dresses in khakis or soft gray pants every other day of the

week. He is delicate and thin, with larkspur eyes and hair soft and pale as Caribbean sand. Were it not for me, his tea-colored wife, he would be madly courted by the Bern County Klan, though the prettiness of his features suggests a penchant for sodomy to certain local minds. His hygiene habits border on maniacal. His parents are both blonde and soft, though their softness covers muscle. They know Wildwood the way Jude knows my body: every inch of it, and the extent of its capabilities.

Laurel and Rick do not understand Jude, but they find him endlessly interesting, as if they were chickens who unknowingly sat on a toad's egg and hatched a basilisk. They peer at him over their Mason jars of tea and ask him questions about the country music star who built our castle, about the police in Bern County and Cambridge, about the time he met Gary Snyder at Grolier's Poetry Bookstore. Laurel asks me questions about herbal lore—it's the one interest we have in common, besides Jude—and Rick invites Jude to share a joint. Jude does not smoke anything, or, in fact, even drink, except for the occasional glass of wine with my mother.

Sometimes when he's feeling especially prickly Jude will ask his parents what percentage of children raised on communes are sexually abused, or how many wind up with substance abuse problems. His parents refuse to become enraged. They won't even argue, but merely rock and sip and maybe pass the joint, nodding and saying, "You may have a point there, son." That's usually when we leave.

None of our classmates at Islington boasts a great relationship with his or her parents. Most of them get along with their parents well enough; only one has attempted violence on his parents that we know of, and that was an exceptional case. Not one of us trusts our parents' judgment, though, and I find that very interesting.

Jude has a theory about this. Jude has a lot of theories. He manipulates ideas professionally, after all, theories of light and time and the structure of the universe, and for fun he keeps as many balls in the air as he can. He is also a prestidigitator—he knows how to pull rabbits out of hats, and how to saw ladies in half, and how to put them back together. He knows one hundred tricks with cards and coins, and he makes doves for me out of silk scarves and flowers. He says that all prestidigitation is quite obvious, in fact—that magic is really just misdirection, distraction. He says the same of physics, however, in his darker moods.

Key II

The High Priestess

Divinatory Meanings: Stillness. Wisdom. Intuition. A Sense of Knowing Things that Cannot Be Explained.

Reversed: A Change from Stillness to Action. Defending, or Seeking Out What is Rightfully Yours.

Jude and I married six months after I returned from New Orleans, on the day of the summer solstice. We thought about springing Eli, our best friend, from the insane asylum where he lived but decided against it. My parents were not informed about the wedding, but Strange and Charmed came with us out to Wildwood. It was odd, seeing his parents, soft and doughy and brown with sun, with my baby sister and brother. Charmed and Strange were night creatures, bone-thin, black-eyed, but dark because of blood. They came because I promised the ceremony would be short, and they could drink blackberry wine, and I would not tell our parents. They did not realize that our wedding was a small part of the festivities that day; Strange and Charmed did not often walk the streets of Nashville, they had not seen signs at places that sold coffee and tobacco products and the implements of Wiccan rituals, inviting all interested to celebrate Beltane at Wildwood. It was my idea to wed there and then. Jude would have preferred a justice of the peace, but I wanted a large wedding, and did not have many friends. My only close female friends from Islington, Isabella and Juliet, had moved abroad years ago, and I had not seen them since. Amazing, how those you love can disappear into the rabbit holes of time.

The wedding was set for sunset. We showed up at seven o'clock, Strange and Charmed springing from the car like birds, both terrifically carsick. I was unaware that they had such difficulties with motion, and would not have believed it if I had merely been told. It was only an hour north of Nashville, but both of them had to change clothes when we arrived. When Jude's mother saw me in my black dress she insisted that I change too. There were seven or eight other girls my age hanging out in Laurel's cabin weaving garlands, chains of ivy, rose and columbine, lavender, violets and white woodbine, which is called honeysuckle in this region of the county.

"Does anyone have a white dress Truth can borrow?"

The girls looked up and tilted their chins, some to the left, some to the right. There was a strange similarity in the way they moved. Something soft and fluid and almost fey, like the movement of deer in long grass.

It was resolved that I would wear red, as the Chinese do, or, at least, a wide red skirt, and a white shirt laced shut with red, red ribbon. The girls refused to bind my hair, but wove a crown for me of woodbine, shot with roses, red and white. While they dressed me and painted my lips they told me about their high school, and where they were going to college. All of them were leaving, but since none

were going to Cambridge or New Orleans I had no advice for them. The girls thought my hair was amazing, and when Charmed wandered in, they liked hers even better. She is a sport. Instead of a single streak of white growing wider by the years, like my hair, and my mother's before me, Charmed has two streaks, one by each temple. Strange's hair is all black, like my father's, even now.

Eventually I was told I was finished and turned back out the door. Strange and Jude and Jude's father had gone to the blackberry patch, since Strange had never picked a blackberry. I imagined Jude's fingers stained with juice, a crushed blackberry on his tongue.

All around me wandered kind and happy strangers, poking shaggy heads into cabins, rolling logs, digging a pit for fire. A month-old Maypole stood right behind the makeshift altar before which Jude and I would be married, its ribbons fluttering in the breeze. Celebrants were gathering, bringing with them drums, flutes, and fiddles. The sun was falling fast. For the first time I was truly conscious of Earth's motion. It was spinning, spinning, around its axis, and spinning, spinning, around the sun, flying through space at a hectic pace, controlled only by gravity and centrifugal force, the weakest forces in the universe.

My betrothed returned to me with a basket of dark and glistening fruit. His fingers were stained with juice.

"I look like I've been writing all day," he said, holding out his hands. I kissed his right palm, just over the lifeline, and he kissed the blue vein on my left wrist, the first place suicides slash when they use a razor. The ancient Romans believed this vein flowed directly from the heart and to the left ring finger, though it does not. Then it was time to marry.

We were married by a high priestess, known to Laurel and David, but not to me. She was old when she performed the Wiccan equivalent of Christening on Jude when he was one year old, and she was older now; he was already speaking then, and if Laurel and David had believed in demons they would have thought their son possessed. As it was they found him frightening, with his endless series of articulate questions, why? and why? six thousand ways. They sent him to Islington when he was four and let him board there during the week. He grew quieter; this pleased them.

Jude has confessed that he used to dream of the high priestess, with her long gray dreadlocks and her soft black eyes. He dreamt of the commune turned into a palace that was also a glade in the woods, of twelve golden plates, of twelve golden cups. The high priestess peered at infant Jude and said, "You will be clever," and all his parents' court rent their clothes and wailed, and Jude woke up. I was amazed.

"When did you read fairy tales?" I asked, and he evaded the question.

Seeing the high priestess, haloed by the sun at nine o'clock at night, I understood why she haunted his dreams. She wore raven feathers in her hair, and jet beads, and an obsidian arrowhead. Her face

was seamed like a dead leaf, and she wore her ugliness like a mask, the way my mother, and her mother, and my mother's oldest daughter wore their beauty. The high priestess terrified me.

I cannot remember one word of the ceremony. I remember the old woman's voice, rolling over us like a dark, slow river, and I remember the thick gold color of the light. We did not exchange rings at the ceremony. We had done that beforehand, exchanged those thin and burning bands of platinum early that morning in bed. Our wedding was truly a handfasting. My left hand was bound to his right, my wrist to his wrist, with red and white ribbons tied with a hard knot. Then the air was filled with flower petals, and with shouts. Then the celebration began.

The girls I had met rose to dance around the fire, their long hair flashing with the light. Strange and Charmed both watched from the side, sipping blackberry wine and sharp apple cider. Jude was persuaded to juggle, and both my siblings laughed. For them he juggled four apples, then five. Then, dropping back down to three, he impressed us all by eating an apple, bite by bite, without letting the other two fall to the ground. They love him for this, and so do I.

The girls called me to the dance and I joined them, pounding the dry earth with my bare feet. Closer to them, I could hear the bells someone wore on her ankles, see how they spun without catching their skirts on fire. We danced to fiddle and drums and flutes; someone played a harp.

I twirled like a gypsy on my wedding night, and stained my lips with blackberry wine. My husband watched silently when he was not juggling. My husband does not dance. I liked dancing with the girls, however, girls who were like me and not. We were all like gypsies, among whom divinatory gifts are the sole provenance of women, dancing under the moon.

Key III
 The Empress
 Divinatory Meanings: Passion. Sensuality. Desire.
 Motherhood and Nurturing.
 Reversed: Detachment. Emotional Distance. Thinking Something Through.

My mother met me at the airport when I returned from New Orleans, her hair star white and flowing, like a wedding veil, around her small brown face. She cut her hair while Beauty was dying of leukemia, but has not cut it since. I think this is because Beauty's hair always grew fast, and after three months in her grave Beauty's hair could have been any length.

And, of course, three months is only the average length of time hair grows after death. Beauty was young, tenacious. Perhaps her hair has filled the casket, shrouded her shroud and her bones in black and white silk, perhaps it has pressed its way out of the box, through every crack and joint, like rootlets seeking water. Her nails, of course, would grow as well. Clawed, tenacious Beauty, locked in a box, surrounded by silken hair instead of a briar hedge, and entirely unreachable.

My mother's hair inspires no such contemplation. It is smooth and soft, caressing the high curve of her cheekbones and pooling in her clavicles. Her hair evokes thoughts of waterfalls, ice sculptures. Pretty, chilly, non-violent images, she looks composed, as if she made herself up, and to some extent, she did.

"We come from a long line of independent women," she said as we got into her car. The Nashville Airport had not changed. I loved that about the Nashville Airport, and I still do. Not even the rate for parking half an hour (free!) had changed while I was gone. Even noting that, it was hard for me to believe I had been in New Orleans for just two years.

"Your great-grandmother Estelle ran away from home to study medicine in Boston, and your grandmother defied her parents to marry my father."

"And you run away all the time." I hadn't meant to say it, though it was quite obviously true.

She sighed. She had expected that line from my mouth. She was overfamiliar with the script.

"Marrying your father was certainly a mistake, but I always tried to be there for you and your sisters and brother."

"A mistake? No. Strange is a mistake. Your marriage is a catastrophe."

"Truth," she sighed, then started the car. "I have no oracles to consult. I can't see the future. But even if I could, it wouldn't have changed very much. I love you and your siblings, and I really did try my best."

"Be that as it may," I began, but I realized that nothing I could say was likely to make either of us feel better, so I just shut up and stared out the window of my mother's new Mercedes. This was a clear

sign that she and my father no longer even pretended to live in the same house. He was raised in Detroit, and believed strongly in supporting the U.S. automotive industry when he thought of driving at all. He had not replaced his driver's license since 1978. "Where are we going?"

"To my apartment," she confirmed, and she pulled onto the interstate. Winter had rubbed his hard hand against the trees and grass, and though it was not as sere as Massachusetts in winter, it was not as lush as New Orleans.

"We have to go by the house," I told her. "I have no clothes."

"You can wear my clothes."

"I can't," I said, holding out my arm. It was thin as a lilac branch.

"Maybe you could wear something of Charmed's," she said, though she was signaling an exit, heading back towards the house.

When my parents bought it the house looked like any bourgeois fantasy of farm life: white clapboard, black shutters, a stream out back, a wood shed. Now wisteria has the front porch in a death grip, and English ivy is all that keeps the shutters attached to the house. I thought I saw someone moving in the gloom by the door, but I was clearly mistaken. The decaying leaves and debris on the front porch had not been disturbed for months.

"I thought you said Strange still lived here," I said to my mother as we pried open the door. The wisteria, apparently, was trying to enter the house.

"He lives in the woodshed," she explained. "But only on the weekends. He has a room at Islington."

"Good lord!" I exclaimed when we finally entered. "The dust!"

I have always suffered a minor horror of dust. The physical evidence of decay, not rotting, or wet, but dry, and almost weightless, capable of elegant gavottes in sunlit air, dust is Death made infinitesimal and infinite. In my father's house it was everywhere, thick enough that my mother's heels were soundless on the old oak floor.

"No one's been in your room since you left. Your school things are at Jude's apartment." This surprised me, though I said nothing. The nature of my relationship with Jude was supposed to be a secret. I wondered if he'd confessed everything to my parents after I disappeared, or perhaps to police. It surprised me further that I hadn't thought of this before.

While my mother made her way to the kitchen, which was the cleanest room on the first floor, though the sink was piled high with dishes my father had dirtied during Strange's week-long absence, I went upstairs. The light bulbs above my head were all dead, but in the half-light drifting from the open door downstairs I could see various needlepoint projects along the wall. Closest to the ground were several samplers sewn by my grandmother in the years since her retirement, soon after my grandfather's death. They were all quotes from his novels, pleasant, happy thoughts; this, more than anything,

evidences Grandmother's genuine interest in his work. Happy thoughts are not easy to find in the works of Alexander Oglethorpe.

Still, pale green Garamond text surrounded by exquisitely stitched lobelia blossoms and columbines remind passing Aikens and Oglethorpe-Aikens that "Delight in life is all in the details." Additionally, in an elegant blackletter hand, one of my grandfather's characters concludes, "Joy is the only justification."

My grandfather was a parasuicide before he succeeded, drowning before six witnesses at Percy Priest Lake. It was early morning, in June. Bobcats were still screaming in the hills. He told a party of white fishermen that he was going to reclaim a lost fortune from his home, flooded by the TVA while he was up north, working. Purest nonsense, as it happens; my grandfather was born in 1930 to a wealthy family in Savannah. He never even visited Tennessee until my grandmother, his fiancée, announced that she would be teaching at Fisk for a few years.

The fishermen believed my grandfather, even though he made this pronouncement looking haggard in a nice suit at six thirty five a.m., his shoes still on his feet though he was knee deep in cool water. He went down and did not come up. My grandmother was fifty at the time, and not entirely shocked. News of his posthumous Pulitzer came two weeks afterward.

Beyond my grandmother's samplers are my mother's tapestries. There are two. One shows a double helix in terrifying detail, in gold and silver metallic thread on black broadcloth. It is gorgeous, of course, sinuous and strange; precisely the sort of needlepoint one would expect from my mother. Next to it is another expanse of dull black fabric, a huge circle, fretted with perfect white stars. It is a map of the sky the night Beauty was born. She embroidered it by Beauty's hospital bed, rather than twiddle her thumbs uselessly while her daughter died.

Mother had been working on protease inhibitor trials at BerendtLab in town when Beauty first got sick. At first we all thought—all hoped, maybe—that Beauty had somehow picked up a strange new microbe at her lab at Vanderbilt. My mother is very good with microbes, and so, for that matter, was Beauty. But when Beauty broke her leg tripping over a plant she knew, we knew. Before the end of the day she was installed in the children's wing of the Sarah Cannon Cancer Center, a few blocks away from her lab and endless miles away.

Beauty wasn't a bad patient. She was terribly dignified—a little too dignified for a sixteen year old, maybe, but calm and quiet and pleasant. I never saw her cry, and Charmed, my mother, grandmother and I spent almost all day, every day, at the hospital, from the time Beauty was diagnosed until the day she died. Charmed and I were the only ones who weren't doing needlepoint. She was designing some sort of operating system, and I was working on temporal translations. In theory, they are the easiest kind to write; modernizing Elizabethan English should be simpler than translating Racine or Ovid. But it's not. Hamlet says, "I shall in all my best obey you," meaning a. I shall do as a son and subject

should, and serve you humbly in my very best clothing and b. I will defy you, you sleazy bitch, by wearing black for mourning. Not only is the play on words impossible in modern English, both meanings dissolve in the morass of American culture. Children do not serve their parents; Americans do not serve their president. That is probably for the best. Additionally, we do not mourn anymore. We no longer stop the clocks. We no longer spend a calendar year draped in black. We no longer cover our mirrors, and put black ribbons on the necks of public ducks. We should.

One morning my mother shaved her head to the scalp. The night before she and Beauty had had a minor squabble about the lack of white thread. Mother was working on her night sky tapestry, and Beauty was working on a tapestry of her own design, though it was clearly influenced by M.C. Escher: it was a mobile tessellation, white calla lilies which became gyroscopes which became white tulips which became gyroscopes which became white roses. Beauty finally shrugged and laughed and said, "At least we won't run out of black thread," pointing at the bowl of hair that she insisted on keeping on her bedside table.

Beauty died before she finished her tapestry, but it is hanging on the wall next to my mothers', completed by Charmed sometime during my absence. You can see the transition if you look very carefully. The stitches on the far left are fine, even, then they become more and more irregular, as Beauty grew weaker. Then they are perfect again, machine-accurate, pure Charmed. There are even a few samplers that are clearly all Charmed in design and execution. They say, "Privacy is a privilege, not a right," and, "Information wants to be free," both decorated with Himalayan blue poppies, almost the color of the Electronic Freedom Foundation logo. I adore my little sister.

I think she's the one who discovered and mounted the last sampler, since I had buried it very deeply in a trunk of old clothes and blankets before I left for school. Compared to the others it is very plain. There is a border of simple ribbon work, almost Celtic, but not quite, and black text on a cream-colored background. The legend is legible even in the dark: "Emotional detachment is freedom."

That one is the last, just before the landing. There are three doors, two of ordinary size and one that is both thinner and taller. That one, which is in the center, leads to the vast attic bedroom Charmed and Strange shared when they were smaller; on the right is Beauty's bedroom; on the left is mine. There was still a small plaque on the door that says, "Sinister," a birthday gift from Strange, and there was a new cut-crystal doorknob that could be locked from outside.

My hand looked all wrong on the nice new doorknob, small and withered and awfully dirty. Nevertheless I opened the door and was blinded by light drifting through dirty windows. As my eyes adjusted I breathed deeply, trying to inhale my childhood. Instead I breathed early adolescence: patchouli incense, Laura Ashley No. 23 and Chanel's Gardenia, both gifts from Grandmother, the dehydrating leather of my Harvard Classics, books stacked to waist height all over the room turning to dust, and the maple smell of bookshelves lining the walls just perceptible. It seemed at once impossible

that I had ever read so many books, and once remembering, that I had ever forgotten so much that I had read. I was too full of other people's words, once, and I had gone to New Orleans to get rid of them.

"Truth." The word seemed to float upstairs on swells of dusty air.

"Yes?"

"Get your clothes so we can go."

I looked in my closet for a duffle bag, but found only a suitcase, a cracked leather Louis Vuitton I had had since I was five. I always told skycaps and porters to be careful with it, there were books inside. I filled it with old clothes, jeans and sweaters somehow free of moth holes, old cotton panties decorated with rosebuds and stars, bras I could no longer fill. I realized, rather belatedly, how bad I looked, how sick, how horrified my mother must have been, seeing me emerge, blinking, from the tunnel connecting the Boeing and the airport where we had said goodbye so many times, so very much like Beauty. Beauty looked better, of course, in her hospital bed, her lean face unclouded by ratty hair that smelled like river mud, like a grave, like New Orleans, her eyes unshadowed by the world.

I packed my things and left, pausing only to glance at my father through the keyhole. He and my mother had argued quickly and quietly, and he, in his fury, had locked himself into his study. He was hunched over a small model of an electron cloud, made with wires and marbles. They were beautiful, the old-fashioned kind, clear glass with multi-colored helixes in the center. If he opened the curtains light would stream through the nucleus and pour, in bright streams, all over the room.

"He thinks you became a prostitute in New Orleans," my mother explained, in the car.

"For all you know he could be right."

"Don't be silly, girl. I am your mother." With this she gave small but serious smile.

"And however I might feel about it, he is my father."

"Yes. But he named you after an intangible property, and I named you for the joy without which life would cease to exist."

"Does that mean you know me better?" I demanded, almost crying, for the first time since I came home.

"Yes," she said, and drove on.

Key IV
The Emperor
Divinatory Meanings: Law. Structure. The Social Order.
Reversed: Whatever Undermines Law and Order.

One morning, after nearly two years in New Orleans, I dreamt of Beauty's funeral. It was a lovely day, late July, and small white butterflies fluttered around Beauty's small white coffin like ashes in a high wind. In reality, over two hundred people crowded the gravesite including members of the press, but in the dream I was alone. The coffin lowered itself gently into the ground. Dirt drifted in after it, slowly at first, then faster. Still, the hole did not fill. Bright green turf poured into the neat brown rectangle, folding chairs, the lovely gravestone I had helped my mother choose, an oak tree. I felt the pull but did not resist—how could I, when the entire world was sinking into Beauty's grave? I wonder what's down there, I had time to think before I slid over the edge into darkness and woke.

The tomb in St. Louis Number 1 where I slept was dark and cold as death, but I knew it must be nearly dawn. Though the outside lock was broken I had installed a new one on the inside, which I quickly unlocked, desperate to get out of the cemetery before any tourists showed up. It was too early for even the bus station, so I walked by the river until the sun washed it gold, then went to the bus station to clean up. Madame Sosostri's Voodoo Emporium did not open until noon, so, like most mornings, I headed to the public library. I took the *New York Times* and the *Times-Picayune* to a window seat in the children's section and curled up to read, still tired, like most mornings. Violence in Israel. Violence in Metairie. The library assistant shelving nearby gave me several dirty looks which I gladly returned, then continued reading. New galaxies had been discovered, the map of the human genome was almost complete. At Tulane a physicist from MIT was giving a lecture on black holes, their youngest physics Ph.D. ever. The photograph they ran of Jude was a good one: he was neither smiling nor frowning, staring, frank and wide-eyed, out of the frame. He had not bothered to shave; fine gold fuzz was visible on his cheeks and above his lip, making him look, for the first time in my eyes, like an adult.

I had not felt so incorporeal since I was lifted out of bloody bathwater by an EMT many years before. The newspaper in my lap was all that kept me from bumping my head on the ceiling, I was so light-headed. I could not decide if I should try to hitch a ride out of town without getting raped or go to ground in the city, huddling in St. Louis Number One with the junkies, other runaways, rats and roaches and all the other creatures that survive by hiding. I was supposed to work in a few hours, reading Tarot cards, but how could I, when Jude would be across town, lecturing in his most reasonable voice about gravity at its most inescapable? I wanted to hang myself, and I wanted to hear Jude's voice.

I went to Goodwill and picked up a dress. I had several on hangers at Madame Sosostri's, but they were all black velvet or silk, gorgeous old vintage dresses that belonged to Madame and made me look

like someone who could see into the future. I wanted to avoid attention at the lecture, so I found a simple gray dress a size too large and a pair of Mary Janes. I paid ten dollars then went to McDonald's to spend another two dollars on fries. I ate by the river, my new acquisitions crammed on top of the two pairs of jeans, three long-sleeved shirts, unknown number of panties and socks, one towel, two bras, toothbrush, toothpaste, stick of deodorant, a bar of Dove, and a comb, all crushed into the backpack that accompanied me everywhere. I also had a switchblade, an old jean jacket that belonged to Beauty and my grandmother's silver ring, which I never took off. A pack of Tarot cards. A pack of business cards with my pseudonym engraved beneath Madame Sosostri's'. The key to the crypt around my neck. All that, and a short stack of five and ten dollar bills in my left shoe, was all I could rightly claim in the world.

At four thirty I took the streetcar over to Tulane, and wandered, thoroughly lost, for twenty minutes. I was still an hour early for the lecture, which was my plan. I found a deserted women's room and washed up again, avoiding the mirror. I knew that the dress would not precisely fit, but it was close enough. I rolled the sleeves up to expose my hands, small but clean, fingernails painted a red that looked almost black against the cards. I combed my hair, and wished I had washed it that morning. It was too cool out to walk around with wet hair more than once a week. I did not bother braiding it, since I had nothing with which to secure the end, so it hung, curly and wild, almost to my elbows, and I hid behind it, sitting in the middle of the auditorium waiting for Jude to speak.

The lecture hall filled slowly, but it did fill. I was surprised—who would have guessed a nuclear physicist lecturing on astrophysics would pack the house? But campus was peppered with posters advertising the event; I had seen at least fifteen during my wanderings. And this was the 1990s: Stephen Hawking was a household name, and kindergarteners had heard that $E=MC^2$, even if they had no idea what it meant. The seats on either side of me were the very last seats to be taken. Not, I think, because I smelled homeless, or even, necessarily, because I looked it. It was clear, though, to Tulane students crowding around that I was not one of them. And I looked like someone who was best left alone.

The stage was empty save for a podium. When the lights died over the audience a small, dapper man with very little hair made a brief speech about Jude's accomplishments thus far, his publications, his lecture tour, which was concluding this very evening, a book for laymen and women that would come out in four months. Then Jude joined him on stage; they shook hands, the smaller man left, and Jude started talking.

I started to shake. I could not help myself. It was a fine trembling, like shadows cast by firelight, but it infected every joint. He had shaved, and the blue jacket and tie he wore were exactly like every other jacket and tie Jude had ever worn. I covered my face—my eyes dazzled—he was so young!

I listened to him explain Heisenberg's Uncertainty Theorem, the baffling nature of light and dark matter, the hobgoblins of my father's house. I had heard it all before, but not for a very long time. It all seemed terribly marvelous, and terribly mundane. After all, this was our universe he was describing, the world we saw every day.

He finished. People applauded. Lights went up. Now I was staring at my lap, shadowed slightly by my arms and my hair. The question and answer segment began. People asked about physics, about being a prodigy, about his plans for the future. Someone asked, giggling, if he was single. He answered every question quietly, reasonably, though I found I could not understand a word. I was listening for timbre; I was listening for strength. I was listening for cadences only I could recognize, having heard his voice every day for most of our lives.

There was more applause. Sounds of plush seats gently slapping the backs of chairs, admiring conversations, eventually silence. It was so quiet I imagined I could hear my bones rattling together, and I pressed the heels of my hands hard against my eyes.

I heard footsteps. The seat beside me squeaked, sighed, as a weight settled in. I heard him breathe in, breathe out, breathe in again and say, "Truth."

"Jude."

He was silent for a long while, and my bones rattled.

"Truth," he said again, and touched my shoulder. My body went still. He encircled my wrist with his thumbs and forefingers and pressed them gently into my lap. He brushed my hair, damp with crying, behind my shoulders but did not turn my face, did not force me to face him.

"I love you," he said.

"Are you sure?" My voice sounded all wrong, like a minor chord instead of a single note.

"Yes." He kissed the hollow beneath my right cheekbone, where Beauty had a dimple. Then he kissed me just below my ear, and the upper edge of a clavicle, where the neckline of my dress had slipped. His eyelashes grazed my skin like cobwebs, lingering impossibly.

"No," I said. "I'm not what you think I am."

"Yes. Yes. Yes. You've never understood how I felt—"

"I don't even understand how I feel!"

"I know. But I know how I feel—"

I was at the double doors before I really thought about running, and was on the streetcar headed back to the French Quarter before I could reconsider. It was not until I reached the doorstep of the Voodoo Emporium that I realized my backpack was lying at Jude's feet. I let myself in anyway, walking past the skeleton greasepaint, the antique top hats, the chicken blood thinned with alcohol, the ground bones, to an alcove where I sat six nights a week predicting other people's futures. The store was empty, save for Madame, muttering to herself irritably while she balanced the books.

An hour later Jude turned up. I suspected that the long delay was a head start, a chance for me to hide if I wanted to play hide and seek. He put the backpack on the table and sat down across from me.

"Celtic cross?" I offered, pulling the cards out, then fanning them in front of him. "Tree of life? The zodiac spread?"

"This is not a game."

"No. It isn't." I Charlier-shuffled then selected The Fool for him without looking. My Charlier shuffle was, at that point, superb.

"I taught you that." His voice was grim.

"I remember." I toss out The Lovers, and The Devil.

"What do I have to say? What can I do to make you want to come home?"

"Nothing could convince me to go back to that house, assuming he would even want me." I handed him Death.

"What are you—you mean your father's house? You don't have to go back there."

"Where else would I go?"

He held my hand firmly, and leaned halfway across the table. His face was luminous in its intensity, like the moon. He almost looked dangerous. Behind him, Madame Sosotris had gone silent and white, then disappeared into a beaded curtain.

"Let's get married. We could find a house off in the woods. You'd never even have to see your father, if that's who you're hiding from."

"Jude, for all you know I'm crawling with disease. You have no idea what I've been doing for the last two years."

"I trust you."

"You shouldn't."

"Really?" He raised an eyebrow. "Am I supposed to believe that you, of all people, have prostituted yourself, despite a master's degree from Harvard and your numerous skills? You don't even like to be touched."

"I live on the street, Jude darling. Just because I don't like to be touched doesn't mean I haven't been."

"Truth," he breathed, suddenly quite still. He swallowed audibly while he searched my eyes.

"I haven't been. Don't worry," I assured him, ashamed of myself. There had been close calls—two very close—but I had maneuvered through New Orleans entirely unmolested.

"I still don't understand why you left in the first place," he said unhappily, twining his fingers with mine. "Was it anything I did?"

"You didn't do anything," I replied, groping for words. "I was. . . uncomfortable, I guess. I was afraid."

“You were more afraid of your old life than you were of this?” He gestured at the store, at New Orleans in general, with his free hand.

I found myself crying again. “Jude, I am so scared of ‘my old life’—I am so frightened—it was so—I guess it’s that I needed so much, and I did things—I mean, look how I treated you! It’s just—”

I don’t know what I would have said if a policeman had not walked in at just that moment. He was young, black, good-looking. Not unlike my father at that age, I thought, regarding his high cheekbones, his clear eyes.

“You alright, Miss?” he asked, heading right over. I saw Madame Sosostriis peeping through her beaded curtain at me and Jude.

“Fine, thanks. What’s this about?”

“Got a call about a domestic disturbance. You say you’re fine?”

“Fine,” I said, trying not to snifle.

“Can I see some i.d.?” he asked. Jude pulled out a wallet, and I shrugged helplessly.

“I don’t drive.”

“You don’t have any sort of i.d.?”

“None.”

“You live with your parents?”

“Er.” I glanced at Jude, who was keeping his expression carefully neutral. I knew he was tempted to tell the police officer that I was a runaway, which is illegal in Louisiana, but he contained himself.

“Not exactly,” I admitted. “I’ve been missing.”

“With him?” The police officer looked like he wanted to arrest Jude. His grip had left my hand red as murder.

“No. He just found me.”

A few hours later I was on a plane to Nashville.

Key V
The Hierophant
Divinatory Meanings: Teachings. Traditional Ideas. Wisdom.
Reversed: Unorthodoxy. Finding One's Own Path.

Harvard University is a mysterious place, and with time the mystery only deepens. It is thick with stories, strange and intriguing, clinging to every dull red brick and twist of ivy. Here is the corner of the Peabody Museum that houses butterflies carefully named and organized by Vladimir Nabokov when he was not writing novels, listening to his memory speak. And here are ten thousand flowers made of glass, once perfect replicas, utterly irreplaceable, many shattered now due to the vibrations of the floor caused by one hundred years of passing tourists and students of botany. Not far from the Peabody Museum is the Jefferson Lab, built in the late 1800s without a single nail of Cold Iron, not, alas, to be the last refuge of fairies in the industrialized west, but so that iron would not interfere with the measurement of the tides of ether. As it happens, the builders had forgotten the ferrous nature of red bricks—I'm not sure if fairies would mind—but it does not affect any calculations. The lab is now a library.

There is an organ concert at midnight every Halloween; every winter, just before Christmas break, an orchestra performs Mozart's Requiem in Memorial Church. Every day fresh flowers are placed in the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Room in the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library.

Harvard students do not graduate with B.A.s or B.S.s; they graduate with A.B.s and S.B.s. They graduate with a peculiar symbol, twisted lines on a black oval called "Crow's Feet" on each breast, color-coded for the degree achieved. Jude and I both had pale blue feet for the master's degrees we had earned, more or less, during our three years there.

Each student, no matter how rich or powerful, is allotted four tickets to graduation exercises, and if the university discovers that you have sold even one of your tickets you face exclusion from the exercises, though it is permissible to give tickets away for free.

Jude gave me two of his tickets, since his parents were his only guests. I then had a ticket for my sister and brother, mother and grandmother, one for my father and one to spare. I told Jude I would give it to one of the graduating football players in exchange for sexual favors, or one of the Hindu Divinity School grads in exchange for good karma.

"Does that mean I get twice the usual sexual favors from you, or twice the usual good karma?" Jude asked as we waited in line at the Coop to pick up our graduation regalia.

"Which would you rather have?" I asked, looking up at him. He was having a growth spurt—his final, I hoped, because he was 5'8 then, six inches taller than I.

He whistled and admitted it was a hard call.

"If they were on an airplane together do you think our parents would recognize each other?" I asked him.

"Mine would certainly recognize your mother—you know, they do get newspapers at Wildwood. Probably not your dad."

"If you had to pick my father out of a line-up of other late forty-something black men with graying afros and dusty clothes would you be able to?" On the few occasions that Jude had been inside my house my father had never emerged from his bedroom.

"Certainly. He told me once that if I ever touched you he would take my hands as a trophy. You don't forget a moment like that, if you have as few of them as I do."

"Really? When?"

"After Beauty's funeral."

I remembered dimly that my father had disappeared for a bit while my mother, sister, and brother sobbed in the funereal limousine. We thought he was tired of crying in front of us and wanted to do so privately for a little while.

"Your hands as a trophy? How macabre!" I could easily imagine them, however, taxidermied into a permanent attitude of supplication, holding down papers on my father's desk with his three-holed torus bean bag, model atoms, model worlds, and crystal dodecahedrons.

"It was rather disturbing, and so weird. I mean, we always thought that your dad was totally uninterested in what we were up to, but he somehow intuited my interest in you just from seeing me at the funeral. That's some kind of genius."

"He's practically an idiot savant," I growled, but then we were forced to drop the subject by our arrival at the front of the line.

Later, walking home through the crowded streets of Cambridge, he asked me if there was any chance that my father would not be going. A chance, certainly. Charmed had calculated it for me the last time we spoke on the phone.

"I'd put it at 88%. Strange says 92%, but he's biased; Dad always embarrasses him on planes."

"Why 88?" I had to ask.

"Ah, well, what is the probability that Father Dearest wants to leave the house?"

"None."

"Not quite none. Some part of him wants to leave the house once in a while; he won't sell the Lincoln, and he stares out the window now and then. So I'd put it at one percent.

"Also, we know that Mater will give him all kinds of hell if he doesn't go. He doesn't like it when she makes her anger known, so a little bit of him—say four percent—wants to go to avoid trouble.

“Three percent of his little mind wants to pick up the honorary doctorate that Harvard’s offered, maybe a little less, but not much. He’s not happy with his work these days, but he’s even less happy with its reception.

“I multiplied the improbabilities, but Strange added them up. Funny, huh?”

“That sounds awfully inexact to me,” I admitted.

“What can I say?” Charmed said cheerfully. “Emotional geometry and calculus are hard beyond belief, because nothing’s very quantifiable. How much do I love programming? How much do I love freedom? How much do I love Strange? I can assign values, love of programming equals X, love of Strange equals Y, and set up equations, $10X = Y$, for instance, rather easily. Love of freedom, Z, is actually a set of loves, though, and all of them vary with time, certainly, and other factors, potentially. I could theoretically define them all, and graph them all, in four dimensions, at the very least, if not more, take derivatives, but in the end, it would all be useless. But emotional algebra, well—just think of it all as back-of-the-envelope solutions, and that’s that. Dad’s probably not coming, which is just as well, since you don’t want him to come.”

“Did I say that?”

“No, but you hate his guts. Duh.”

“Charmed, I think you’ve been talking to your peers a touch much. ‘Duh’?”

“It’s a useful word. There really is no exact synonym in the English language, and you can use it all the time.”

“You can.”

“You can too! Actually, it should have been the last word of your thesis.”

I had to laugh at that. I was plagued throughout the writing with a suspicion that the whole thing was entirely pointless. Against all logic and my plans I wound up writing about Lewis Carroll. Writing about wordplay was already passé by the time I began my master’s thesis, but it was still interesting to me, at least until I finished the introduction. After that I was plagued by the conviction that everything I had to say had already been said, and I just hadn’t found the article or book that said it. After reading *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* a few hundred times my every thought seemed as obvious as a sheep knitting in a rowboat or as hopelessly inexplicable as the similarities between ravens and writing desks. I mostly wrote the obvious things, and Charmed’s last word would have worked well as a concluding paragraph.

“Point,” I conceded. “Maybe you should be a linguist instead of a programmer.”

“Same difference,” she laughed. “Beauty was and Strange is a genius of a field of knowledge. There’s nothing he doesn’t know about politics, but his understanding does not extend beyond the applications of political thought in other fields. But your talent is for understanding the way individual

languages work, not just grammar rules and vocabulary, but evolution of the vocabulary, the line of thinking that created the rules. I think the same way, which is why I am such a superb hacker.”

“And here I thought all you did was sit around your room looking at porn!”

“Hardly,” Charmed giggled. “Though I have had a lot more time to think since I left Islington. And I’ve started taking a lot of Ritalin.”

“What psychiatrist was stupid enough to believe that you have attention deficit disorder?”

“There isn’t one, at least not that I know of. I know a rather corrupt young pharmacist who hooks me up.”

“Charmed Alexis Aiken! Drug abuse? That’s so unlike you.”

“Ritalin abuse is entirely like me, Truth Ananda Aiken, as you ought to know quite well. Speaking of which, I ought to take some more and get back to work.”

“You aren’t snorting it, I hope?”

“Of course not. If something happens to this little brain I’ll have to turn to prostitution, or modeling. That won’t do.”

“You’re too short to be a model.”

“I could model clothing in a catalogue geared entirely to dwarfs. Bye!”

“Bye.”

Charmed amuses the hell out of me.

After Jude and I got back to our dorm, we hung our gowns in the closet and separated for a few hours. He wanted to check on hotel reservations for family members and I wanted to visit Elijah. I stopped by McLean’s at least once a week to bring Eli books and the occasional dirty magazine, but Jude came almost never. Jude believed that Eli hadn’t gone mad at all, or was even depressed—he just wanted to avoid the unpleasant trappings of growing up. And, in fact, of all my friends, Eli had changed the least since we were young. I would aver, however, that Eli had always been mad, always a little depressed, and never very interested in maturing past adolescence. Eli was always the smartest of my friends.

Jude met me at the bus stop after my visit and suggested dinner out. We walked close together in the gathering dark, almost touching, wandering around the Square, watching other people walk alone or in pairs. Cambridge at that time contained more single people per capita than any other area in the United States, even when adjusted for the unusually high student population. Graduation was a week away and already the hotels were filling with the happier families, and restaurant seats were difficult to find. Jude and I put our names on the list at our favorite Vietnamese restaurant and resolved to keep walking for an hour or two.

"Are you looking forward to it?" I asked quietly as we walked down Mount Auburn. Jude and I are not given to public displays of affection but a month before on this very street we kissed, very briefly. It was an odd day. We were going to lunch with my thesis advisor upon the announcement of my receipt of Summa Cum Laude honors, and turned into the street just as some firemen loosed the water from a hydrant. It was May; the Bradford pears were losing their petals, and the sky was a most remarkable azure. There was something about that moment, the blue sky, the water blood red with rust, the falling petals, that stilled my heart, and Jude's too. In the pale orange light of street lamps it seemed an avenue like any other, too bright and too dark by turns.

"Not particularly," Jude shrugged. "I hate pomp and circumstance."

"Concept or tune?"

"Both."

"Ah," I sighed. "You're in trouble."

"And you?"

"I'm always in trouble of one sort or another."

"Are you looking forward to graduation?"

"Sort of," I had to admit. "I'm ready to leave."

I didn't have to look up to know he was smiling.

"We're moving three fourths of a mile away, and you'll still be studying at Harvard."

"I don't study," I said irritably. "I just read and write. Which, when it comes down to it, I could do anywhere."

"Ah, look," Jude said, suddenly transfixed, as we approached the center of the Square. "The Fireater."

Of the various freaks that haunt Harvard Square the Fireater is the most physically impressive. He wears stilts, so he's twenty feet tall, with red and black striped satin pants that seem to bend in odd places. He wears a tall hat too, which does not fall off his head even when he tilts waaaaaaaaaay back so that he can eat fire, and breathe it back. He's dark as charcoal and his teeth are white—the latter is perhaps not surprising, given that fire purifies.

He is not a constant denizen of the Square, he comes and goes, and most of the time he is alone. This time, however, he brought a friend.

She was, I think, eighteen and a half feet tall, or a little shorter; her pants were white and blue, and she wore a wedding veil. They were not eating fire together but dancing, to a tune being played a block away by another street performer, with almost supernatural grace. A foxtrot.

"Fantastic," Jude breathed, and he threw down a five he could not really afford into the Fireater's oilcan, already paved with change. We watched for a while longer, then moved on.

We watched Roy, a prestidigitator who's famous in the neighborhood for his rude patter, and we listened, with a vast crowd, to Not Quite the Beatles But play "Penny Lane." We almost missed the Mistress of the Shakespearean Tarot, tucked, as she was, in the alcove in front of the Coop, but she saw us.

"How now, fair spirit?" she called. "Wither wander thee?"

"Over hill, over dale, through brush and briar," I replied, almost without thinking. "Over park, over pale, through flood and fire. We do wander everywhere, quicker than the moon's sphere, and we serve the fairy queen, to dew her orbs upon the green."

She cackled at me, and beckoned, so Jude and I joined her. She was sitting cross-legged on a wool blanket, and lying before her was a square of silk, an unlit candle, an empty jar and a pack of cards. I brought her a sandwich once a week, and she taught me how to read Tarot cards.

"Would you like to know your future, bright spirit?" she asked me.

"What will it cost? A pound of flesh?"

"How many florins does Claudius give Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for their voyage south?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "If it happens, it happens offstage."

"It happens, alright. Shuffle the deck." She did not hand them to me; she made me pick them up. It was an old deck with a pattern of red and white roses—for the history plays?—on the back. Each of the cards was painted with a scene from Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet were The Lovers, Iago was The Devil, Ophelia was the image of Strength. The cards were all marked. I Charlier-shuffled the deck three times and gave it back to her.

"My question is—" I began, but she stopped me with a hand, then commenced to lay out a Celtic cross.

"Ah, the questioner is The Fool. No surprise there," she said cheerfully, showing the card to me and Jude.

"Is that a scene from *Lear*?" asked Jude.

"Yes," the Mistress and I both said. A terrible storm and a laughing jester, carrying a lantern. Strangely, Lear himself was nowhere in sight.

"Distant past: The Star, reversed. Recent past: The Tower, reversed. Near future: Death. Distant Future: The Hierophant, reversed."

"Wait," Jude said. "This can't be right. What about the Minor Arcana? Aren't there more Minor Arcana cards than Major Arcana?"

The Mistress laughed. She pointed at Jude with her chin and said to me, "He's wise enough to play the fool." She continued to lay down cards.

"The questioner: The Moon. Outer landscape: The Empress, reversed. Inner Landscape: The Devil. Do you want to know your ultimate destiny?"

"What about you, Jude? Do you want to see my ultimate destiny?"

"Everyone has the same ultimate destiny." For a moment he sounded rather like me.

"Nonsense. We've already seen the Death card. Aren't you curious?"

"Justice," said the Mistress as she laid down the last card.

"Good night, sweet lady," I said, and I handed her ten dollars. She smiled crookedly and said, "I could be bounded in a walnut shell and call myself a king of infinite space were it not that I have bad dreams."

"What exactly is that supposed to mean? I mean, what was the point?" Jude asked as I drew him away, walking towards our dinner.

"It's a warning," I sighed. I was a touch disappointed in Jude; he had taught me to count cards himself a long time ago. I thought he would realize that I had shuffled the deck, and the Mistress only laid out the cards. He hadn't, or had not realized what I was trying to tell him. In theory, Tarot cards evoke the archtypes that float in our collective unconscious. They did not, apparently, speak to Jude.

Far behind us now I could hear the Mistress declaiming the final speech from *A Midsummer's Night Dream*.

I was careful to be kind and pleasant during dinner at Pho Pasteur, still the best Vietnamese restaurant in Harvard Square. The stress of preparing for graduation had made me the slightest bit snappish, but one quiet dinner seemed within my capabilities. Much later that evening on a bus headed south, I thought about Jude's discomfort with the fortune teller. It was unusual for him to reveal discomfort overtly, and rare for him to be so impolite. He thought the Mistress was insane, though I disagreed. He admitted to a fascination with the cards.

"I wonder who picked out the scenes for each illustration," he mused, lying on his back, damp sheets modestly swirled around his waist. Our dorm was not air conditioned, and the air was stifling. It was almost too hot for sex.

"I don't know," I admitted, staring at the ceiling, planning my escape. "I've done a little research, but no one knows where and when the cards were published, or who made them."

"A lot to choose from," he yawned, turning over, exposing shoulder blades exquisitely curved as new wings. "Lots of lovers in Shakespeare, lots of fools."

"Yes. There are a lot of lovers in Shakespeare's work, and a lot of fools."

He fell asleep then, and I left.

Key VI
The Lovers

Divinatory Meanings: Love. Desire. The Merging of Opposites.
Reversed: Difficulties. Opposition. The Need to Rebel.

On the evening of my fifteenth birthday Jude gave me a set of silk sheets, hand-dyed to a delicate pale brown in his lab in January, though my birthday was on the Ides of March. We celebrated alone on the floor of his room, which we used primarily as a study. We kept two desks there, two bookcases, two chairs, an electric teapot, and an empty cube refrigerator. We slept in my room next door, which was barely large enough to fit our beds, nestled close together and covered by a single quilt. It was a funny arrangement: not quite a suite, since there was no kitchen, no bathroom, but almost; like a newlywed's apartment in an alternate universe without food and its attendant complexities.

"They're very nice," I told him, stroking the top-sheet lightly with my left hand. The right was still slightly smeared with frosting. He had bought a cake for me at Barsimian's, but we had no forks or spoons. I didn't mind, though it bothered him terribly. "A lovely shade. Was your intent protective coloring?"

"No," he responded slowly, remembering again that his girlfriend was black. That such a thing could slip his mind amused me greatly. "I dyed the sheets to match the tea you spill in bed, though it's a thought."

"We could trace veins on it with blue highlighter. If I shaved my head and closed my eyes it would be a *trompe l'oeil*."

"Would you let me photograph you naked?"

"Would you let me cut off my hair?"

"Of course, if that's what you wanted," he said simply, playing with one of my blown-out candles. They were the aggravating, relighting kind, which I had always felt made wishing pointless, but Jude claimed conveyed infinite wishes. We both knew that water would put them out. "How could I possibly stop you?"

I stood up and shook the crumbs from my dress. I had taken to wearing long dresses in gray and black, with very high collars and three-quarter sleeves. Jude thought they looked "curiously erotic." Like a habit on a young nun. I thought they looked like photographic negatives of the kind of dresses Beauty favored, always cream or white, and quite unlike my mother's beloved reds.

"You could wrestle the scissors out of my hand. You're stronger than me, you know," I said, looking for scissors.

"Physically, maybe."

"Almost certainly. I'm a creampuff."

"I'm an éclair."

"You're disgusting. Where are your scissors?"

"Why would I have scissors?"

I pantomimed slitting my throat.

"Scientists do not commit suicide by cutting their throats," he reminded me gently. "Are you really going to cut your hair?"

"I'm still deciding." Actually, I was reading the papers on his desk. There were printouts from his lab activities, problem sets, postcards from other ex-performers from the Islington Circus. Isabella was in Italy, Juliet in Prague, Eli was a few miles away at McLeans, which he called "the best resort cum mental hospital in the world". Everyone else from our year had stayed in Nashville, which was almost certainly the best choice. Though Jude and I enjoyed each other's company, we sometimes tired of each other, but when we were apart we were alone.

"I do love your hair the way it is," Jude said rather wistfully, still sitting on the floor.

"I love your hair the way it is. Gentlewomen prefer blonds."

"Sometimes I think you don't actually like me."

"You think that I only want you for your body?" I demanded without turning around. "Don't be asinine, Jude."

"No, that's not what I mean." He was silent for a long time. Contemplative. I continued to read his mail.

"You've been acting sort of strange lately. Quiet. Anxious. You have bad dreams and won't tell me about them."

"You don't want to know about my bad dreams."

"I do, actually. I'm very curious." He paused. "I'm worried."

"Don't be. Bad dreams are not particularly dangerous."

"I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams."

I turned around, amazed. Jude was still sitting cross-legged on the floor by the ruins of my birthday cake, hands folded neatly in his denim lap, staring up at me with huge gray eyes.

"I'm impressed, Jude. Did you memorize that for this occasion?"

"I saw it written on your wrist a few days ago. It looked significant."

"Did you find the reference?"

"*Hamlet*, Act II, Scene II."

"Do you really think I don't like you?"

"I don't know."

"I love you, I think. I definitely like you."

"You don't trust me."

"I sleep with you."

"But you won't tell me about your nightmares."

"I won't tell you lots of things."

"Is that supposed to comfort me?"

"It should."

He stood, snatched the sheets almost violently, and left the room. I put down the postcard from Juliet, tidied his desk, threw the remains of the cake into the trash, and followed Jude into the bedroom. He had locked the door, but not used the deadbolt. He was changing the sheets.

"So the dream begins with me as Robin, or maybe Batgirl, but I think Robin. Batman and I are trying to foil some criminal. It's very complex—lots of helicopters and jets that are undetectable with radar. I think our enemy is the Penguin."

"Do you often dream about comic books?" he asks. Now he refuses to look at me, concentrating instead on hospital corners, which are tough with silk, because it slides.

"No. It's a recent phenomenon. Since we've started fucking, actually. Anyway, we're trying to pull off this daring rescue attempt—for some reason the Penguin's trying to kill some elementary school children. Or maybe not. Maybe the elementary school just happens to be next door to his mansion. I think it was the latter. Anyway, so we're trying to stop him, or Batman is, and we fail. The Penguin—or was it the Joker?—gets away, laughing, in his helicopter, and some people in the school are screaming. I head for the school—I'm not sure what happened, exactly, I think it was an experiment with some new weapon—but Batman runs away. Towards the street. He hops in a cab and tries to take off, but the traffic is terrible, so I catch up to him. I tell him he has to see what his negligence has done, and I drag him off to the school. The building is full of a horrible, multi-colored liquid. A very viscous liquid."

"Like blood?"

"No. Mostly clear, but with a few shots of bright color. Somehow I know that what we're looking at is liquefied children, so I reach a hand down into the goop in wave it in Batman's face."

Jude looks suitably stunned, so I continue: "Then the dream backs up. I watch the whole thing again in reverse, but very quickly. Then I have to watch the whole thing again, except this time I'm Batman, and the whole time I know what's coming. I know I'll fail. I know all the children will die. I know I will run from the horror, and my sidekick will wave a handful of liquefied child in my face, and I will feel terrible.

"Does that make you feel better? Do you feel more confident now that I love you?"

"Do you?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you hate me."

"Jude." Dramatic sigh.

"You think I'm dating the wrong Aiken."

"Charmed is almost certainly single, Jude, and I'm sure she'd love to be fucking a big, strong fifteen-year-old like yourself. She's what, twelve? And Strange is surely entering his prime."

"You know that's not what I mean."

"How would you know what I know? How can you presume?"

"Truth—"

"Shut up!"

"Can't you listen to me for five fucking seconds?"

I clamped my hands over my ears and stalked over to the window. If I had been thinking I would have gone to the door. Nothing was happening outside. A half moon shone on dead grass and old houses. A bicycle passed. Jude grabbed me by the wrists, hard, and forced my arms across my chest.

"You are not your sister," he hissed in my ear. "You are not responsible for her death."

"I know that, you fucking bastard, leave me alone."

"You can't keep torturing yourself."

"You're torturing me."

He let me go, and I slapped him. Then I sat down on the bed and cried.

"Go away," I said, when I heard him approach.

"Never."

"Why won't you leave me alone?"

"Because I love you."

"So?"

"Truth." He sighed, exhausted. "Can we talk about this in the morning?"

I told him that I'd be perfectly happy never to talk again. He took that as a yes and turned out the light.

Key VII
The Chariot
Divinatory Meanings: Will. Power. Force of Character.
Reversed: Weakening Will. Doubt.

For Jude's fourteenth birthday, two days before Christmas, my friends decided to go to town. Eli had, against all probability and logic, wrangled a hardship license from the Department of Transportation, and Zeffy, another former Islingtonite, had altered it to bestow full driving rights on its carrier. So we piled into a Volvo station wagon bought for two hundred dollars from Eli's older brother, all my lovely lunatics, Julie, Iz, Eli, Jude and I, to the Wildhorse Saloon, where all our crazy double-talk failed to convince the bouncers that we were admissible. Instead, we wound up getting take out from Taco Bell, it being the only place that we could really afford, since our allowances were more appropriate to fourteen year olds than college freshmen, then we went to Centennial Park for a picnic.

I've heard it said by my more worldly friends that Centennial Park is an atrocity, a theme park for small-minded Southern classicists, with its Parthenon, built to scale but on a tiny hill, with none of the glorious decay of its original. Not so, I say, not so. There are more beautiful places on earth, I guess—the Black Hills of North Dakota, Victoria Falls, the Mediterranean Sea, when the water is lavender, lapping the black beaches of Thera—and even more beautiful places in Nashville, depending on what you like. I love Fort Negley almost as much as Centennial, and have spent much time there, clambering over the honeysuckle-choked remains of the fort. The closest I have ever been to God was in the hills overlooking Radnor Lake. Centennial, however, is a most special place. Most special. Though Nashville is undeniably the buckle of the Bible belt it houses the largest statue of a goddess in the world, and despite Nashville's troubled past, the statue is the image of Athena, goddess of truth, justice, and wisdom. At night, when the klieg lights are on, lighting the Parthenon all sides, occasionally a barn owl or a great horned owl throws its shadow on the building, sixty feet across, and the rightness of the Parthenon being where it is, between First Amendment Hill and the outdoor theatre that shows movies in June and Shakespeare in August, knocks on your bones.

So to celebrate Jude's birthday we went there, and spread our picnic in the sunken garden.

"Don't burn yourselves," Jude said as we lit the candles on his cake. The Islington chef made it just for him—red velvet with cream cheese frosting, because I liked the look of blood red cake, and I was the one who requested it. They probably would not have made it for my birthday. They thought I was a little monster when I went there, compared to Beauty, who was not at all a picky eater, but given that Beauty had just died, maybe they would have made one for me anyway. Charmed was even worse than I was, her compulsive reading of online medical sources pulling her towards an organic vegan lifestyle when I was just a vegetarian, and not a particularly obsessive one at that. Charmed, for instance, would never have eaten at Taco Bell.

I loved Taco Bell then, though. I licked the last bits of cheese off my fingers as I watched candlelight play with Jude's features, and Eli's, and the girls. I thought we looked so old that night. We had dressed, more or less, to mock Jude. Eli was in khakis and a jacket, though it was December, Iz, Julie and I in white dresses under our coats. We wanted to find white tennis dresses—we had *The Great Gatsby* in mind—but all we could manage were pretty white vintage dresses, which fit us well, tiny as we were.

While we were singing to Jude a police car rolled to the corner and stopped. We stopped too. He seemed to us very old, though he was probably only twenty.

"I know that isn't a fire," he said, approaching, staring down at us. We stared back.

"Candles, actually," Eli said. "They'll be gone when he makes a wish."

"Wish then," said the cop, and we all stared at Jude. He stared back, closed his eyes, and blew hard.

"Ah," said the officer. "Alright. You kids know the park closes at eleven?"

"Yessir," we said, as he looked us over more carefully with a flashlight, on low.

"Your parents know y'all are out here?" he asked.

We yessired, then waited.

"How many candles are there on that cake?"

Jude answered truthfully, "Fourteen."

"Fourteen," the officer repeated. "Not a bad year. If you kids promise not to light any more fires you can stay after eleven, but curfew starts at twelve, so mind you head on home."

"Yessir, yessir. Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome," he said, tipped a non-existent hat, then trotted off into the darkness.

Eli cut the cake and handed around slices, saying, "Now's the part where we say, 'What did you wish?'"

"And I say," Jude said, "'If I tell you it won't come true.'"

"Then we wheedle," I said, and Iz and Julie wheedled, "Please, please, please—"

"Then I say something crude," Eli said, and we all laughed.

"It's good to be back," Jude said. Eli smiled a red smile at him and kissed him on the cheek.

"It's good to see you, birthday boy. You were a better roommate than the spaz I share a room with now."

"Coffee?" Julie offered, pouring some from one of several thermoses and passing it around.

"And I always thought you were psycho-single material, Eli," Iz teased. "What were they thinking, giving you a roommate?"

"Yahweh knows," he shrugged. "Do you have singles?"

"Of course," everyone scoffed, though Jude and I had just resolved that next year, no matter what, we would be sharing a room.

“Solitude for you all and compatriotism for me. What do you think the housing committee was thinking?”

“Maybe the housing office knew that if you didn’t have someone to listen to your epigrams you’d be lecturing your plants?” I suggested.

He rolled his eyes. “I already lecture my plants. It’s good for them.”

I laughed, then shivered. Though Nashville in winter rarely rivals Boston for cold, it was a chilly night. A very bad night for imitation Gatsby—my legs were freezing. As soon as we finished eating we resolved to take a constitutional, me on Jude’s arm, Iz and Julie bookending Eli. Round about the Parthenon, down into then out of the sunken garden, then to the edge of the frozen lake.

“Makes me think of the patron saint of Islington,” Eli said, tapping the surface of the lake. It was frozen solid. When we were younger we used to crack the ice for the sound it made, an odd, singing cry.

“Salinger?” Julie asked. “I wonder if he ever found out where the ducks go in winter.”

“He probably knew when he wrote it,” Julie said.

“Certainly. Writers do know everything, after all,” Eli said, stepping onto the ice. He stood perhaps a foot from the edge then turned away from us, looking at the stars.

“Elijah!” Jude’s voice was sharper than I had heard it in some time, indeed, since the last time we had seen Eli.

“Judy, honey, relax.” The water was only four feet deep at that point, and the ice bore his weight. “A shame no one has ice skates.”

The we heard it, the scream of breaking ice. Jude lunged, grabbed Eli by the collar, and dragged him back to shore, pulling both of them onto the ground. Only Eli’s shoes were damp.

“You know, Judith, sometimes a man wants to fall,” he said, sounding mildly annoyed. In fact, his face was flushed, and something that looked a lot like sweat dampened his brow. “The next time you want to roll around on the ground with me just say so.”

“You are the most aggravating asshole I’ve ever met,” Jude said mildly, standing, dusting himself off. “Next time I’ll let you fall.”

“Perfect,” said Eli, staring up at us girls. “Want to play hide and seek?”

It was, it had always been, my favorite game.

We argued a long time about boundaries. The park was huge, and no one had a flashlight. We decided to limit the field to the area surrounded by Centennial Lane, the one way street that surrounded the park. Because it was his birthday, Jude was It.

“Always the It boy,” Julie said, fluffing his hair. “Come find us, tiger.”

Jude rolled his eyes and began counting, face against the magnolia tree we were using as base. The rest of us scattered.

Eli and I fetched up by the little cave in the sunken garden. It is walled off now, probably because of bad kids like us, and we argued quietly about the spot.

“It’ll be the first place he looks,” I whispered. “It’s too obvious.”

“He won’t check it for that very reason.”

“He’ll assume that we’ll assume that he won’t check, because it’s too obvious.”

“This could go on ad infinitum. Let’s hide someplace else.”

“Hiding in pairs is always a bad idea,” I said, wondering where Jude was in his count. Julie and Iz, despite their white dresses and the white legs flashing underneath had melted into the shadows.

“You know, it’s nighttime at Centennial Park. Why hide at all?” Eli climbed up the long low stairs out of the garden. “Hey Jude!” he screamed, then he ran.

Jude appeared, pelting through the darkness, his dark coat billowing behind him. Iz and Julie also appeared, clearly visible, heading for base while Jude was distracted. I remembered, then, that our rules used to be different. We had peculiar policies defining asylum areas, and the conversion of captured hiders to seekers with limited powers. A little older, we better understood the essence of the game—it is best when you merely hide, or seek, and race towards base, heart beating in your throat as your feet hit the ground.

That was the last time my friends were all together. The next winter Iz was in Italy, and the next Eli’s family celebrated at McLean’s. He had been diagnosed with severe depression, though I’ve always thought that Eli had just had enough of the real world. But that evening at Centennial Park is how I like to remember us, breathing the clean, cold air, illuminated only by the light reflected from the sandstone of the Parthenon, flying towards safety.

Key VIII

Strength

Divinatory Meanings: Strength of character. Gentle persuasion.

Reversed: A need to speak more directly. Feelings of weakness.

I haunted Million Year Picnic on Thursday afternoons, between my seminar on Post-Colonialism and a lecture on the renaissance in Florence, reading comic books and staring at comic book lovers. Jude had turned me on to the scene, arguing that there was a natural alliance between comic book lovers and prodigies: both were groups composed of largely solitary individuals who were generally immature, poorly socialized, and horribly asocial, frequently with serious hygiene problems. Furthermore, he was convinced that comic books were the most innovative form of literary culture in America. I was less sure of that, having flipped through far too many superhero comics during my hour long Thursday afternoon loaf. However, one comic book captured my attention; though it was a limited edition series, I became quite addicted to *Death*.

I loved reading about her. Death resembled a cute, likable gothette, and she was the Fate that cut the strings. Her looks were modeled on a waitress named Cinnamon in a coffee shop somewhere. It said so in the introduction to the first *Death* collection, *The Time of Your Life*. All her other fans were creepy comic book boys, a fact which never surprised me, but it certainly disappointed me a bit.

One cold February afternoon, when the sky had the texture of hammered pewter and the ground retained only the dirtiest piles of snow, since there was no new *Death* the owner, a tall, slim, nice-smelling man named George, suggested that I give *The Crow* a try. I had a fondness for psychopomps, so I bought it and brought it to my History lecture. It was strangely fulfilling to read a comic book tucked in the pages of my notebook. Pleasantly archaic.

The story was not that great, though some of the dialogue was much better than one can usually find in a comic book. However, while Professor Manchester was explaining the significance of Mercury's appearance in the far left corner of Botticelli's *Primavera*, a painting of which I was not at the time fond, I became completely entranced by a series of illustrations at the very end of my comic book, all of which were posters based on the series. Most of them simply showed the unfortunate revenant, Eric Draven, whose soul was brought back from the dead by the titular crow. A few, however, included a few lines of poetry. Most, oddly enough, came from the work of Arthur Rimbaud. One was a simple landscape, a graveyard, gentled by snow, with a large black bird watching the still scene from a leafless tree. It bore a legend I never would have expected: *Ou sont les neiges? Ou sont les neiges d'antan?*

I felt my lower lip quiver. Professor Manchester was saying that "The flowers emerging from her mouth not only *explain* Zephyr's inability to understand her cries, thus justifying the abduction, but link her with the goddess Flora, whom she will become." I shoved my notebook, my pens, and *The Crow* as quickly as I could into my backpack and sped off towards the bathroom.

The restrooms in the Science Center are not good for crying. Electric eyes peer into every nook and cranny, flushing toilets, running water, turning hand dryers on and off. The stalls are all too small, and it is distracting to hear a toilet flush and flush when you're just sitting there, having a mental breakdown. I wanted to go back to Greenough Hall, to my cozy little bedroom, fully stocked with high-quality Kleenex and nearly soundproof walls. I could call Isabella and weep. But I could not walk through Harvard Yard with a tear-streaked face. The university thought I was unstable enough as it was.

I remembered hearing about the steam tunnels, which were once used to transport steam, I suppose, from the Science Center to the outer reaches of campus, by the river, for some unimaginable reason. According to popular belief, the university never sealed off the steam tunnels; supposedly, in the event of a major emergency at Harvard Yard, any luminaries on campus would be spirited safely away, underground. If they did exist, they would certainly come in handy; this was the third time since freshman week that I'd left a class in tears.

If the tunnels did exist they had to be nearby; the restrooms were in the basement, where they kept useless but aesthetically interesting scientific instruments of the sort that fascinate my father in dusty cases and the university print shop. The hallways were largely deserted, so I commenced my search.

I tried any number of light gray doors, the same color as the lumpy cement walls. The Science Center is one of the relatively few buildings on campus that looks like it was built in the 1970s. However, I had very little success. I did find a likely looking door in a shadowy alcove, and had just started picking the lock when two university police officers turned up, wondering what I was doing.

"I'm trying to get into this lab," I said, kicking the door once, furiously. "It's locked."

"What makes you think it's a lab, young miss?" said the older cop. He had the faintest hint of a brogue; definitely Southie, very old school. Bad news for me.

"My friend said he was in the lab at the end of the hall on the first floor," I said, composing wildly. Was Jude's lab at the end of a hallway on the first floor? I thought so. He said something about the unpleasantness of hearing hundreds of people wandering out of the auditoriums every hour, on the hour, when he was trying to titrate acids that demanded serious attention.

"What's your friend's name?" asked the guard.

"Jude Whitelaw."

"What lab's he supposed to be in?"

I shrugged. "A chem lab on the first floor."

"Well, little miss," he said, leaning down to talk into my face. I became horribly conscious of how strange I looked: a wet-faced black fifteen year old with a streak of white hair and a guilty expression. I looked like a freak. "This is not the first floor. This is the basement. And that door says authorized personnel only. So if your 'friend' is not in Chem Lab 1 you're in a lot of trouble."

"I'm just *lost*," I sniffled, then I started crying again. The HUPD cops exchanged glances, and I cried harder. This was not intentional. In fact, I could not stop.

The cops marched me upstairs with me between them, though the younger one was kind enough to hand me a handkerchief. I had him pegged as South Boston too—he looked it, with dark hair and light blue eyes—but he was actually from New York. I wondered what brought him to Cambridge but I didn't ask.

The chemistry lab, when we arrived, was surprisingly loud. A few graduate students were sipping ethanol from beakers, talking and listening to *They Might Be Giants*. Jude was huddled in a corner, looking desperately small as he scribbled in a much abused lab book.

"Oh, god. Has something happened?" he said, jumping to his feet. I found this hysterically funny; I had never actually seen anyone spring from a sitting position to his feet before, but Jude did it, and fast. I started to laugh, though I was still crying.

"You Jude Whitelaw?"

"Yes."

"We found her trying to break into one of the restricted areas downstairs," said the cop from the Bronx. "She said she was looking for you."

Jude's eyebrows disappeared under messy blond bangs as he tried to imagine what I had been doing. "She's never been here before."

"But you know her?" said the older cop.

"She's my best friend," Jude said, shutting his notebook, throwing it into his bag. "It's okay. I'll take care of her."

This was the cause of more giggles in the midst of my tears. The guards decided they had had enough of me. They shuffled off without even telling me not to get lost in the basement again. Jude slipped an arm around my waist, just underneath my backpack, and led me out a back door into the early mid-winter dusk.

"I miss the proper snow," Jude said, politely ignoring the fact that I was still sniffling. "I hate these little crust balls." Then, in an effort to amuse me, he quoted Villon, in translation: "Where are the snows? Where are the snows of yesteryear?"

"Nowhere," I whispered sadly. "Nowhere at all."

"Don't be ridiculous. They're in the ground, in the air, in the oceans. Villon didn't know about evaporation but you certainly do," he said gently as we walked to our dorm.

"Water is not snow." I was indignant. "The snows of yesteryear do not currently exist."

"They exist in memory, though, right?" he said.

"I suppose."

"Well then. Problem solved. Someone should tell Villon's ghost, if he has one."

"I wonder. He was a good Catholic, I think, so he probably shouldn't."

"Well, you would know." We had taken a back way without discussing it, to avoid the students now wandering in and out of the Yard. I was more conscious of his hand around my waist than I wanted to be, but we walked in companionable silence.

"Want to come to my room?" he asked, watching our feet. He always looked down when we walked together, in order to match our strides. Until recently I had been much taller than he. "We can make hot chocolate."

"Sure," I said. "I don't want to go to Annenberg tonight."

"Granola and hot chocolate will probably be better than whatever they're serving at the dining halls."

So we had granola and hot chocolate for dinner, which a hearty splash of Frangelico in each of our mugs. It is a measure of our temperance that half a cup of hazelnut liqueur was enough to get us tipsy. Of course, it was hard to convince anyone to buy us alcohol at school. The other residents of Greenough were all freshmen, and though a few had fake i.d.s, none were willing to risk arrest to give a fifteen year old liquor. Jude had filched this bottle at a math department tea, where alcohol was always served, at tea time on Fridays.

We were sitting on his bed, because he only had one chair, and it was not particularly comfortable. We were listening to the Kronos Quartet. We had been discussing the difference between *kronos* and *kairos* when the conversation quietly died along with the music.

"You know, Jude," I said, feeling warm and almost mellow, "I'm sorry I've been such a lunatic lately."

"Doesn't bother me," he said. "Everyone's crazy."

"Impossible. Some people have to be sane. You are, reasonably."

"Nah," he said, blushing. "Not lately."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, you know. Periblepsis."

"Periblepsis!" I yelled, shocked, confused. Jude really was the sanest of my friends, and I could not bear for him to lose his mind.

"It means that I stare at something, for long periods of time," he said calmly, sagely, looking at his hands, wrapped around his mug.

"I know what periblepsis means. We had a cat named Periblepsis once, just before we got Titania. But do you have any other symptoms?"

"I have an *idée fixe*. And it's a strange one."

"What?"

"I don't think I can tell you."

“What?”

“You’ll get mad.”

I sighed dramatically, trying to imagine his newfound obsession. Frankly, though I had known Jude for most of my life, I could not imagine what it was. Actually, I could imagine any number of things it could be, but not with any real confidence. “Jude, I promise I won’t get mad.”

“Are you sure?”

“Certainly.”

“Alright then.” He breathed out, quick and forcefully, then took a deep breath.

“EversincewewenttothearboretumthatdayI’vebeenthinking—I want to touch your hair.”

“What?”

“You know, that day we went to the arboretum?”

“Yes?”

“And we rolled down the hill and you got all those leaves in your hair?”

I nodded. I remembered the day very well. Autumn reasserted itself quite randomly in early December, so Jude and I celebrated by taking the Orange Line all the way out to the Arnold Arboretum. We wandered around, ate cheese and tomato sandwiches, and rolled down steep hills into piles of leaves. The sky was a perfectly irrational azure.

“Well, I wanted to reach over and pull the leaves from your hair. But I couldn’t. Because I’m not the kind of guy who does that sort of thing, and we don’t have that kind of relationship.”

“Huh,” I said, a bit baffled. “I see.”

“Yeah,” he said. “That’s mostly it. I find myself . . . transfixed by your hair. And your eyes, sometimes. It’s so weird. I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Well, it’s no big deal. Touch it,” I said, untying the ribbon that kept it in its perpetual ponytail.

“Really?”

“Sure,” I said, turning my back to him. “Go ahead.”

For a long, awkward moment neither of us moved. I just stared at dark window at the foot of Jude’s bed, watching our frozen reflections. Then Jude leaned forward slowly, jerkily, like a toy winding down. I could see that his eyes were closed. He put both hands on my shoulders, then slid them to the nape of my neck. He paused, for a long while, then slipped his fingers into my hair. My hair is heavy; when he pulled his hands back a bit my hair ran through his fingers like black and white sand. He caught it up again and kissed a double handful of it. The whole time his eyes were shut.

“I love you,” he said faintly.

“That’s insane.”

He did not respond. He lifted my hair again and kissed the base of my skull, letting my hair fall against his face.

Key IX
The Hermit

Divinatory Meanings: Withdrawal. Acting alone. Seeking wisdom.
Reversed: Becoming more active in the world.

When I overheard my mother say (scream, actually, at my father) that she was taking Charmed, Strange and me to the end of the world, I thought, quite briefly, that she was developing a belated case of Mauchausen's Syndrome by proxy. Then I thought, ah! Bora Bora, Greenland, New Zealand! Perhaps we would see penguins at the southern tip of Africa, or the point far north where earth becomes tundra. The land ends everywhere earth encounters another element—mountain peaks are land's end, beaches rimmed with sand, black or white or in between.

After Beauty got sick my mother stopped traveling for several months, then, three months after Beauty died, mother announced our family excursion. I was pleased—I had learned more about Tennessee in those months than I really wanted to know, and if Tennessee is one thing, it is inland. Natural lakes are incredibly rare here, a geographical oddity, considering the number of rivers that carve the state, so there are no natural beaches of any size. Tennessee feels endless in every way.

But my mother did not take us to a tropical outpost, or even a truly distant beach. She rented a house near Finister, on the Oregon coast, a town so small and white that we Oglethorpe-Aikens doubled the minority population. The house itself was gorgeous, in a creepy, Victorian way; Strange haunted the widow's walk at dawn and dusk, thinking his unimaginable Strange thoughts, while Charmed reconstructed lost lives from the debris stuffed in the attic. My mother peered sadly at piles of data from the CDC and her lab in France, noting the rise and fall of various epidemics while she was mourning, and the apparently endless success of her enemy retro-virus, which was jumping from powerless minority to powerless minority in the U. S. and Western Europe, and preparing to wipe out entire nations in Africa.

"If you should find a cure for AIDS while you're out, please let me know," she said as I kissed her goodbye one rainy morning in June.

I almost said, 'Death cures all ills', once the standard response in our household. Instead I said, "If the cure for AIDS can be found on a wet beach with a disloyal golden retriever, I'll find it."

She smiled at me a little grimly, and drank more coffee. I half filled my thermos with milk and sugar, dumped on a lot of very dark decaf, then headed through the woods to the Carter house. I had never seen the Carters. I half suspected that they were all dead, and the house haunted by unusually responsible ghosts. Horace always looked healthy and well-fed (perhaps a little too well-fed, in fact), but no matter what time I came wandering by Horace was sitting, thoroughly depressed, in his doghouse. I had never learned to whistle so instead I softly called, "Magic time," and Horace would

wriggle his way under the fence, though a hole a small elephant could have used, and we would go down to Bonita Beach together to mope.

Bonita was not a popular beach. There was no sand, only rocks, and Charmed had plugged a large sign that said “Colored” by the path, which seemed to scare people off. I would draw starfish and anemones, collecting driftwood for an hour or two every morning, drinking my coffee, then Charmed and Strange would show up with their idea of a picnic lunch, rain or shine. At first I worried that they would not have a good time—there was no DSL cable at the house, so they could not enjoy their electronic social lives, which meant more to them than their Islington lives—but they kept themselves amused.

They had never enjoyed domestic responsibilities until that summer. With no Nana around to shop, and Mater nearly as inexperienced as we, we ate oddly but well in Oregon. We never had breakfast but often ate omelets for dinner, usually stuffed with peculiar vegetables my siblings picked out at the Farmer’s Market. We all developed an insatiable taste for fennel, and Charmed fell in love with Jerusalem artichokes. We ate a lot of goat cheese from a goat farm two miles from town, spread atop brioche and topped with pignoli. Some hippies on their way to Portland taught us to make chocolate silk pie from tofu, melted chocolate chips and graham cracker crumbs. We discovered *baba ganouch*.

So lunch on the beach was always surprising. On the day in question, when Horace and I were searching for a cure for AIDS in tide pools and caves, Charmed and Strange brought peanut butter and brown sugar sandwiches, Mirabelle plums, carrot coins and mint tea. I built a small fire out of driftwood, so pale we could hardly see the flames, but it was warm. We were fascinated by the weather; our Nashville summers were siesta hot, and it had been some time since we last summered anywhere other than our father’s house. We loved summer session at Islington—exactly like the other sessions, but the supervision was even more lax, and we could swim in the ecological study lake—but this was undeniably better.

We agreed, by silent consensus, not to discuss Beauty unless our mother made us, and that seemed unlikely. We were escaping Beauty in Oregon, where nothing should have reminded us of her, except, of course, ourselves. I was losing the march against sexual maturity—I had to buy new jeans that summer, the first in a long while, since I had not thought to bring along some of Beauty’s. Every day I looked more like my dead sister, and every day my living sister looked more like Beauty had once. Neither of us was actually quite as lovely as Beauty herself: I was a bit more skeletal, my eyes a little too big, distinctly weird-looking; Charmed did not have the Matrilineal Stripe, but, instead, two streaks flowing back from her temples, and her face was foxier—small and triangular. Clearly in a few years she would be a vixen, but for the short-term she was still our little Charmed particle, acting according to rules that did not apply to the rest of the universe.

Strange looked ordinary, a safe, sweet little black boy of the variety favored by sitcoms, the kind one can't imagine growing into a terrifying thug, like most other little black boys. And he was mostly quiet, so he did not often disconcert people the way Charmed and I did. We all knew that Strange's conception was an accident, and my sisters and I wondered exactly how much genetic material he shared with us. We were mildly anxious, during the pregnancy, about our father's reaction—would he emerge from his bedroom a proper father to his son, like a moth from a chrysalis? Would he demand a genetic test immediately and disown Strange? We were not certain which would be better; but either would be interesting to watch.

Of course, nothing happened. My father remained in his room, and Strange grew pleasant and only slightly peculiar, just strange enough to seem ordinary to casual observers.

In town, Strange even had a few admirers. They called him "Tommy" for the Who musical of the name, and watched Strange for hours at a time while he played pinball. There was an old "Star Wars" pinball machine in basement of Islington; nobody knows why. Strange was the only one who ever played it, and only once in a while. Fenister's pinball machine was in the center of the arcade, surrounded by ancient Mrs. PacMan machines and a new Area 51 that was missing one of the guns. Strange played while my mother, sister and I looked for books in the public library; Strange wrote out a list on the plane between Minneapolis and Portland, the procurement of which kept us busy all summer. Most of the books were available at the Portland Public Library, or the University of Oregon, or at Harvard, where my mother kept borrowing rights. If the libraries in question knew that we were appropriating most of the world's published texts on the birth of war for a six-year-old they may well have balked. Nevertheless, Strange was pacific. When someone else wanted a turn on Fenister's "Raiders of the Lost Ark" pinball machine Strange rejoined us the library, or played a game or two of Mrs. PacMan. Now and again he threw a game, because throwing a game is never a bad idea when you're the envy of the town's feisty, twelve-year-old pinball aristocracy. They liked Strange—Strange was a genuinely nice kid—but they envied him.

We think that's why they alerted Julius Deek to Strange's presence. We later found that Julius had been in Salem visiting his father for the summer but was sent back to his mother's for insubordination. Julius Deek had been the reigning monarch of Finister's pinball scene for three years at that point, since he was a nine-year-old of a size to compete with then twelve-year-olds, who were now the teenagers smoking on the pier and popping in occasionally to play the newest Mortal Kombat until they broke the machine.

Julius found us on the beach. This surprised me a little—I had not realized that anyone was paying attention to the daily ramblings of my siblings and me. Horace growled low in his throat when Julius approached, so softly I could not hear it over the steady sighs of the ocean. I felt the growl in my femur, since Horace was half flopped in my lap, hoping for sandwich crumbs.

"Didn't you see the sign?" Charmed asked. "The white beach is half a mile thataway."

"I want to talk to Tommy." The interloper stopped about twelve feet away from our fire. He was close enough to count the flame red pimples on his forehead—seven—close enough to see scars on his knuckles. Though he was staring directly at Strange, his nose was pointed at Charmed. I was intrigued. We did not have fights at Islington, per se. There were daily squabbles, of course, and occasionally, among the very young children in Form 1 and 0, disagreements rose beyond the level of discourse, but I had never actually seen a broken nose before. Or knuckles that were scarred by anything other than a very serious accident in the chemistry lab. But of course I did not ask.

"There are no Tommies here," I told the interloper. And Charmed added, "Go away."

"You're the one they call Tommy in town, right?"

Strange shrugged. "There are at least three Tommies in town."

"Stop joking around. I want to watch you play."

"You'll have to wait until Thursday, when our mother takes us to town."

"Oh, the big pinball wizard's afraid to go to town without his mommy?"

"The big pinball wizard is six years old, ignoramus, and town's seven miles away. It's not a matter of fear." Charmed was getting peevish. Her own inability to get in and out of town without a car was initially a major concern for Charmed. There were no bicycles at the house, and nowhere in town to buy them. Once Charmed learned how boring town was she stopped pestering my mother for a trip up to Portland to buy some.

"He can ride the crossbar on my bike. I'm a safe rider."

"What's the rush?" I asked. "Watch him Thursday."

"I want to see him play pinball now. Maybe I should play pinball with his little pinhead."

At that we could not help but laugh. Pinball with his little pinhead? Even Strange thought it was funny.

"What's so funny, pinhead? You think your skunkhead sisters can save you?"

We laughed some more, though the joke was unoriginal. Eli had been calling me Pepe le Pew for years.

"Actually," Charmed said, rather breathless, "I've always thought I looked more like a badger."

Then, without further warning, she launched herself at the interloper's knees. There was a sickening crack as he went over, straight like a tree. Charmed never paused. She scrambled around his squealing, prone form, pulling his arm with her. He did not resist, flopping on his stomach. Charmed pinned both arms behind him and offered Strange the interloper's ass to kick.

"Come on," she said. "How many opportunities like this will you have in life?"

"Did you dislocate his knees?" I asked, shocked and rather horrified.

"Probably. And though it's painful, it's not hard to fix. Strange? Come on and finish this."

"I'm not sure that's just, Charmed, or wise. What would I gain from kicking his ass?" Strange was frowning at the ocean, as if he would not sully his innocent mind with the spectacle of Charmed's ferocity.

"Well, look at it this way. If our little compatriot goes back to town and says, one of those Aiken bitches surprised me, man, I was just talking to 'em and she broke both my kneecaps, there's a chance that they'll attack our mostly pacifistic Truth. She and he are of an age, after all, and if he's much bigger she does look mean. But if you kick his ass, baby Aiken, they'll think, My God they're dangerous. We won't fuck with them any further."

"Of course he'll lie about it," Strange said. "Wouldn't you?"

"I would not be getting my ass kicked. I would know not to fuck with a girl like me, or the younger brother of a girl like me. Come on, Strange. This is your battle."

"Charmed!" my mother called, halfway down the beach. The wind was playing with her hair, making her look like a surprised dandelion. "What are you doing?"

"Defending the family honor," Charmed said, unwilling to move.

"Good lord. Who are you?" Until now, the interloper had been softly crying, trying not to asphyxiate in the stony sand. He rose a little and introduced himself as Julius Deek.

"Mr. Deek, what has my daughter done to you?" He started crying again. Charmed told my mother about his kneecaps.

"I see. Would you flip him over, please? Gently, Charmed. Don't dislocate his shoulders too."

My mother pushed her glasses closer to her eyes, swept her cardigan closed, then knelt in the sand. She rolled up Julius Deek's jeans to the knees and peered at them.

"Do you want me to put them back?" He looked confused, but he nodded. She sighed, jabbed him hard with both fists, then sat back on her haunches while he howled. He stopped in a moment and bent his knees experimentally.

"If I were you I'd go someplace else," my mother gravely suggested, and he took her advice. We watched him retreat, a tall, skinny creature, dwarfed by the rising headland. He did not look back once, just picked up his bike and left, pedaling slowly at first, then faster.

My mother stood, dusted herself off, then moved closer to the fire. She sat between Charmed and Strange, facing me. "I won't ask you to explain yourself, Charmed Aiken, because what you did was indefensible."

"On the contrary," Charmed began. "It was obvious where things were going. If I hadn't struck first, and struck effectively, Strange's little pinhead might not now rest atop his shoulders."

"Really, Charmed? You thought that boy was a serious threat to Strange's well being?"

"Yes."

"Strange?" We often deferred to Strange on questions of diplomacy.

“He might have been. He cares about his reputation as pinball king. My success not only displaces him, but devalues pinball in the eyes of his peers. He might have hurt me, if he had a chance.”

“Which, thanks to your sister, he did not. Today. Are you at all concerned with the future ramifications of your behavior, Charmed?”

“Concerned, yes. But not very. I am fully prepared to protect my siblings from bodily harm. I’ve been studying karate since I was five.”

“Have you now?” My mother’s eyebrows betrayed the astonishment her voice belied.

“Certainly. I spar with two of my counselors.”

“Truth?”

“Yes?”

“Is this true?”

“Yes.”

“And you let her attack this child?”

“I don’t know karate. How was I supposed to stop her?”

“Good lord. Well, take care of each other. I’m going back to the house.”

“How did you even know to come down?”

“A mother always knows when her children are in trouble.”

Actually, she was watching with a telescope from the widow’s walk. She did it every day. Even though we could not see her, far away as she was, we could see light glinting off the lenses as we played quietly on the beach.

Key X
 Wheel of Fortune
 Divinatory Meanings: Change of Circumstances.
 Reversed: Taking Charge of Your Destiny. Discovering the Causes Behind Events.

JUDE, MY HEART, IF YOU DON'T STOP READING OVER MY SHOULDER I WILL HAVE TO KILL YOU IN YOUR SLEEP.

"I think my curiosity is not unreasonable."

You already know all about my early life and times. You were there for much of it.

"But there was a lot I missed. Bantock House, for instance. Isn't this chapter supposed to be about the asylum?"

The asylum was very boring. You would not want to read about it.

"I am very curious about the asylum."

But you should not be. It was not very interesting, and nothing I could say about it would ameliorate your life. Are you glowering yet?

"I've been glowering. I don't like conversing like this."

Then go away.

"Come with me. It's time for dinner."

I am not hungry.

"You're never hungry."

True.

"I really think you ought to go to Nashville for blood work."

I should and I will, but not now. I am trying to work. Go away.

"I don't understand why you're in such a hurry."

Really?

"Yes. Is this about your father's book?"

Perhaps.

"Still, you could use my laptop and write in the car."

I prefer the typewriter.

"You have to soak the ribbon in ink every night!"

That has never bothered me.

"Well, how about a pregnancy test? It will only take a couple of minutes."

The nearest drug store is forty miles away.

"It just so happens that I bought one the last time I was in town."

Just so?

"Just so. Come on. Fifteen minutes, then I'll let you get back to work."

I thought you were going to let me get back to work.

“And I thought you would tell me the results.”

You can’t guess?

“No. I can tell you’re displeased, but I’m not sure if you’re displeased because you’re pregnant or displeased because you’re convinced you have leukemia.”

“Displeased” is a bit too mild. I could kill someone, probably myself, I am so frightened.

“That was not an answer.”

No, it wasn’t. Now look: I really can’t stand it when you read over my shoulder. Once I finish a chapter you can have it, if you’re careful of the paper. The ink does smudge. Now go away.

Key XI
Justice

Divinatory Meanings: Adjustment. Making Things Right.
Reversed: Lack of Compassion.

One reason I never moved into Islington was the bathtub at my parents' house. It was made to fit tall, broad-shouldered men who could coax corn and tobacco out of our thin soil. When we were small, Nana would bathe me and my sisters in it simultaneously, enduring our absurd arguments about modesty and individuality, and the possibility of Charmed drowning when Beauty and I splashed. There are two other bathrooms at the farmhouse, both with showers, both more popular than the ancient bathroom on the first floor. When I was thirteen, I was the only one who ever used it. Like most thirteen year olds, I spent a lot of time in the bathroom.

It was possible to fill the old talon-toed tub with water that neared one hundred degrees centigrade. The steam erased my features in the glass slowly, like the Chesire cat, fading away, and frothed my hair like an angel's. The clanging of pipes and rushing water obscured the noise or silence beyond the bathroom, and covered any noises I might have made.

Beauty and I, when we were young, competed over everything. When Nana made us drink warm milk we burned our tongues again and again to be the first to finish the stuff, even though we hated it. I thought about all that hot milk during my boiling baths, the way burned taste buds hurt abominably at first, then the pain fades, but everything tastes a little bitter for days afterward. Boiling baths are the same way. If the water is cool enough to just miss a third degree burn the pain is still overwhelming, at first, and it stays that way for a while, but with time it fades; you get used to it. And afterwards your skin is red as a newborn's, and as delicate, and as soft.

At first that was all, that was enough: I would bike home from school just before dark, eat an apple, put away my books. Pull down the shades even though we have no neighbors, exchange jeans and a sweater for my grandfather's white cashmere robe, and creep back downstairs to the bathroom. Generally the first floor would be quiet. Charmed and Strange stayed at school until eight or nine o'clock, when my mother picked them up on the way back from BerendtLab in town; Nana would be in the basement, doing whatever it was she did when she was not plagued by Aikens; my father would be in his room, across the hall from the bathroom.

What did my father think of my hygiene habits? Who the hell knows? My father, like several people I know, including, arguably, myself, is mired in a kind of endless adolescence. He hides in his room, plays with his desk full of toys, daydreams the daydreams of a mad scientist, and waits for someone else to deal with the real world for him. And he inevitably responds to incursions from the real world with violence.

Sitting on the edge of the tub, perhaps twelve feet from his desk, I would let the water rise up over my feet, first cool, with a faint smell of old stones and moss, then warmer; I thought about hot milk, white teeth, burned tongues, swinging our feet so hard the old kitchen chairs squeaked, unwilling to shriek and thus alert Nana of our ridiculous behavior.

Eventually, though, it was not enough. I borrowed a scalpel from the biolab at Islington and a bottle of rubbing alcohol, bandages, medical tape, and several dozen trial-sized tubes of Neosporin from the medicine cabinet and started cutting. The upper thigh was the obvious place to start, since recent repositioning of body fat had suddenly expanded the available surface area there, and created a few stretch marks. They looked like the waves of distortion rolling off hot tar, almost like little flames. They reminded me of T.S. Eliot's memorial at Westminster Abbey, a burning rose carved in marble, so I decided to carve a pair of roses in my flesh, one on each thigh.

I bathed and shaved first, then ran another hot bath. I did not want to spend the evening mopping up blood from the bathroom floor. I lined up the necessary materials on a towel on the floor, and sterilized the scalpel with a bayberry scented candle that had been in the bathroom since our long-past, guest-hosting days. After it cooled down a bit I started cutting.

Skin is the largest organ of the human body, and is responsible for keeping undesirable microbes out, and organs, blood, and water in. The epidermis is a semi-permeable membrane, and as thick as airmail paper, and composed of several layers of cells in a state of constant renewal. The outer layer dies, and flakes off to become the dust that coats books and untended houseplants and gathers itself into bunnies under the couch.

Alcohol and hot drinks make you feel warm because they dilate blood vessels close to the surface of your skin; they do not raise your body's core temperature. A hot bath, on the other hand, raises the body's temperature considerably and causes blood vessels to dilate. You sweat, of course, which lowers blood volume, and the heart beats faster. If you happen to be cutting yourself you will bleed a lot, though not, necessarily, dangerously. When people attempt suicide by severing arteries across the wrist, survival rates are actually quite high. Not as high as those who try poisoning or drowning, but nowhere close to the success rate of those who use guns, or jump off sky scrapers. Of course, cutting is quieter.

Nerve endings lie just beneath the epidermis, but if the blade you use is very sharp then you'll hardly feel the first cut. The ones afterward hurt more. But it's amazing to see for the first time the layers of your own skin, so simply brown on the outside and red just underneath, then a layer of subcutaneous fat, white as milk, on my thighs an eighth of an inch thick. I stopped there, seeing no reason to cut any further. Any cut that reaches the subcutaneous fat layer will leave a scar.

Cutting with a sharp knife is not all that painful, but if you are bleeding in hot water for any length of time, it is difficult to remain conscious. I had completed the basic design of both roses, and was adding

leaves and thorns to both, deciding whether or not I should add a few lines of poetry, when I passed out. Eliot seemed most appropriate, perhaps, “We die with our dying,” but Lewis Carroll would have worked as well: “Still she haunts me, phantomwise. . . walking under skies/ Never seen by waking eyes.” People often forget how sad and scary the Alice books are. In Wonderland and beyond the looking glass Alice is in constant danger. Her only means of control is in altering her body, making herself big enough to threaten or small enough to escape notice. She cannot for the life of her behave appropriately, and even her memory, even words memorized long ago, twist and tangle in her mind.

I woke up again briefly when Nana came into the bathroom and started screaming. I was awake just long enough to notice that the water was the same soft pink as the walls in my bedroom, and my fingernails the pale blue of my comforter. And I woke up, briefly, when the EMTs arrived.

I woke up again a little while later in a hospital room. When a nurse I recognized from my last visit came in the fluff my pillows and check my I.V. I asked her what was going on.

“You were admitted for blood loss and possible concussion,” Elaine explained.

“How could I be concussed?” I asked, surprised that I hadn’t drowned.

“You bumped your head on the side of the tub, apparently reaching for something.”

“Oh,” I said. “That would be rubbing alcohol.”

“Yes,” she said, nodding, refusing to meet my eyes.

“I’m not concussed,” I said. She kept nodding. “I didn’t lose that much blood. I’m a little dehydrated.”

“You’re anemic,” she said.

I sighed. “I’m a vegetarian.”

“Truth,” she said, finally looking at me. “You weren’t trying to kill yourself, were you?”

“Of course not.”

“Then what were you doing?”

I wondered if that could possibly be unclear. Fuzzy headed as I was toward the end, both roses on my thighs were very clear; though they were weeping blood, no cut was more than a quarter of an inch deep, and did not even require stitches. What I had done, I thought, was obvious; belatedly, I realized that what she really wanted to know was my intent, or even my motivation. All I could really describe, however, was what was on my mind.

“I was thinking about poetry,” I told her.

Not long after that I was moved from the trauma ward to the psychiatric ward, and from there to Bantock House, where I was to spend much of the next few months.

Key XII

The Hanged Man

Divinatory Meanings: A deep attachment to what matters most in life.

Reversed: Succumbing to social pressure.

And then there's the day that Pater tried to kill himself. Nana found him in a pool of vomit under his desk. That was the day Nana gave thirty days notice. This was a great tragedy for Charmed, Strange and me, and probably the main reason why Mater and Pater finally separated. We were never able to secure the services of another housekeeper at the farmhouse, and Mater could never tolerate a messy house. Her penthouse in the city is very lovely, in fact it's quite a bit nicer than our castle, which is significantly larger, of course, but underfurnished and hard to keep clean.

Charmed, Strange and I were at school when it happened. I'm not sure what they were up to—something online, I'd guess—but I was taking a nap in the library. I was sleepy much of the time in those days, and the library had comfy sofas and window seats.

I was dreaming a forgettable dream when Mr. Charley, the principal, woke me up.

"Time to go home?" I asked, looking around. The library was full of the red-gold light of late afternoon. No one particularly cared when day students headed out, but when my siblings and I walked, Charley preferred for us to leave before full dark.

"No, actually," he said, sitting across from me. "There's been an emergency at home, so you and your siblings will be spending the night."

"What happened?" I yawned, still muzzy with sleep.

"I suppose your mother will want to tell you. She'll be here in a few minutes."

"So she's alright?"

"Yes, she's fine."

"Is it Nana?" I asked, now quite alarmed.

"Who?"

"The housekeeper."

"No, no, I'm sure your housekeeper's fine. Come downstairs to wait for your mom."

I followed him into a little parlour where he met with potential students. Charmed was sitting primly in an armchair, a nanometer away from utter panic. There was an enormous bouquet of gladiolas on a central coffee table that hid Strange from view.

"Ahoy," I said.

"Ahoy," they replied.

"When is our mother coming?" Strange asked politely.

"Soon," said Mr. Charley.

The dinner bell rang, and we watched a stream of schoolmates wander past us towards the dining hall. All of them peered in, curious to see a new freak auditioning for the circus, then looked away when they saw us. When my form came slinking by, Jude, Eli, Julie and Isabelle, deep in conference, they halted suddenly and almost came inside.

"Dinner," Mr. Charley said with a quick shake of his head, and they passed on, very slowly.

With the last of the dinner stragglers came our mother, elegant and wan.

"Your father tried to kill himself this afternoon, but he's fine," she announced. "They're keeping him at Vanderbilt tonight for observation."

"How did he do it?" Charmed asked.

"Pills," said Mater.

"That seems rather out of character," I said.

"True," Mater agreed. "But people often act of character in times of extreme stress."

We all stared at her recently bald skull, now lightly fuzzed by hair gone entirely white. It looked like a halo.

"Are you going to spend the night at the hospital?" Strange asked.

"No, I'm going to spend it at home, cleaning. Things are rather a mess."

"But where is Nana?"

"Nana has gone home for a few days."

"Where is that?"

"Oh, you know. East Nashville, where her daughter lives."

"Nana has a daughter?"

"Two, but one of them lives in Kentucky."

"Oh," we all said. It had never occurred to us that Nana might have another family, she seemed so much a part of ours.

"But Mr. Charley has said you can spend the night here, and I will pick you up after I bring your father home in the morning."

"That's not necessary, Alyssa," Mr. Charley said. "I'll drive them over around noon."

Mr. Charley was in love with our mother. We did not know an adult male who wasn't, with the possible exception of our father.

"Thanks, Evan. Well, I will see you tomorrow," said our mother, and she kissed us all on the cheek (with the exception, of course, of Mr. Charley), and left.

"Well, I guess we should go to dinner," said Mr. Charley, and the three of us nodded. We followed him halfway to the cafeteria, then drifted off to our former pursuits. Mr. Charley, I'm certain, expected this. He had known us all since we were three.

I said goodbye to Charmed and Strange by the computer lab and went upstairs to the library to sleep. This time I was awakened by Julie and Izzy, who were wearing their pajamas.

"Come on, you," they said. "Time for bed."

"But I just woke up!"

"Nevertheless," they replied, and dragged me over to their room. Though they had spent the night at my house a time or two, I had never been in their room before. It was small, of course, with bunk beds and a blocked-off fireplace.

"Great, isn't it?" Iz said, handing me a pair of plaid flannel pajamas. "They think we're geniuses, and assume we're dumb enough to burn the building down."

"Or they think we'll do it on purpose," Juliet countered. It was strange listening to them. They argued in the same constant, off-hand way that Jude and Eli did. For a moment I regretted living in my own huge room at home. This is what married couples sound like, I thought.

"And I think they think we're prodigies, not geniuses," I added.

"Same difference," they both said, and laughed, though of course they know that that's not true.

"So how do we sneak over to the boys' side?"

"Sneak?" Julie answered. "We just walk. Nobody cares."

"It's not like anyone's having sex," Izzy added.

"And if anyone were, it wouldn't count," I could not help saying.

"What do you mean?" Julie asked, slightly aghast.

"You know, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Holly Golightly. Nothing before you're fourteen counts."

"Twelve, actually, I think she says, but I certainly see your point." Izzy looked at me as if she did not see my point.

"So no one will be offended if I sleep in Jude and Eli's room?"

"We will be," said Julie. "You're forever privileging those two over us."

"Well, yes," I admitted. "They need me more."

"This is true. God knows they were constantly at each other's throats while you were gone."

Then we were all silent, which would happen for years whenever my absence was mentioned.

They promised to forgive me and said goodbye. I trotted down the hall and up a staircase to Jude and Eli's room. They were wide awake, fully dressed, stretched out on the floor playing cards. The cards themselves were rather fantastic; they featured comic book bimbos, with big breasts and bigger guns. I assumed readily enough that they were Eli's, but I must now concede the possibility that they weren't.

"Hello, darling," Eli said. "Know how to play poker?"

"No," I said. "I used to, but I forgot."

"Spades? You've got to know spades."

"I don't. And that's a racist comment, you know."

"You bet, my jiggaboo. Egyptian Rat Screw? War? You know, there aren't that many games you can play with three people."

"I don't know any card games," I admitted. "You will have to teach me."

"Perfect," Eli said. "Have a seat."

So they taught me to play poker, spades, war and Egyptian Rat Screw. Then they taught bridge and whist. Then they taught me blackjack and two variations on solitaire.

"Dear heart," Eli said. "We're rapidly running out of games."

Then they taught me how to play checkers and how to play chess. In fact, I already know how to play chess but did not tell them. It was very soothing to sit between the two of them and listen to them argue about strategy and rules.

Downstairs we only had one board game, Diplomacy, which I knew how to play very well. Eli suggested a game around four a.m.

"Aren't you tired?" Jude asked.

"No," he said. So we all went down to the common room to play Diplomacy. It is not a game for three people. There are too many countries, and every country really needs both a president (or queen, if you're England, as I was) and a prime minister. So we left the board where it was and went to the kitchen.

Charmed was already there, with a clutch of her fellow seventh formers, drinking coffee.

"You'll stunt your growth," we said, sweeping in and stealing the coffee pot. Charmed makes really excellent coffee. We went outside to drink it and watch the sun come up. Eli immediately fell asleep, so Jude and I left him there and went back up to their room.

"There was a card trick I wanted to teach you," he said. "But I couldn't do it in front of Eli."

Jude taught me two card tricks, actually, a modified Charlier shuffle and the Easy Force. To do it, he put their full length mirror on top of his desk and sat down, and told me to watch. The force was, as the title suggests, easy. The shuffle was very hard.

"The original Charlier shuffle looks messy," Jude explained, ordering the deck so that all the diamonds were together, all the hearts, clubs, and spades. "Mine is a bit better, but it helps if you can distract your opponent a bit while you do it."

"I imagine it would be difficult with cards that look like that."

"It depends on who you're playing with. But patter is the best form of misdirection anyway. Whenever possible, distract your audience with words. Now, watch."

Cards flew from his left hand into his right, some from the top, some from the bottom.

"Now I cut," he said, cutting the deck. And see?"

All the diamonds altogether, all the hearts, clubs, and spades.

“Now,” he said. “You try.”

So I sat the desk and watched my reflection dump cards all over his desk.

“No, no, no,” he said. “Like this.”

And then he did it again.

I attempted it once more and dumped cards all over his desk.

“It’s useless,” I said, suddenly crying. “I can’t be taught.”

“Nonsense,” he said. “Watch me.”

He moved the chair out of the way and stood right behind me, and rested his chin on my shoulder. I watched his hands, not his reflection, as he shuffled. I finally saw what he was doing: a card stuck out just a little bit, in the middle, showing him where to cut. He was watching my reflection.

“Now you try.”

He handed me the cards and knotted his hands around my waist. I Charlier-shuffled. Everything was in its place.

“Amazing,” I said. “Thank you.”

Key XIII

Death

Divinatory Meanings: Release from old patterns. Change.

Reversed: Fear of Change. Stasis. Stagnation.

Life is alchemy. A human being, no matter how large, is composed of elements you can buy at your neighborhood laboratory supplier for less than fifteen dollars. It is practically impossible to create a human being thus—you would have to construct that small but elegant double helix, embed it in a nucleus, surround it with organelles and cellular goo, then convince the cell to multiply, somehow, after you made your elements into the proper compounds—even though humans, like everything else in the universe, are mostly empty space.

It is not hard for most people to make human beings, and usually costs less than fifteen dollars at the start. It is easier for rabbits to make rabbits, or more accurately, it is easier for a pair of rabbits to make a lot of rabbits than it is for a pair of humans to make lots of humans. It is probably best that humans do not litter, because humans are terrifically difficult to raise. First born children usually have the highest I.Q. scores, because I.Q. scores are directly related to the attention a child receives from his or her parents at the beginning. Last born children are usually the tallest, even if the family does not increase its prosperity dramatically from first child to the last. I am not as smart as Beauty was, and Strange is taller than she was. This is one of the few ways we managed to be stereotypical.

Beauty liked being stereotypical. She liked the color pink, and she liked to wear lipstick and nail polish, and she liked the Beatles, except “Number 9.” She hated that, but we had to listen to the rest of the *White Album* again and again and again while we were waiting for her to die. I was indifferent to it then, and I don’t like it now, except for “Savoy Truffle,” because Strange used to do a little dance to it that we called the “Savoy Shuffle.” Strange was ordinarily a very reserved seven year old. He was so shy that for years no one believed that he could talk except for my immediate family. Islington almost denied him entry because he refused to speak in the presence of Mr. Charley. Charmed solved that problem by pretending that she had gone deaf. We all waited in Mr. Charley’s office while Charmed and Strange screamed at each other in the adjacent restroom. “I DON’T WANT TO GO TO SCHOOL.” “WHAT?” “I DON’T WANT TO START SCHOOL..” “WHAT? WHY?” “BECAUSE THEY WON’T LIKE ME HERE.” “HUH?” “THEY WON’T LIKE ME.” “TRUTH IS HAPPY HERE AND LOOK HOW WEIRD SHE IS. JUDE AND ELI ARE HER BEST FRIENDS.” “SHE’S NINE. I’M THREE. IT’S NOT FAIR FOR ME TO BE IN SCHOOL.”

Strange was always inordinately concerned with justice. He thought that it was terrifically unfair that Beauty had cancer, though he never mentioned it to her. When he was at the hospital he read books and watched tv, and grooved a bit to “Savoy Truffle.” He lip synced, even though he had no idea what most of the lyrics meant. I’m still not entirely sure what a Ginger Sling is, or a Monteclimat, but the

lack of hard definition never stopped Strange. He would stand in his chair to sing, but he never looked at us. He stared out the window above Beauty's head that faced the courtyard where doctors and medical students went for lunch when the weather was nice. It was entirely made of dark brown bricks, and frankly, even Beauty's hospital room was a more cheerful place to dine. Still, medical students ate there almost every day that spring, staring at brown bricks or each other while they wolfed Quarter Pounders.

On the last day that Beauty was alive Strange was reading *The Count of Monte Cristo*, which the rest of us had adored at his age, and I was reading *The Duchess of Malfi*. I don't really care for the play, though I used a few lines from it on Beauty's grave: Cover her face/Mine eyes dazzle/She died young.

Interestingly, in the play, these lines are uttered by the Duchess' brother, who has just had her killed. He torments her through most of the play because he thinks she is immoral, and he wants control of her lands. And, to return to the subject of littering, I seem to recall that Duchess and her two brothers are triplets, but perhaps I'm wrong. Though I read a lot of books in those days I misremember lots of them. For years I was convinced that there was magic in *Richard III*, but I later discovered that the magic was all in dreams. However, sometimes a sound or smell associated with the pediatric cancer wing of Vanderbilt Hospital will bring back a few lines of text. Nana never made us butterscotch pudding, but when she was dying Beauty ate it all the time, and the smell of it—like real butterscotch, but moister, riper—reminds of *The Lord of the Rings*. Specifically, it reminds me of the passage in which Legolas the wood elf first hears a sea gull, and it awakens in him a desire to leave Middle Earth for the havens that haunts him all his days.

I think Beauty wanted to die in the end. The chemotherapy ravaged her, left her unable to keep her pudding down, too weak to do much but embroider. It took away all her hair, which, before the chemotherapy, was as gloriously black and white as a night of new moon. She had no privacy in the hospital, and she had to put up with having her little siblings in her room all the time. It must have been maddening.

But, in fact, Beauty dealt with the situation with consummate grace. She had long ago come to accept the fucked up humor of the Fates. Clotho had been having a good time with Beauty since the beginning, giving her a father who would name his first child Beauty without even considering the real-world implications of such a name, or the fact that his wife would be furious when she woke up after the C-section. That Beauty was in fact a beauty was hardly a recompense for the problems such a name engendered. The Fates (and genetics) gave Beauty a mind of blinding power, and a skin color that assured everyone who looked at her in Oak Ridge, Tennessee that she was destined to be a maid, or someone's dark mistress. Even after my parents moved to Nashville when Beauty was one, the secret service men who were assigned to keep my family from becoming pawns in the Cold War spent most of their time keeping people from burning crosses on our lawn. When she graduated from Harvard she

was too young to get a learner's permit. She would die before she was old enough to drive. She had been a plaything of Clotho and Lachesis for fifteen years, and it was hardly surprising that Atropos couldn't wait for her turn.

She did have her bitter moments, however. She made my mother cry a time or two, and once accused me of looking forward to her demise. It was a Sunday morning. My grandmother had dragged everyone off to church but Beauty and me because we were sick. I had a nasty stomach flu, and Beauty and I took turns with the vomit bucket.

"Be honest," she said, wiping her mouth, a little after 11:30. We were watching "The Week in Rock" on MTV and reading books on Art History in an attempt to fill the gaping holes in our education. "You were glad when your bone marrow didn't match."

"Sure, Beauty," I said, quite hurt. "I was hoping Charmed would have the honor of saving your life."

"Get real. There's certainly a level where you can't wait to be the oldest."

"Next you'll be saying I'm jealous of your cancer too, because then I'd so much attention from Mater and Pater."

"You are."

"Bullshit!" I said, and then I threw up. Watching me made her throw up again. Then we both brushed out teeth and retreated into books. A few months later, when one of the nurses in Beauty's ward called just as I was putting on pajamas and getting into bed, I thought about what Beauty had said. Beauty was dead. Was the flutter in my chest misery or elation? The gaping emptiness where thought used to be—could that be happiness? I had been jealous of Beauty all my life. There was no one of whom I thought more often. There had even been a time when I took Keats at his word, and I thought myself Beauty, and Beauty Truth—but that was when I was very young, and my personality not effectively differentiated.

I wished I wanted to gnash my teeth and rip my hair from the roots when I heard the phone ring, when I heard one of my parents screaming like a rabbit in the jaws of a fox. I didn't. I didn't even want to creep towards the kitchen and see which of my parents answered the phone. I did want to check on Charmed and Strange, and make sure that our parents hadn't wakened them.

The two of them slept in twin beds in the same room, painted a soft green and still smelling of baby powder, as far from my parents' room as possible. Charmed was a light sleeper, and my father prone to midnight pacing that made the floorboards in his room squeak. When I came in Strange was chewing on his teddy bear's paw and Charmed was mumbling the Fibonacci sequence in her sleep. She had always talked in her sleep, usually number sequences, because that was how she cured insomnia. First she counted off prime numbers, then, beginning when she was four, she would double numbers in her head until she lost track and fell asleep. Italian mathematicians were a new interest for her. She

doodled mathematically perfect snail shells on Waffle House napkins while my mother and grandmother discussed cancer specialists in New York and London, and she drew what waitresses often mistook for eyes but were actually Witches of Agnesi. At the time Charmed was obsessed with Donna Maria Gaetani Agnesi, the eighteenth century Italian noblewoman who discovered the equation of the plane curve $x^2y=4a^2(a-y)$ when a is the radius of a circle that sits right on top of the x axis. The phrase “Witch of Agnesi” refers to the equation, its graphic representation, and its discoverer. I have no idea why Charmed was so intrigued by the Witch. Perhaps she was synthesizing Beauty’s fondness for math and my waning obsession with the occult. I do know that soon after Beauty’s death Charmed lost all interest in pure math and devoted herself to its applications.

Having confirmed that the little ones were alright I locked my bedroom door, climbed out the window, slid down the drain pipe and biked over to Islington. My parents had strictly forbidden me to do each of those things, and though they had never told me not to leave the house in my pajamas, if it had ever occurred to them that I might do so they would have banned that too. In those days I slept in pajama bottoms and a t-shirt, so I was not indecently covered. It was May, so I was perfectly warm, in fact, a little too warm, once I started biking the empty streets. Islington was only two miles from our house, and mostly downhill, but I had begun to perspire before I reached the school.

I left my bike in a clump of honeysuckle growing near the gates and crept around the side of the building stealthily as I could. Boarders were strictly forbidden to leave their rooms after lights out, and leaving the dorm was out of the question. I didn’t think there was a rule about sneaking in, but Mr. Charley was no fool. There were rules governing practically everything. The building looked haunted, unnaturally dark for such an early hour.

I found Jude and Eli’s room easily enough, and getting into it wasn’t much of a problem. There was a magnolia tree from which I could reach the roof, and from there I could swing into Jude and Eli’s window. I’m not sure what I would have done if their room had not been accessible from the roof. I might have sat up there all night like a weathervane, or gone biking around the suburbs until the sun came up. As it was, I just hissed at them to open the window and they did, and Eli grabbed me firmly around the knees when I told them what I was doing.

“It’s nice to see you,” Jude said, lighting an alcohol lamp he had stolen from the lab. Thirteen year olds had lights out at ten. “But what are you doing here?”

“Beauty’s dead,” I said. “I have to start school again.”

“Not until tomorrow morning,” Eli said, and kissed my forehead.

“Do your parents know you’re here?” Jude asked.

“What do you think?”

“Are they going to come looking?”

“I’d be very, very surprised,” I said. “So this is what you wear to sleep?”

Jude blushed, visible in the moonlight. He and Eli were both wearing boxers, and a little gold pendant hung in the middle of Jude's hairless chest. "What is that around your neck?"

Eli answered for him. "The patron saint of lost causes. What else?"

The two of them had been bickering for months. Every time I dropped by the school to tell my counselors what I was studying I caught them in a fight. "Male territorialism bullshit," Eli had explained. "Pretty soon we'll be wearing animal skins, carrying clubs, and beating our chests," Jude elaborated.

"St. Jude is my namesake," Jude said, sitting on the floor.

"You're named after the Beatles song and you know it. Your parents have no idea that there's a Saint Jude."

"You're probably right, but I'd rather have a pair of brainless hippies for parents than a maker of nuclear weapons and a harpy."

"Jewish mothers can't be harpies; wrong mythical system. You're totally confused, you poor goy."

"Okay, gentlemen, that's enough," I said, sitting next to Jude. "I came here because I need cheering up."

"We could do a panty raid on the girls' dorm," Eli suggested. "Or we could, I don't know, do something disastrous in the lab. We could set free the snakes!"

"I could juggle for you," Jude said, fluffing my hair. "I've been practicing."

"I could steal a bottle of wine from Counselor A.J.'s room. He's a deep sleeper."

"How exactly would you know that?" I asked.

"My little secret." He winked lasciviously.

"Your skin feels very warm," Jude said, touching my face. "Are you running a fever?"

"I just biked two miles, then climbed a tree, and now I'm cavorting with boys. Of course my skin is warm."

"We should go for a swim," Eli pronounced. "Let's go to the pond."

"It's too cold to swim," said Jude.

"No, it's perfect. Warm enough to swim but not warm enough for the water moccasins to be about."

"None of us have swimsuits."

"It'll be like an REM song. You'll love it."

"I don't know. What do you think?" Jude asked me.

"Let's swim," I said, so we went. It was much harder getting onto the roof than I would have guessed. Only Eli was tall enough to do it by himself, and Jude and I probably would have killed ourselves he hadn't pulled us up, even if we weren't all trying to carry a change of clothes and a towel. And once we arrived at the pond Jude and I probably would have sat on the edge and talked all night if Eli hadn't immediately slipped off his boxers and jumped in. Jude felt he had no choice then, so he

unbuttoned his shorts, whistling “Nightswimming” for courage, and joined his best friend in the lake. It was half a mile from the school buildings, and surrounded by old willows and oaks, and used almost exclusively by students interested in environmental science. Students who stayed all summer preferred the pool in the gym, or went to the YMCA, where they impersonated normal children for an hour or two, splashing and ducking and accusing each other of pissing in the pool.

“Be gentlemen and turn around,” I ordered when they began taunting me from the water. I was not deterred by the fact that their teeth were chattering, and the water was warmer than I expected. The sludgy bottom dragged at my feet; I nearly slipped on aquatic grass as soon as I stepped in.

“This is incredibly gross,” I admitted.

“Come out where it’s deeper and tread,” Eli suggested, so I did, happy to kick away from the bottom, and happy to hide my breasts in the water.

“Wouldn’t it be awful,” Eli teased, “To lose your maidenly virtue to a water moccasin?”

“About as bad as being buggered by one,” I pointed out.

“Oh, alliteration! Are we feeling poetic tonight?” He started to shout out “The Jabberwocky.”

“Shut up before your wake up Charley,” Jude said, standing in waist high water, shivering. Eli splashed him, and while they tussled I paddled around in the middle of the pond. I wanted to lie on my back and see the stars, but that seemed like a less than good idea. The moon was very bright. I watched a barn owl pause for a moment at the top of a willow then wing silently back into the sky. I wanted to cry for Beauty, or cry for me, but I could only wet my face with pond water, rich with micro-organisms, teeming with life.

“Maybe I should go home,” I said eventually.

“Are you tired?” Jude asked.

“Kind of. Yeah.”

“You could sleep in my bed,” he said. “I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“Home’s just two miles away, and I do have my bike.”

“But it’s the middle of the night. Does your bicycle have a tail light?”

“It doesn’t even have a headlight, but it’s quite bright, and nobody’s on the street.”

“We can walk you home,” Eli suggested. “We didn’t have any plans, did we, old boy?”

“Don’t call me that, you Jewish bastard. We are not old boys.”

“Shut up and walk already,” Eli said, zipping up his jeans. I had borrowed a pair of Jude’s khakis and one of his science fair t-shirts. Neither quite fit anymore, but they were satisfactory for a long midnight stroll. On the way home the boys fought the entire time, and I didn’t bother trying to stop them. Our wet feet squished in our sneakers as we passed silent house after silent house. In my driveway they both kissed me goodnight, and both tested my health by the soundness of my ribs. “Your skin is still very warm,” Jude said, parting. “Take it easy if you have a cold.”

"But not for too long," Eli said. "There are not enough girl-monkeys at Islington."

Jude beat his chest in a gorilla goodbye, and I let myself into the house.

"Do you use protection when you're with those boys?" my father asked by way of greeting. He was sitting by the door in the dark. The rest of the house was quiet.

"I'm thirteen," I reminded him, a little shocked.

"You should still be using protection, especially you, with your mother the expert on AIDS." He narrowed his eyes then slapped my face. I was so stunned I couldn't speak for a long moment. No one except Beauty and Charmed had ever hit me before, and neither of them half as hard as my father.

"What are you thinking, you sick fuck? Leave me alone," I said, feeling slightly relieved by the tears that were welling up. I backed towards my bedroom without turning on the light.

"You don't talk to your father like that," my father said, advancing towards me. "Did those boys teach you that kind of language?"

"Leave me alone," I said again, reaching behind me for my bedroom doorknob. It was not there. I had been wondering how my father knew I had gone. He tried to grab my arm but I twisted easily out of his reach. I noticed that he hadn't brushed his teeth, and though he was ordinarily fairly fastidious, his breath smelled about as bad as my cat Titania's just before she died. I flung myself across the hall into Beauty's room and slammed the door, then locked it, then shoved her heavy banker's desk in front of the door. My father removed that doorknob too but he could not budge the desk, wedged, as it was, against a chest of drawers. I lay in Beauty's bed, indulging in maiden meditation, fancy free. My mother must have taken Charmed and Strange to her mother's house and noticed I was gone. When I saw them the next day no one mentioned my absence, or where they had been. Beauty was buried the day after that in a tomb inscribed with the lines from Webster, which my parents allowed me to select. Charmed went back to school immediately, though I had come down with a late spring flu, and since neither of my parents felt like working they took turns bringing me bowls of warm soup all day.

Key XIV
 Temperance
 Divinatory Meanings: Calmness. Self-Possession. Containment.
 Reversed: Delirium.

My family was not alone in our hospital vigil; Beauty's boyfriend Adam, Eli's older brother, spent a fair amount of time there as well. He would turn up in the afternoons, clutching pale roses and baby's breath, *The Journal of the Society of American Biochemists*, and *New York Times* crossword puzzles he and Beauty worked out together in pen.

"Isn't he awful?" Eli asked one afternoon when he came to the hospital with Adam. We were walking down twenty first to Fido for coffee, which I really did not need. The nurses let me use the coffee pot in their station, so I trembled slightly all day, and stared at the glow in the dark stars on my ceiling all night.

"Adam?"

"Of course! He's just like Jude but worse."

"You adore Jude."

"Well, of course I do—how can you not?"

"Beats me. I adore him."

"Everyone does, which devalues our love a little. Now, you and I are difficult to love, which makes those that love us a bit more special."

"Alternately, it suggests that only people with the most debased taste could endure us. Like alcohol, I guess. Jude is like really fine wine, and we're like. . . what is it that winos drink? Rubbing alcohol? Turpentine?"

"Something in brown paper bags. And let's see, Adam and Beauty are like Irish cream: cloyingly sweet, lovable, heavy."

In fact, Beauty had become quite light: 107 pounds at five foot three, which made her look like an anorexic angel. Her hips and breasts disappeared, which made her look more like Charmed than me. Adam and Eli looked exactly alike, and almost like Aikens: crazy black hair, black eyes, though they were too pale, of course, and their noses were larger; Eli called their nose the Jerusalem Beak, though their ancestors were almost all Greek-Americans, one of whom converted upon desiring a beautiful Jewish girl in New York.

Adam and Eli shared nothing but appearance and parentage. Adam was born in New York and Eli in Oak Ridge, a fact which, in their minds, explained away the differences between the two.

"Radiation," they would say, and nod knowingly.

Radiation: Adam was not frightened of the changes in Beauty, even during chemotherapy, when she was losing so much weight and filling the glass bowl by her bed with black and white hair. He once

said, when only the three of us were in the room, while Beauty was bitching about how sick she felt, “You always were a bit fat in the can, kid.” She laughed so hard a nurse came pelting in, convinced by the sudden change in Beauty’s pulse that something terrible was happening.

Beauty was trying to figure out a way to turn off her heart rate monitor without triggering the alarm in the nurses’ station. Until then, even if she could get rid of everyone but Adam, a make-out session was beyond the realm of possibility. She asked me if I thought Charmed could do it, and of course I said, “Of course,” but then she would have to tell Charmed why she wanted it turned off, and that seemed profoundly unwise. Charmed knew how to keep a secret, but she liked to tell them too.

There was an obvious solution, obvious to Beauty and me, anyway: all we had to do was hook me up to Beauty’s machinery, and the two of them could sneak out and do whatever they desired. There were a few problems with this plan, of course. There was the off chance that the second or two that it took to strap on the appropriate electrodes would trigger the nurses’ alarm; there was the possibility that someone would come in and notice that I was not my sister.

“That’s minimal,” Beauty assured me over the phone. We had to do all planning after visiting hours, because my mother, grandmother, sister and brother spent almost all day at the hospital. Beauty had already told Mater that she needed to have a “girl talk” with me the next day, in order to keep everyone out of the way for a few hours.

“How do you figure that?”

“No one ever bothers me when I’m asleep during the day, because they know I have trouble sleeping at night.”

“Ah,” I said. “What do I need to bring?”

“A grape fruit and baby powder.”

“What?”

“A grapefruit is a citrus fruit closely related to the orange. In fact, an orange would be fine as well, but Nana doesn’t usually buy them, so bring a grapefruit. And baby powder. It’s made of talcum, cornstarch—”

“I understand what they are, Beauty, but I don’t see what good they’re going to be in helping me impersonate you.”

“You’ll see. Just bring them tomorrow at noon. And don’t be late.”

I was not late. When I arrived Beauty listening to her walkman and putting on lipstick, with which she had not bothered since the day she was diagnosed.

“Oh good,” she said, seeing me. “Adam will be here momentarily. Come here.”

I sat on the edge of her bed while she made me over. First she hid my hair under a knit cap, then she darkened the dark circles under my eyes, and added hollows beneath my cheekbones. She drew in, with

a blue eye pencil, a vein over my left eyebrow, then dusted my face with baby powder. She looked at herself in her mirror, then looked at me.

"Close enough," she pronounced. She produced a hospital gown and told me to hurry, Adam would be there any minute. I did hurry, though I was careful not to smear my make-up, then crawled into bed next to Beauty.

"What's your resting heart rate?" she asked.

"About sixty seven. It's probably a bit elevated."

"Hmm. Do you remember when Mom made us breathe synchronistically, to make us calm down on airplanes?"

"Of course."

"Then listen." Beneath the beeping of her machines and the hum of the hospital I could hear Beauty breathe. She placed two fingers on my left wrist and two fingers on her throat, and I shut my eyes and breathed with her, and waited for my heart to match Beauty's, beat for beat.

"Perfect," she said eventually, and she pulled the electrode from her chest and pasted it to mine within a heart beat. "Where's the grapefruit?"

I pointed to my backpack, which was lying on the other bed, one which Mater used when she spent the night. Beauty found it, then winced as she ripped off the medical tape securing her I.V.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" I asked.

"Of course. It's only glucose, though I assume you don't want an I.V."

"Right-o," I said, looking at the bruises on top of Beauty's hand. She taped the I.V. into place then tucked the grapefruit under the covers in the vicinity of my left hand.

"Hey," Adam said, letting himself in. He took a long look at my face, then whistled, recognizing for the first time how much Beauty had changed, or how similar she and I looked after all. I'm not certain which.

"How far are you two going?" I asked, just beginning to worry.

"To my car."

"Help me out of bed," Beauty ordered, and Adam complied, taking most of her bodyweight once she got to her feet.

"Jesus," she grumped. "I'm not sure I'm going to make it downstairs."

"Then hop back into bed. We can try again next week."

"We don't know if I'll be here next week. It has to be today!"

"Calm down. I guess we don't have to go to the car. There's another bed right here."

"Not a fucking chance," I said. "Absolutely not."

"Come on, Truth. This could be my final request."

"Do you know what you're asking me?" I was almost hysterical.

“Chill out, Truth. We’re not asking you to witness anything,” Beauty said, with a quick glance at the heart rate monitor. “Here’s a sleeping mask, and look, you can use my headphones.”

“I don’t have any cds!”

“Truth, calm down. I mean it. You’re going to bring the nurses in. Now look: I’m asking you, as a sister, to do me one big favor. I will never ask you for anything else. Just lie there with your eyes shut and listen to music for an hour or two. Alright?”

“Fine. Give me the headphones.”

I slipped them on, pushed play, then put on the mask. The volume was not high enough; I could hear the curtain around the other bed squeaking. I turned it up and tried to breathe slowly. It helped that it was a slow song, “Ghost” by the Indigo Girls. After it ended I expected to hear “Joking”, but instead it was “Ghost” again. And again. Beauty had left it on repeat, and I could not bring myself to remove the mask, even for the time it would take to change the setting from Repeat One to Repeat All.

I don’t know how long I listened to “Ghost.” Long enough to memorize every lyric, never to forget a single one, though I did not, in any real way, understand it. Later I would. Much later, on a streetcar in New Orleans, I would think of it, of the lines, “And I feel it like a sickness, how this love is killing me. But I walk into the fingers of your fire willingly.” Then, though, in Beauty’s hospital bed, the only line I really felt was one of the first: “There’s not enough room in the world for my pain.” That much I could comprehend.

Finally someone tapped me on the shoulder. I assumed it was Beauty, and almost said her name, when my eyes adjusted to the sudden light, and I realized I was looking at a nurse. I watched her mouth move for a moment or two before I moved to turn off the headphones, then stopped—I am left-handed, but could not afford to show my I.V. less hand. So I turned it off with my right hand, and gripped the grapefruit tightly. In the absence of “Ghost” the world seemed very quiet. Certainly, I could hear nothing from behind the curtain a yard or so to my left.

“How may I help you?” I said, in my best Beauty-esque diction. Her voice was naturally half an octave lower than mine at the time, and huskier, but the nurse did not notice.

“Are you cold?” she asked. “You don’t usually sleep in a hat.”

“I’m a little cold, yes.” This was true. In fact, cold sweat was trickling down my spine, and in a slick trail down my belly. I was afraid I was sweating my make-up off.

“I’ll bring you another blanket. Are you feeling alright? Your face looks a little puffy.”

“Maybe I’m retaining fluid.” I shrugged.

“I’ll leave Dr. Olafson a note. And I’ll bring you that blanket right away.” The nurse marched out, and shut the door. Still there was silence beyond the curtain, which lasted until the nurse had brought me the blanket and left again. Then there was a mad scramble on the bed, which caused the pale green curtain to twitch, and finally it parted, revealing Adam and Beauty, dressed but disheveled, reeking of

salt. Beauty looked more composed than her boyfriend, largely because she had no hair to muss, and because hospital gowns are hard to wrinkle. Adam looked like he had wrestled with an angel and lost unfairly. He was almost as wobbly on his feet as she was, though he valiantly tried to help her back into bed after I scrambled out of it.

I forgot that I was supposed to be modest. I forgot Adam entirely in my rush to put my clothes back on and flee as fast and far as I could. Fortunately, they too seemed to forget about me. They were not exchanging tender sentiments but staring at each other, almost darkly, staring into each other's eyes as if searching for something lost. I forgot to remove my Beauty mask until I reached the little boutique where I was supposed to meet my mother. I needed a white dress. After Beauty finished this round of chemotherapy we planned on going to my grandmother's English cottage for the summer, and, technically Anglican, I was supposed to be confirmed. Of course, that never happened.

I could see my mother inside the store, discussing with a salesgirl the requirements of Anglican confirmation dress, and I could see my reflection, dark in spots from sweat and tears. I walked further down the street to a McDonald's where I washed my face then back to the dress shop. I was fitted for a fine white dress, the sort that appears often in the dreams of girls in early puberty, and, in nightmares, is always stained red.

Key XV
The Devil

Divinatory Meanings: Struggles with oppression. Illusions. Dark feelings or desires.
Reversed: Liberation. Bringing things to light.

Occasionally I tired of sitting around the hospital room, waiting for Beauty to get better or die. When I did, I wandered around the hospital. It's a big one, with handy underground tunnels for when it rains. Most floors of the hospital were not entertaining, of course—floor after floor of sad, anxious people, watching bad television and handling magazines—with one exception. The nursery was a rather interesting place to be. Emotions ran high, and those emotions were, for the most part, positive. And there was always someone staring anxiously in the windows at the babies, like kids staring a Christmas storefronts, wondering what their parents would buy them.

The nurses there were almost as nice as the ones in the juvenile cancer ward. They put me to work massaging preemies when they realized how often I would come to visit.

"It's very simple," they explained, seating me next to an isolette. (I've always liked the word "isolette": little, feminine isolated thing. Rather than the giant bed I share with Jude I should sleep in an isolette.) "First you rub the head and face, then the neck and shoulders, six times for ten seconds. Then a back massage, then his arms and legs. Gently pump them: preemie calisthenics. Then you rub the little tummy, then the back again, then you're done."

I looked at the tiny creature sleeping in the isolette: it was a little bit bigger than my father's hand, and had the face of an eel. What remained of the umbilical cord looked like a snake feeding. I was more than surprised; I had always been told that babies were cute.

Nevertheless, I began my brief career as a baby masseuse. It was, in a way, very soothing. The babies had to be stroked firmly, like moulding recalcitrant clay, but not too firmly, or they wailed like ambulances. The best part was exercising their joints. I called them my little starfish, and they stared up at me, rapt and slightly confused.

"You know, you're getting rather good at this," said Nurse Wendy late one evening. When I left Beauty's room at seven everyone but Charmed was asleep, slumped over their embroidery, and Charmed was not feeling communicative.

"I'm a genius," I said, stroking a pair of shoulders delicate as dragonfly wings. "If my clients could speak, the testimonials would be phenomenal."

Wendy laughed. "You should think about getting licensed."

"I can't really see myself in massage school. I don't think I'd like massaging adults."

"Maybe not. But you're really very good with babies. Do you have little sisters and brothers?"

"One of each, but I didn't see them much when they were babies."

“Oh,” said Wendy. The nurses refrained from asking me questions. I had told them about Beauty, but nothing else about my family, and they had gotten the impression that we were somehow wildly dysfunctional, probably. It did not occur to me to correct them until long after the appropriate time had passed.

“Babies are a mystery to me,” I continued. “I wouldn’t know what to do with one, besides massage.” This remains quite literally true. I have not been anywhere near an infant since my masseuse days, not even as close as the waiting room window.

“Oh, you’d figure it out. When they’re unhappy, you know, babies start to cry. And there isn’t much for them to want in the beginning. Food, diaper change, to be held.”

This did not sound altogether positive to me. Many of our preemies screamed much of the day, and even those carried to term needed endless feeding and cleaning. It was, at the time, impossible to imagine myself at home with a baby, and nearly as impossible now.

“Do they have different cries for each desire?”

“Most babies do, but usually only the mother can tell.”

Fascinating, I thought. A secret language of tears. Of course, everyone speaks some dialect of sorrow: silent tears code for a certain set of miseries, and wailing, keening, and sobbing for others. There are a great many ways to cry, but not many ways to put tears to use. How many people can you reasonably expect to understand your tears? Your mother, perhaps, but who else? An older sister, a brother, a lover? And other than communication, and, perhaps, catharsis, what can you do with tears? The *lachrimae* family of moths lives entirely on tears, but not human tears, because ours are too unpredictable. Indeed, as it happens, I’m crying now.

Key XVI
The Tower
Divinatory Meanings: Pain resulting in Liberation.
Reversed: Less Pain, Less Liberation.

It begins with a phone call—don't most stories involving teenaged girls?—or perhaps, more properly, with two. Half the first one I did not hear, but someone, someone who worked at Beauty's lab, called Mater at the house to say that something very bad, very baffling, very bad had happened on the way to Provence. Not the region in southern France, but a café on 21st, half a mile from Medical Center North. Beauty tripped over a pansy seedling ripped loose from its planting and fell, breaking her tibia and fibia, but not, thank God, her femur.

“What?”

Beauty tripped over a plant lying, dying, on the pavement, and fell, and broke her leg in two places.

“Excuse me?”

Perhaps she slid. No one is certain. But this is what is clear: Beauty; a flower, much favored for its long bloom, which continues through the winter; a fall; a pebbled pavement walkway. A broken leg.

“I see. I'll see you at the hospital.”

We saw him at the hospital, fat, bespectacled, twenty three. He probably had a crush on Beauty. We never spoke to him, though. A crowd of physicians descended upon my parents the moment we arrived, eager to discuss tests. Charmed, Strange and I waited in the waiting room, reading old issues of *Time* and *Life* with ill humor. It was a Saturday morning. The television was tuned to cartoons, not the late series Loonie Toons, which my siblings and I adored, but one of the silly, then-new cartoons on Nickelodeon. “Ren and Stimpy,” I think—I recall the surf-rock theme song played against the beeps and murmurs of a hospital, which the imagination supplies even when they are inaudible.

My parents emerged from their conference bleached by displeasure. Mater said, “They'll have to do some tests, I'm afraid.” We knew though, of course; we all knew, even Strange. Bones that break like matchsticks? We knew.

We filed into Beauty's hospital room, the first of a few. She looked good then, excellent—her hair spilled across her pillow like hot tar streaked with calcite. She still had her eyelashes, and her eyebrows. Her eyes were as white and black as her hair.

“I won't be leaving anytime soon,” Beauty said. “Things at the lab will go to—”

“Language,” said my mother sharply, glancing at Strange.

“Things will go awry.” Beauty smiled, and rolled her eyes.

Things, I thought, are about as awry as they can get, though of course I was wrong.

Beauty was rolled off for tests, and we all went to lunch: Beauty and Strange to Mediterranean Cuisine, Mater and Pater to Beauty's beloved Provence, and I went to Fido to make a phone call.

"Eli, do you still have the weed you bought from George?" George was the boyfriend of our most degenerate counselor, Helena.

"Most of it."

"Come meet me at Fido," I said. "Right away."

"Do you know what time it is?"

"Where?"

Eli laughed, and promised he would come, even though it was eleven thirty p.m. in Rangoon.

I drank coffee and stared out the window at 21st. The street was largely empty, though the sidewalks were thronged with the type of twenty-something that chooses to meet friends at cafes on Saturday mornings.

Eli came alone, which was not, in itself, surprising; Jude did not, and does not, care for pot or the city bus. He looked terribly grave, however, and that did shock me. How, I wondered, could he possibly already know?

"Adam told me. Have you seen her?"

"Yes. How did Adam know?"

"They were supposed to meet for elevensies, so she called him from the hospital."

"Did he call you at Islington?"

Eli nodded, and began breaking my wooden coffee stir into very small pieces.

"Don't you want some coffee?"

He shook his head and continued to shred the stir.

"Fruit juice? Milk? A soda?"

"Nope. I would like to get stoned, though, so finish your coffee."

I finished my coffee and we headed back to campus. Vanderbilt was crawling with cops, so we let ourselves into the observatory. It was small, and housed an ancient telescope—there was a much newer one across town, called Dyer—and was entirely deserted. We had gone to great lengths to procure a key the previous summer, then almost never went. It was clean, though, and quiet, and well ventilated. Perfect. Pale blue light drifted in from the clerestory windows and bounced off the steel of the telescope.

Eli preferred joints to a pipe, and preferred his joints neatly rolled so he could use a cigarette holder. His was a foot long and faux ivory, à l'Astaire, I think. He bought one for me too, black and significantly shorter, with gold tips and embedded rhinestones. Silly, but fun.

"Is Adam in love with Beauty?" I asked as we lit up.

"Uh huh," Eli confirmed. "Madly."

"Have they had sex?"

“He says they have but I bet they haven’t. They want to get married, though, after she’s finished her Ph.D.”

“Do you want to be my brother in law?”

“Absolutely.” He winked lasciviously. “Vacations together, holidays at my house.”

“We don’t celebrate any of the same holidays.”

“New Year’s? Halloween?”

“Hmm,” I said, thinking about my sister and Halloween. It was her least favorite holiday because it interrupted the school day with a costume contest and the consumption of pumpkin-shaped cookies, even though Beauty once won the coveted award. Beauty was an angel, a common enough idea, though robots were the favorite default costume at Islington. Most angel costumes consist of gauzy wings and a tinsel halo, but most costume makers know a lot less about chemistry than ten-year-old Beauty. She emerged from the lab at five o’clock just before our scheduled departure, led my Mr. Charley, dressed, as he was every year, as a circus ringleader. Beauty was winged and crowned with fire, carried a burning sword, and instead of saying, “Trick or treat!” she screamed, “Fear not!” That was the last year she went trick-or-treating.

I asked Eli, “Do you think you’ll still be at Islington next Halloween?”

“No. I’ve already gotten the acceptance letter from Berkeley.”

I almost dropped my cigarette holder. “Really? When?”

“Yesterday. You’re the first to know. I haven’t even told Jude.”

“Has he heard from Harvard?”

“No, and he probably won’t until December. You know how they are.”

“Yes,” I conceded. I was waiting for my letter too. There was a real chance we would be rejected; Harvard did not allow many students younger than eighteen to matriculate because they tended to be, on the whole, too immature. I was hardly convinced the university would perceive me and Jude as exceptional.

“Seems weird, doesn’t it? I don’t even feel fourteen yet, and by next fall we’ll all be off at school.”

“You’ve been fourteen for seven weeks, Eli. I’m sure you’ll feel much more mature by next fall. Hey, you might even have facial hair.”

“I do have facial hair,” he insisted. “I shave.”

“Sure,” I jeered, so he scraped his jaw against mine.

“Ouch. Why is your stubble so rough when the rest of your hair is downy fluff?”

“My hair isn’t downy fluff. You would be thinking of my baby-chick roommate.” He wagged his finger at my nose. “If hair be wires, my hair be black wires.”

“Hee hee hee.” I was terribly stoned. “You’re wrong. The hair on your head is like the fluff of a baby raven.”

“As if you’ve ever seen a baby raven. A ravening? A ravlet?”

“Ravenet.” We laughed and laughed. It was very good pot.

Then we heard a sound that even high quality marijuana could not alter: the sound of the door downstairs opening and shutting, with a faint jangling in between which could only be keys.

“Holy shit,” Eli breathed. We glanced wildly about for a supply closet and found one, though it was longer than it was wide, an awkward shape. We hustled into it as fast as we could, hoping whatever dorky graduate student currently invading would be too callow to recognize the scent in the air. Eli and I were perfectly silent, folded together on the floor, lying with our heads by the door.

“What do you want to see?” asked a voice, high but definitely male.

“What can you see during the day?” asked a woman. Or a girl, rather; I’m sure she was a freshman.

“A lot of things. Here.” We heard the machinery that guided the telescope clinking into action, ceiling panels and mirrors and heavy glass sliding into place.

“I don’t see anything.” A pause. “Oh, wait, is that—oh my god. That’s a comet?”

“Uh huh.”

“Wow. God, it’s so pretty. Want a look?” Pause. “My turn again. I want to see—”

About that point I fell asleep, and Eli soon after. Thank God we didn’t snore. Pot has always made me sleepy, and I have not indulged much since I was fourteen. When we woke up it was dark in the telescope chamber, and cold. And I was still very, very stoned.

“Want to see a comet?” I asked Eli as I keyed switches and set the ceiling to open up.

“How about the moon?”

“Oh, Eli.” I had to use a step stool to reach the eyepieces, and it took a long time to focus, but eventually I could see the stars. For the most part they look quite similar, even with a powerful telescope: pale blue or pale yellow, big or small. “Hey, there’s Algol the Demon Star. I always forget how early it becomes visible.”

“Let me have a look.” Eli and I switched positions. It looked like Eli was balancing the weight of the telescope, some fifteen feet of metal and glass, on his eyes, like some twisted, surreal Atlas. His neck seemed fragile as a straw.

It was then that I made a decision that was bad, bad, bad.

I knew if Jude found out he would be mad, mad, mad.

But despite the long escape, despite the pot, I was sad, sad, sad.

By the time Elijah had finished staring at the heavens I had taken off my clothes.

“Hmm,” he said when he turned around. “You look beautiful. But do you think this is a good idea?”

“Eli, if you love me you’ll come here right now.”

“Yes.” He did what I wanted. Not because he wanted it too, though I’m sure he did, but because he understood that I understood exactly what I was doing, and knew exactly what I wanted, even knew I

knew that the next day I would be horrified by myself, that I would hate myself for years; still I wanted it. And except for Beauty, Eli was my oldest friend.

“Truth,” he said, kissing me afterward, “I am sorry. For what it’s worth. About everything.”

“I know.”

“And I’ll never tell anyone about what happened. Even Jude. Even though nothing would piss him off more.”

“I know.”

“I mean, I’m really sorry about what’s happening with Beauty. Not just. . . this.”

“Shut up, Elijah.” I sighed. “Want to look at the stars some more?”

“No. I’d really prefer to hold you a while longer. Pretty soon we’ll have to go home.”

“Yes,” I said, thinking about how furious my parents would be if they had noticed my absence. They hadn’t noticed my absence. I was very grateful.

Key XVII

The Star

Divinatory Meanings: Openness. Hope. Selflessness and Sacrifice.

The Outpouring of Feelings.

Reversed: Negativity. Holding Back Emotions.

The first thing we decided was that they weren't stars at all, that they were the eyes of angels, and we meant above all to avoid them. So we planned all our wickedness for cloudy nights, of which there are quite a few in Tennessee, in the summer, or at least there were above Nashville the summer we turned twelve.

When we were thirteen we didn't worry about evil anymore. We decided that maybe the stars were stars after all, and that they should all have names.

"But they do have names," Iz pointed out. She had just become Iz; she had been Isabella before, and still claimed a few Isabella-like traits, like pointing out that the stars had names, all of them.

"Not quite all," said Eli. "And anyway, who knows them? Only astronomers, and that's because most of them have names like R-14690 or Betelgeuse."

"Some stars have beautiful names," said one of us. "Sirius and Rigel. And there are beautiful names for constellations. The Lyre. The Swan."

"And horrible ones, like Canis Major and Minor. And we call Sirius the Dog Star."

"Well, that's true. What would you call Sirius?"

We would call it Isabella, because we found it beautiful. There was a star named Eli, one called Truth, and one called Jude Whitelaw in our constellation, which we named Forever. It is visible in the sky above Nashville much of the time, but often invisible in other places.

One constellation we never saw was the Northern Cross. We decided it should be called Authority and were perfectly happy not to see it.

There was a quarry just outside of town that we never saw by daylight. One of us discovered it on the way back from Memphis and brought the others. No one had hauled off stone from there in twenty years or so. We could build fires to keep warm and leave the radios on by our bikes and the sky was perfectly black where it was not lit by stars.

In a philosophy seminar late that spring we had to read *The Myth of the Other*. We thought that it was a good myth for which to name a constellation. We decided that since Cassiopeia was an African queen The Other would be a fitting name for her. Though we never quite saw a woman there, beautiful, proud, and very strange, we called those stars Other just the same.

We saw the bow of Sagittarius; we saw the scales of Libra. We saw, one perfect evening, the River flow across the sky.

We once named a star that fell the same night. This is impossible, I know, but it happened. We were at Lake Islington and it was near sunrise. Bobcats were still screaming in the hills, and the droning cicadas were keeping Jude and me awake. Boone's wine had solved that problem for the others. But Jude and I were debating whether or not a certain cluster of stars near the western horizon should be called the Top or the Gyroscope when the star in the center slipped sideways then disappeared. We probably called the constellation the Doughnut in the end, I can't remember, but that star I know was called Balance in the beginning.

"You know," someone said, "we should designate some part of the sky as unknowable. You know, here there be tigers, here there be dragons."

"There is a dragon," said someone else. "It's to the far north. We can never see it."

"Then let there be a tiger somewhere we can't see it."

Another night, a year later, when Eli was throwing a party on his dad's boat down in Oak Ridge, the following conversation occurred: "Those two stars there, the kind of reddish ones, we called Nicole's Nipples."

"But only one of them is red, and that's a planet. And there are several stars between them."

"Yeah, well, they were more reddish and more starlike last summer, when I was dating Nicole."

We gave half the eastern sky to poets. They were like gods to us, after all, and we hoped their work would burn in the mind of humanity forever. T.S. Eliot deserved a planet; we gave him Saturn, because it was vast and cold but very beautiful, especially when viewed with a telescope. Sappho got Venus. Allan Ginsberg got Mars. Rimbaud got a comet for obvious reasons. There was a star called John Donne, a Christina Rossetti, a Virgil, a Horace, a Rainer Rilke, and quite a few more, but I can't remember now which was which.

A barista who heard us discussing our project over espresso one rainy night told us certain ancients believed that swans and geese wintered on the moon. We liked to imagine a million white birds floating on the Sea of Tranquility, a million white birds crossing the sky. We called the August meteor shower the Migration and watched it with shivering awe.

We named one star Wormwood, just to keep an eye on it, just in case.

One night when Iz was out of town, sent to her grandmother's because she spent too many nights out with us, lost under the stars, someone threw a brick through the living room window of the modest Queen Anne where her parents lived. Said individual was quoted as screaming something about orbitals, comets and return, but whoever it was was incoherent, and Iz's parents were half asleep.

One of us once made the mistake of explaining our project to an outsider. He said, "You mean you and your friends hang out outside all night and think up names for stars? You bike all the way out of town or go out on the lake to think of names? That's the stupidest shit I've heard in a long time."

We ran out of metaphors early on. How many things can a sky full of stars be like? Dark velvet sprinkled with diamonds, a curtain with a million holes, behind which the sun glitters, a majestic roof fretted with golden fire. If you stare at them for a very long time—every clear night for a summer, perhaps—you realize that the stars aren't like anything else in this world, or anything else in another.

We were eventually forced to start making charts and lists of names and places. There were stars whose names were in dispute, and there was the question of quorum; how many of us had to be there to name a star? And what if there was disagreement about a star's proper name? And what to do about stars named after objects of lust who no longer interested us, after poets we came to distrust? Was the naming of stars a science or an art?

These questions distracted us during a full moon in July. These were bad nights for watching stars. Too much ambient light. When the fight was resolved we could only be thankful that it had not taken place during the new moon, or on the night of the summer solstice.

Various counselors began to be concerned about dark circles under eyes, and much more concerned about listlessness while designing experiments or translation projects.

"Whatever you kids are on you better stop doing it," warned Randall, who was responsible for the boys on Jude and Eli's floor. We were lucky he never told anyone in charge his suspicions.

At this point we could not help ourselves. There were more stars than we had ever realized, and each demanded our attention. They were all unique and shining brightly and deserving of a name.

One night long after we had stopped talking about their beauty Jude turned to me and said, "They don't look warm, do they? I mean, I know that they're all suns but they look cold out there."

I agreed. "It's their whiteness, I think, and the fact they are too far away to actually warm us."

He grinned oddly at me. “But it’s like Shrodinger’s cat. How can we know that they’re actually warm, if they’re all so far away? I mean, we think they’re hot like our sun, but maybe they’re just cold and distant stars.”

He was the physicist; I was a writer. I was not sure how to answer this.

Before going home one morning Eli and I stopped off at a Waffle House to update the charts. We had been naming part of the south western sky after animals that would soon be extinct. At one point Eli set down his coffee and looked at me, then looked away, glaring at a rose petal dawn that was spreading over the city.

“You know, sometimes I wonder what’s the point of it all,” he announced.

“Of the star charts?”

“Of everything.”

He finished his coffee then left so that he could get an hour or two of sleep before going to work. I kept working on the star charts.

On Independence Day we watched fireworks explode over the city. Though we had hoped to disdain them and resent their disruption we had to admit that they were, in their way, as stunning as stars, and in some ways still more so, more colorful, and fleeting.

Some drugs made star-gazing more fun; other drugs, less so. Getting stoned was usually disastrous, and screwdrivers were just a bad idea. The stars animated by LSD were too beautiful for words. We cried hopelessly, lost in the night sky for hours, spooked, overwhelmed, haunted. We could hear the music of the spheres and it was lovely. The experience was almost too much. We tripped just the once and never again.

We did like to watch the stars with a bottle of wine or two. It warmed us when the nights were chilly and otherwise kept us cool. Wine brightened the stars’ fire but did not paralyze us, or leave us dumb.

We stumbled upon a book of Native American astrology at a bookstore one night when we had momentarily run out of names. We were, in fact, looking for books intended for new parents. We found that every tribe had its own name for the constellations, a fact that did not surprise us. It gave us pause nonetheless

A contemporary of ours at a coffee shop one evening told us that Goethe once said that one must trust himself if to give birth to a dancing star. I later found that it was some other German thinker, but the sentiment was certainly true.

Every now and then—in fact, very rarely—we would decide to dance under the stars. It was always a mistake since we were trying to be friends but it was nice too, very warming.

We found that if you stare at anything long enough it will stare back at you. There was a point when I could feel the first star wink into existence in the early evening, even if I had my back to it, even if I was indoors. I began to feel also that the stars were my eyes, and that when I was sleeping just after dawn, or in the afternoon, I often dreamed of staring down at oceans and continents and people from a great distance, unable to affect much, just watching, watching.

At some point we started looking forward to cloudy nights.

Our obsession with naming stars forced us to become more aware of celestial phenomena in general, and of names. That summer I saw ball lightning come crashing down from the heavens and ignite an ancient oak; it seemed to bounce around the higher boughs exactly like a child's toy, or a balloon. I saw a green streak shoot out from our closest star when I was riding out to the quarry at sundown, a sight I attributed to severe exhaustion until I read about the phenomenon years later. One afternoon I saw a double rainbow ringed around the sun like a target, like the aurora around the moon on a night that it will snow.

When we watched the migrating stars of August we were shaken, leveled by awe, but also very tired. Everyone fell asleep on the ground at the quarry for several nights in a row.

One miracle of the night sky astounds me still, that when you gaze up at the night sky the stars wink out one by one. But then, if you close your eyes for half a minute or more, when you open them the sky will be replenished, every star in its place, unless one has fallen while your eyes were shut.

The menstrual cycles of women who do not spend their nights indoors eventually sync with the moon. It happened in our circle by the full moon in June. But menstrual cycles are also affected by the presence of other females, even faster than they are by the moon. The start of school in the fall had predictable results on both our bodies and our minds. We slept at night. Iz and I bled with everyone else.

Our circle of friends began to be known as the Lunatics. This amused us more than anyone else. Eli took to howling majestically from time to time in the lab, or in the library. We still looked at stars on weekend nights in September while Algol the demon star was rising, while it was still warm, when we didn't have other things to do.

There was a meteor shower in early November. We could not decide where the geese were headed. After all, the sky had been streaked with falling stars just three months before and that time we felt that they had been headed moonward. This time they appeared to be falling in all directions. It occurred to us in retrospect that the August stars had been moving earthward too and we were surprised that we hadn't thought of this.

Winters tend to be clear and cold in Tennessee. It seldom snows but there are ice storms that rip full grown trees to splinters. It is not a good time for astrology, but not a bad one either. If one is interested there is the Dyer Observatory, closed much of the summer, and several telescopes at Vanderbilt University. The Cumberland Science Museum features an enormous planetarium, and behind it looms the ruins of Fort Negley, high on a hill; the walls that still stand hold off the wind if one wants to look at the stars unaided.

We went there now and then, and to the quarry, one unnaturally warm December night, but the winter stars did not interest us. A slight tilt of the planet had given us new stars, stars we had not named and would not. We could not see the point.

Key XVIII
The Moon

Divinatory Meanings: Instinct. Wildness. The Mysterious and The Primal.
Reversed: Resisting Our Instinctive Natures. Feeling Disturbed By Our Emotions or Fantasies.

Drawing down the moon is the first spell apprentice witches learn in this country. In theory it is easy—all you need is a cup, a knife, water, wine or milk, a full moon, a circle of protection, and the beneficence of whatever deity of the moon you're calling. Since Isabella, Juliet and I were all virgins and well read in Greek mythology we opted for Artemis. Kneeling in my back yard, which was thick with oak and hickory, it was easy to imagine Her with us, Her bow a silver crescent, Her arrow tipped by a star.

Drawing down the moon is not, by itself, much of a spell; it gives the witch in question power for her true endeavors, at least, those that can be done during a full moon. That means no spells to attract money, or to protect from snakebite or difficult exams. Full moons are good for love magic, though, and that's the sort of magic that twelve year old witches like best. The three of us were very conscious of the irony of invoking Artemis for love magic, and worked hard to rationalize it. Our theory seemed to revolve around the fact that Artemis was both beautiful and a little vain, and she liked being attractive to men: witness the chaos with Paris. Furthermore, you didn't see her cutting off her right breast to make archery simpler, like the Amazons (though we knew very well that your right breast has to be awfully large to interfere with shooting, at least with the bows we used at Islington. We could only assume that Amazons were shooting with horrifically unwieldy bows, which is not especially improbable, given the time when they were believed to have lived). Aphrodite would have been all wrong for our purposes; we didn't want to fornicate with the boys we intended to bespell. We just wanted them to love us forever.

For the second spell we needed the usual ritual implements, listed above, and a few others: attar of roses, a bit of cinnamon, dried red rose petals and lavender flowers, three hairs from the boys we meant to bespell, three silver pins, three silver rings, three small squares of silk, and a mortar and pestle.

Isabella laughed when I brought the last out of the Italian silk bag I had stolen from my mother to store our implements. "Next you'll be carrying a broom around."

"All that nonsense about witches and brooms has more to do with male fears of female masturbation than flying," I pointed out, a little miffed. I was already planning to do my doctoral dissertation on magic as performative speech act, and was taking it quite seriously.

"Then why does Baba Yaga fly around in a mortar?" Juliet asked, genuinely perplexed. "Surely Russian men didn't fear pestles!"

“They’re pretty phallic,” I had to admit. Suddenly my hand seemed smaller, wrapped around the pestle, the rhythm of grinding herbs a bit more sinister. “But it probably has more to do with a fear of spell casting than auto-eroticism.”

“I should think,” Isabella said sniffily, “They would have been better off worrying about masturbation.”

“No negativity,” Juliet said. “You’ll ruin the experiment.”

“Nimue seemed pretty confident that the spell works,” I reminded them.

“Nimue also claims to have trapped Merlin in a cave of glass. Hey, do you suppose Snow White started out as a man?”

“Different Nimues, first of all.” Nimue was the use name of the author of the grimoire I was studying at the time, though my research indicated that she was really a Susanna Dendree, burned as a witch near Oxford in 1522. That the woman was even literate is interesting, from an academic point of view. Did the woman who taught her “witchcraft” also teach her how to write? Why would she, given that a book of shadows could only increase the possibility of suffering the brank, at best?

Beauty and I had managed to visit the Museum of Torture in London the summer before, and I was painfully aware of the risks Susanna had taken. I have never been known for exceptional sensitivity, but at the Museum of Torture I very nearly fainted. It wasn’t the branks or the Iron Maidens that disturbed me so, or even the horrific Torture of the Goat, which is performed by soaking a traitor, or witch, or homosexual, or heretic’s feet in water for a few days, then allowing a goat to lick the foot bones clean—it was a saw, an ordinary, two-man saw such as you might find in any village hidden among trees. The woodcut accompanying said instrument depicted in a use I never would have independently imagined: a man was hung naked, upside down on a St. Andrew’s cross, and the saw applied between his legs, cutting the victim in half. This was a popular torture for homosexuals during the Inquisition; the because the victim was upside down, death came after hours of indescribable suffering.

Who would dare to love another man in those days? How did anyone deny the undeniable fact that God is God and Jesus His son? How did anyone pass on a spell for love your grandmother told you about when you were small when that could brand you a witch? Strange days, and stranger still that men and women could be so brave in loving.

Nimue’s grimoire was full of perfectly accurate information about herbal medicine, better than the physickers at Oxford would have known at the time; it was this, more than anything, that convinced me to try the love spell. Of course, as an experiment, it was nearly useless. The spell promised endless love; it would take millennia to determine its effectiveness. But it was the only spell that we could perform without going shopping, so that was the spell we cast.

After grinding the flower petals into a fine and sweet-scented dust, we dampened it with the attar of roses, making it into a strange sort of dough. Then we wound a hair each from the heads of our chosen boys around a silver ring. Each of us took a handful of the flowery dough and rolled it into a ball with a silver ring in the center, then we stabbed each ball with a silver pin, then wrapped the whole thing in silk. We said a few words of witchy chant, tossed our things back in the bag, and went into the house to eat brownies and watch “Labyrinth” for the fifteenth time. It was then and continues to be my favorite movie. I love David Bowie and Muppets almost equally.

“So what now?” Juliet asked during the opening credits.

“Well,” I said, flipping through my photocopies of *The Grimoire of Nimue*, “We just hang onto the little bags, keep them near our hearts for the next twenty eight days, then we open them up again. After that, as long as the ring is still intact, the gentlemen in question will be ours forever.”

“So whose hair did you use?” she asked me. It was common knowledge that she was trying to ensnare Brian Robbins, and Isabella Jack Fortescue. Since there were eleven kids in our form, and four of us were girls, there was not a terrific lot of choice in the matter.

“Couldn’t you tell?” I asked. “You were right there while I was winding it.”

“I was *concentrating*. Didn’t the spell say we had to think about the boy in question while we did it?”

“Uh oh,” said Isabella. “What if you were concentrating on the boy in question’s roommate while you wound the hair?”

“Since when did you like Morgan?” I asked, mystified.

“Not me, sweetheart. I saw the color of that hair of yours.”

“Did you pick *Jude*?” Juliet demanded. “Ick. What about Eli?”

“What about him?”

“*Hello?* He’s the hot one.”

“Neither of them is hot. Trust me.”

“Yeah, but Eli’s going to be hot. Have you seen his brother?”

“He’s dating Beauty as we speak.”

“No kidding?”

“Nope. And Eli’s too unpredictable. God knows what he’ll be like in ten years. But Jude will be exactly the same forever.”

“Yahweh knows,” Isabelle said, in a perfect imitation of Eli’s imperfect imitation of some unknown relative. At the same time Juliet said, “And you want to be in love with a twelve year old geek forever?”

“Think of it this way,” I said. “If Eli loved me forever, but I didn’t love him, he would probably bludgeon me to death with the Talmud, or a copy of *S/Z*. Jude would just pine to death.”

“Jude is a pretty good chemist. He could poison you.”

“But he wouldn’t.”

“He might poison himself.”

“Maybe,” I conceded. “He does seem the type.”

Just then the front door opened and in swept Beauty, all white silk and blazing eyes. She dropped her purse on the coffee table in the foyer and strode into the den, descending on our brownies like some savage goddess.

“Hi, girls,” she said, in precisely the same tone my mother would use, were she there and not in Amsterdam. “Having a nice night?”

“Fantastic,” I said. “Go away.”

“Tell us about your date first,” Isabella begged.

“Oh, you’re too young to worry about such things.” She tripped off down the hall.

“YOU’RE THREE YEARS OLDER THAN I AM!” I screamed at her back. Then I said to Juliet, “I ought to put a curse on her, the bitch.”

“Oh, you’ll like her eventually,” Juliet said confidently. “Most sisters do.”

Since Juliet was on her way to becoming a talented sociologist, I tried to believe her. However, all that evening I wished that losing a sister was as easy in real life as it was in books or movies: you think something awful about someone and they turn up dead before you can apologize. That’s the way things are in fiction, and, more often than you might suppose, the way things are in real life.

Key XIX
The Sun
Divinatory Meanings: Happiness.
Reversed: Happiness and Strife.

We had skipped school, Eli and I, for no reason at all, except maybe to prove to ourselves that we could, and that no one would notice we were gone. We left during an outdoor assembly; all twenty six students, fifteen teachers, fourteen counselors, and three janitors were all watching an 8/11ths eclipse. Eli and I walked from Islington to West End Park, stopping at Subway for a foot long veggie sub we split, talking about art, in the curiously cold light of night eating the sun, bite by bite. We had recently decided that we would both be writers, famous, if possible, but at the very least critically acclaimed. It was still fairly bright but cool. Early autumn. The sky was very blue.

It took an hour to walk to the park because we walked very slowly. We didn't want to draw attention to ourselves, though in fact no one paid any attention to us. We had discussed a cover story, but there was no truly compelling reason for two eight year olds to be wandering around Nashville in the middle of a school day. Everyone outdoors that day had an index card, or a sheet of cardboard, or some other opaque thing pricked by a single pin. They were staring at the ground. There weren't that many people outside anyway.

When we got to the park it was almost empty. I should not have been surprised, given that you can see the sun just about anywhere, during the day. It wasn't like Halley's comet or some faint, rare, falling star. In fact, when we squinted up at the sun we saw only the usual blinding brightness, no sign of the moon at all. We put on our sunglasses, mine huge black cat's eyes, Eli's small blue circles, and saw the same thing.

We sat under a tree and talked about Art, how I wanted to be Henry James, E.M. Forster and William Faulkner, but black and female and young, how Eli wanted to be Thomas Pynchon, William Burroughs, and John Barth, but without substance abuse problems. We talked some more.

All around us danced crescents of light created by the *camera obscura* of gaps in the leaves while we talked about Art, talked about Art, talked about Art.

Key XX

Judgment

Divinatory Meaning: A Time of Great and Positive Change, Particularly in Self-Perception

Reversed: Resisting the Knowledge that Something has Changed

Jude takes a deep breath, rereads a page, lets it out. He puts the papers he has read in a tidy stack on my desk. The animals stir.

"You did not," he says quietly, "Have sex with Elijah."

I ponder, You never asked, and, Certainly not—this is a text, my darling, full of lies.

"Yes," I say. "I thought at the time you would rather not know."

He puts a hand in his hair and leaves it there, he frowns, and he begins to pace.

"Just Eli? Just once?"

"Yes," and, "Yes."

"You fucked him." And, "I can't believe it." And, "At thirteen?"

"Seven years ago now."

"Did you use protection?"

"For Christ's sake, Jude, what do you think? We were fucked up but we weren't stupid. And it's not like Eli was crawling with disease then."

"How do you know?"

"That is a stupid question."

"That was not an answer."

"Juvenile sophistry? You're acting a bit out of character, Jude."

"No," he says, and he picks up my paper weight. It is the seed pod of an Indonesian tree I have never seen, and looks something like a stiff brown sea urchin, and smells like cinnamon. He throws it in the fire and says, "Yes."

"Are you writing this down?" he asks. "A record for our progeny who won't ever exist?"

Exeunt Jude and his fury. On the stage remain the cat and the dog, the desk, minus one exquisite seed pod, bought for me ages ago on the Left Bank by my now dead sister for a couple of francs, and me, and a minute but growing collection of cells, quite recently a zygote but now a fetus, and perhaps, with time, a child.

Key XXI
The World

Divinatory Meanings: Understanding. Perfection. A Sense of Oneness with the World
Reversed: Isolation from Others. Confusion.

Beauty decided to start with the letter S, because of Snakes and Snails and Spiders. It was the summer I turned five, and Beauty eight, and we desperately needed something to do.

“And I find snakes very interesting,” she said, eyeing the bookcase where the Worldbooks were kept. They were a birthday present from Grandma, and Beauty was extremely proud. “According to Freud snakes are phallic symbols.”

“How can snakes be symbols of anything?” I asked, chewing on a fingernail. My mother had told me a thousand times that chewing my nails put me at risk for nematodes and a variety of other parasites, but I really liked the habit. It comforted me. Nana had told me that if I chewed my hair instead I could produce a bezoar, which, once I died and it was removed from my stomach would protect the bearer from poisoning. However, I could not see the point in picking up another bad habit just to benefit whoever cut open my stomach. “Titania isn’t a symbol of anything.” Titania was our tabby cat with six toes. She had rather foolishly befriended me one afternoon when I was playing at the park, and Mr. Coleman, the secret service agent who was watching me, let me take her home.

Her predecessor, Periblepsis, had been my father’s cat, and had lived with him in Detroit, in the house where his parents still live but I have never seen, in Cambridge, in Oak Ridge, in Nashville, briefly. It is impossible now to imagine my father sufficiently engaged with the world to see a kitten in an alley, lure it home, feed it with the money he made by winning a Ford design competition, hiding it in his single at Harvard, petting it while he persuaded my mother to fall in love with him over the phone, half a city away. The cat stayed with him when my mother left for the first time, when he took the job offer at Oak Ridge. Periblepsis probably knew my father better than any other creature on earth. My father had already begun his retreat from the world when Periblepsis died, when I was two, but he spent the entire day in the real world, comforting Beauty and me, building a simple pine box coffin, and burying it out back near the creek.

Of what is Periblepsis a symbol?

“That’s a stupid question, Truth,” Beauty observed, scratching the back of one thin brown ankle with the toes of her other foot. Though we were not allowed to walk around outside without our shoes—there was still a possibility of contracting hookworms, though Brentwood was the most civilized suburb of Nashville—we were encouraged to take off our shoes by the front door, to avoid tracking in dirt. “How are you going to be literary if you don’t understand symbolism?”

“I understand snakes as symbols in literature, and with the caduceus and everything, but I don’t know what Freud has to do with anything. Or phallicae.”

"Not *phallicae*, Truth, those're mushrooms. Jeez. Phallic symbolism, in dreams in stuff. You know. The penis."

"Do you dream about penises?" I asked, amazed, and wondering if I should tell Nana about this. She thought that Beauty knew too much for a little girl, and was leading me towards evil too. It worried her that our parents were atheists.

"NO, ignoramus. When you dream about snakes, you're actually dreaming about penises."

"I don't think so," I said firmly. "When I dream about snakes I'm dreaming about snakes."

She shrugged. "I don't know why I bother. You're too young to understand, or too stupid. Go back to your Shakespeare and your Charles Dickens."

"I am not too young or too stupid! I'm just as smart as you are, ask Dr. Withers!" Dr. Withers was our psychologist, whom we visited once a week. At first it was fun; he would give us little word puzzles and black and white blocks that we would have to arrange in certain patterns with time limits. For the last year or so he mostly wanted to talk about our feelings, which neither of us found very entertaining.

"You are stupid, you're just too dumb to know. You're definitely stupid compared to me and Mater and Pater. Maybe one of the neighborhood kids will play with you, they're all dumb."

I started to cry. The neighborhood kids would not play with me, and Beauty had no idea whether or not they were really dumb because they wouldn't play with her either. She used to cry about it too, and ask Mom and Dad why we had to be black, because it seemed awfully unfair, and it was.

"I am not dumb. I can read the encyclopedia too, and my Shakespeare and my Dickens. You can't even understand Shakespeare," I insisted.

"Of course I can. I can understand anything I want. That's what it means to be a genius. But if I knew everything about science and everything about literature, where would that leave you? What would you learn? Art? Be thankful I'm leaving you anything at all," she said, stretching as high as she could and plucking the Sn-Sz book from the shelf. She put the book on her head and headed upstairs to her bedroom, showing off. I hated her. Usually she was nicer than that but summer time put us both in bad moods. Even though we hated everyone and everyone hated us at Islington in those early years, with the notable exceptions of Adam, Eli, Mr. Charley and Jude, there was a library there that was even bigger than the one my parents had. And the school let Beauty do whatever she wanted in the science lab almost all day. But Islington was not an enlightened place. We believed my mother when she said Oak Ridge was worse, but it was still a problem.

Apologia: roses, not vulgar red or virginal white, but chocolate roses, which shade from a brown pink like the skin on my wrists to cream at the base; a seed pod from an Indonesian tree I have never seen, FedExed here from the Peabody Museum Shop, wrapped in gold and red paper; another passport: I'm Irish now, called Mary Katherine.

I don't think I want this baby.

Even on my tippy toes I couldn't reach the encyclopedias, so I had to find Nana. She was folding clothes in my parents' bedroom, with her little dog Pumpkin playing with a sock by her ankles.

"Nana, have you seen Titania anywhere?"

"She was back in your room when I was making beds. I haven't seen her since."

"What was she doing?"

"Cat things."

"What kind of cat things?"

"Washing, napping."

"I do those things too."

"You never nap, and I've never seen you wash without someone making you."

"I do sometimes, when someone comes over."

"Well, I never seen you."

"I do."

I tried to entice Pumpkin into playing with me by dangling one of my father's long black socks in his face. He ignored me and kept on chewing on one of Beauty's little lacy anklets.

"Child, you just come in here to devil me or did you have some sort of purpose?"

"I'm not deviling you, am I? Am I deviling?" I loved that verb, and said it whenever I could. Nana and I were the only ones who ever used it.

"What do you want, Truth?" I knew Nana was mad at me because she usually called me Ananda, because she thought that Truth was not suited to little girls.

"Would you get a book down for me?" I asked.

She sighed, and finished putting one of my mother's lab coats on a hanger. Then she walked down the hall, followed by Pumpkin the Pomeranian, followed by me.

"What book do you want, honey?"

"I want the H book of the encyclopedia," I said, pointing enthusiastically.

"Your sister know you're reading her books?" she asked suspiciously.

"She said I could."

"Alright then," she said, handing me the book. I liked the look of it, the deep brown leather, the tan spine, but especially the gold lettering. H was just one book, unlike S, and not as thick as Sn-Sz. Though I was not as good at lab work as Beauty I could read just as fast, so I knew that if she could finish the Worldbook I could too. But I might have to give up my Dickens, which I didn't want to do. I dreamed of finding different parents, ones who would rejoice upon finding me, ones who thought I was

special. Brentwood was certainly a nicer place to grow up than Victorian London, but that did not preclude my fantasies.

“Thank you,” I said, and skipped upstairs to my bedroom. It was the most wonderful place on earth. My parents had allowed me to use some of the money I won in an essay contest to redecorate my room, and so now everything was pink or blue, and I had the canopy bed I had wanted since I was three. I also bought bookshelves with a sliding ladder attached, like the ones they have at the public library downtown, which had fascinated me since I was a very little girl. Titania was sleeping on my pillow, looking like a princess’s cat.

“But soft,” I said, pressing my face against hers. She mewled softly in her sleep so I left her alone, curling up at the end of my bed with the H book. I had selected it because I wanted to learn about the human body.

At the same time, I’m not certain I want to throw it away.

One phone call to my mother’s house, to my sister, and I could be anyone, anywhere, within a few hours—

Or I could be no one, no where, without even picking up the phone.

But the world is a pretty place, if you can accept death.

And it’s within this paradox that beauty thrives.

All that summer we read, *Beauty and I*, with a childish belief in the possibility of sharing wisdom through encyclopedic writing. The editors of *World Book* would have been better off meeting in Morocco to encode all of human wisdom in a series of painted cards. The D volume cannot contain Death or the Devil; the J volume does not teach Justice or Judgment. Of course, neither can the cards themselves contain or teach much of anything. However, unlike volumes of an encyclopedia, Tarot cards can be shuffled, rearranged, to make stories, and that is where the truth lies.