

## Conform the Soul

by

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*“There is something which unites magic and applied science (technology) while separating them from the “wisdom” of earlier ages. For the wise men of old, the cardinal problem of human life was how to conform the soul to objective reality, and the solution was wisdom, self-discipline, and virtue. For the modern, the cardinal problem is how to conform reality to the wishes of man, and the solution is a technique.”*

— C.S. Lewis

Hayden and Toby, 2000

That year, we all got really into paintball, you know. Simon’s grandad had lead the O.G. paintball team that won the first world cup, the one that made every company in the paintball world try to seek out his hand, his face, his words, his name for an endorsement. The Stingers. Mascot was a bee, kinda like Jesus in the Catholic church, only less packed with meaning cause I think they just thought of the little bruises from the balls. Stingers. Anyways, Grandad Greg (not mine, his) got all this free swag and free CO<sup>2</sup> tanks and guns and balls. Lots and lots of different balls: swirl and metallic and yellow. We got done out there in the back twenty where he’d stacked pallets for speedball and we set off a smokebomb we’d handmade in my mom’s kitchen, the third in a series of smokebombs the first of which nearly burnt down my mother’s house (more on that later), and it filled the field with so much smoke that we had to quit. Grandad Greg asked me if I wanted to hop on his John Deere lawn mower and I did and started turning round and round in large looping S and Z and W and O and X and K shapes, trying to keep them guessing. I’ll be honest, paintballs getting shot from thirty vindictive twelve-year-old boys, hitting the side of the open-air machine you’re driving is... well it’s freaking terrifying. It’s terrible. Lateral hail in a roofless, wallless tin shack. But I only got shot twenty-one times. They emptied forty hoppers (some reloaded) and only hit me twenty-one times.

For perspective, each hopper holds about two-hundred balls. Times forty. That’s eight-thousand paintballs they shot at me while I was on that lawn mower. Eight thousand. Hit the tractor a ton, but only hit ME twenty-one times. That’s a .26% success rate. 99.7% of them didn’t hit me.

I didn’t want to chalk that up to magic but...

I also *really* wanted to chalk that up to magic.

We went in and cleaned off and it was the New Year's Eve party. The Willennium. Some of you encountering this won't remember this and some of you encountering this will remember it quite well, but people in their every-twelve-year-apocalyptic thinking swore up and down that because computers had been programmed with their internal clocks to think of time in terms of a double-digit rather than a quadruple-digit input, once the clock rolled over from 1999 to 2000, the internal clocks of the computers would roll from 99 to 00, functionally sending their processors and hard drives back in time, predicating every *past* memory on a future past memory, creating a time loop, and collapsing mainframes all around the world. It was the sort of come-to-Jesus moment the tech and infrastructure worlds in America needed in order to reconsider how dependent we've become upon our machines, but they applied it weirdly, stocking up on water and canned food and whatnot. A solid EMP blast from a solar flare could do as much as easily.

Anyways, everyone was going to die and eat each other, that was the gist.

We eighth graders cared little for all of that, paintball birthday and midnight New Year's ball drop and all, but we still had the fear at the back of our brains like many other parts of life at that age. A visceral, carnal, I will go level-ten-Lord-of-the-Flies on you kind of fear that hid beneath all the Tomagotchies and Furbees and replays of *Barbie Girl* and hormones and the rest. The room filled up with the smells of nacho chips and cheese crackers and M&Ms and bad boy body spray. Everyone was camped out on the sectional in the basement and playing pool and foosball with one another. Simon and I went into the paintball workshop where the breaker box hid right around the time the clock started counting down and everyone had armed themselves with party poppers and had donned plastic year 2000 glasses, eyeballs in the interstitial zeros, seeing through numbers that could crash the whole world. Our fellow students counted down the seconds. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one.

On "ZERO! HAP—" we flipped the switch on the main breakers, turning off not only the T.V. but the power to the whole house.

Girls screamed.

As did tough football guys.

It was one of the cleanest, best-timed pranks ever. I told Grandad Remmy the next day and he laughed for days and immediately went to The Elks to tell his buddies. He was so damn proud. Hay and I walked in to them that evening after he'd been bragging on me and all his buddies — the former New York dancer lady that ran the theater, the golfing buddies, local professors at the community college — most of them turned to me and Hayden and shouted, "It's the Moon Boys!"

"Moon Boys?" Old Man Rooney asked. He was old as shit. How he hadn't died ages ago baffled me. I think some of his organs had crystallized through all of the stout beer over the years.

"You ain't heard the Moon Boys story, Old Rooney?" Grandad Remmy asked.

"Well no, I don't think I have," Old Man Rooney said.

"Well shit, which of you wants to tell it?" he asked us.

I looked at Hayden.

Hayden was blushing but chuckling low, looking back.

We both shrugged.

"Fine, I'll tell it," Remmy said. "Oh boy oh boy I love this story. Well these two — how old were you boys?"

“T’s six, I think,” Hay said.

“That’d make me eight or something,” I said.

“Right,” Remmy said. “Well my son Bren, you all know Bren.”

They nodded and tipped their lite beers and one munched on them really good hot wings The Elks does, you know the ones if you’ve been around.

“Well Bren was at my grandkids’s Mimi’s realtor’s office, you know the one just around the corner, Main Street entrance.”

They knew and nodded. Used to belong to another family name. Some were already giggling in their beers.

“Their Mimi’d asked their daddy to fix the back porch, that little concrete patio in the sea of black asphalt. Thing’d cracked and you can only patch a bad patch like that so many times over the years so Bren had to get it done quick and he and Danny couldn’t find no babysitter that day, for whatever reason, so Bren took the boys to work. The boys Mimi doesn’t care if they mess around with all of her office supplies and things, right? Well Bren’s out there, jackhammering it all up and got it shovelled into the wheel barrel and cleaned up. And he realizes, as he starts mixing the concrete, that he hasn’t seen hide nor hair nor heard no peep from neither of them boys in the last hour or more. Which meant they’s either playing better than they’ve ever played before or they broke something, right?”

Rooney said, “Right.”

“Bren steps over the hole in the concrete and he goes into the back office and hears this *boomp-sfish, boomp-sfish, boomp-sfish* sound coming from the main room. Don’t sound good at all. And there are Tobias and Hayden, buckass naked, both their asses up on the copy machine photocopying their asses through a whole goddamn ream of paper.”

They cackled.

“That ain’t the worst of it! They’d been up to it for that whole hour, had to have been, cause half of the office was already wallpapered in black-and-white toner copies of their butts!”

Oh they laughed. “To the Moon Boys!” the whole bar shouted.

I blushed.

Hay blushed.

We both laughed and waved. They called us that every time we walked in somewhere our Grandad or Papa had been. Most of them mozied smelling of belched beer and bass and I sat up on the sable leather barstool, little twelve-year-old prepubescent legs dangling down, asking Grandad Remmy, “Do you think we could really go to the Moon?”

“Why not?” Grandad Remmy said. “Didn’t I tell you the Good Lord sent me part of the moon one time? That’s how I fixed up those oil boys good.”

“Part of the moon?” I asked.

“Well,” The Good Lord said, “it was more of a space rock. Something from the deep womb of the worlds. The Vale.”

“Eh,” Remmy said, “you’re ruining a good story.”

“If you think the most important story is the one *you’re* telling, Remmy, then yes. I am.”

Remmy didn’t have nothing to say to that. “Anyways, sure, Toby, you boys can really go to the moon if you want. You’re the Moon Boys, ain’t you?”

“Sure,” I said. “But I’m not gonna be an astronaut. I don’t want to do it with chemicals and steel and trigonometry.”

“Well trigonometry’s beautiful and so’s astronomy!”

“Of course, Grandad,” I said. “But that’s not the way I wanna go.”

“Well pray. Ask for a miracle or use magic.”

“Well I told Hay I wanted to, but to find that kind of spell, I gotta find out where magic comes from.”

“I can tell you,” he said. “It’s simple and good, even if it’s hard.”

“Hay says I need to check with the Pentecostals.”

Grandad Remmy thought for a moment. “That’s one way, I guess,” he said. “Though seems a bit roundabout to me.”

We felt The Good Lord grinning.

Remmy said, “There’s three of them that still try to go for miracles. There’s the fake snake handlers, the real snake handlers, and the ones that don’t do none of that. First one’s in Iuka. Second one’s in Kell. Third one’s in Odin. I can drive you if you’d like, it’s a bit of a hike for a young boy in this day and age.”

“That’d be great,” I said.

First we went to Iuka.

Hayden came along. “I need to shake some hands and kiss some babies if I’m ever gonna get a job.” He’s ten years old at this point.

The mean kids called the kids from Iuka the I-puke-ans. It was mean, but all kids are mean, so it didn’t seem any meaner than kids on the East Coast calling each other Massholes and New Fuckers, like children do. Well not *your* children, of course, just everyone else’s children and everyone else’s children’s influence on *your* children the few times *your* children get that mean. Even religious children get that mean. Maybe especially the religious ones, desperate for something living they can grab hold of, even if the living thing’s a mean old crocodile in the English language, the language of the poor. The Iuka Pentecostals handled snakes, but they didn’t handle snakes with courage. That conjugates weird on paper. I meant that they didn’t *courageously* handle snakes. I’m sure all snakes have courage. Except Barry. He’s a cowardly little shit cobra.

That seems like a weird thing but after five minutes there, I realized that Barry, their in-house cobra, had been defanged. Completely. How the thing still survived, I had no clue — maybe he had a feeding tube or something, but it was all a charade. When they spoke in tongues, they spoke in languages with only five or seven phonemes, ten tops, which either made it the dumbest language ever spoken — and by angels at that — or meant that there was a long line of bullshit passed down from one Pentecostal five-phoneme user and the next. Bable, that’s what it was, not xenolalia, not proper translation without a translator, and nothing angelic about it. They had, like the spiritists before them, little switches that would rap on tables and little levers that would move paintings and little ways to pull out chairs without help and so on. It’s the sort of thing Houdini spent his life debunking. I asked Barry the Cowardly little shit cobra — whom I felt much more sorry for, given that they pulled his teeth out — how he was doing.

“You get tired of living, Toby,” He said. Though “tired” and “Toby” sounded a bit slurred due to lack of teeth and excess of forked tongue. He was the kind of snake that needed a miraculous healing of the Pentecostal variety.

“Sorry Barry,” I said.

“Thanksssss for caring.” He pouted.

I didn’t know snakes could pout, but man they looked sad: as if the snake Moses raised up in the desert that the people might look on and be healed had not been elevated as a remedy, but rather as a crucified example to all other snakes.

Meanwhile, Hayden’s in the back handing out business cards he’d hand-drawn during the service on the back of the church bulletin.

So Grandad Remmy took me to the next one. The Kell Pentecostals.

The Kell Pentecostals looked nothing like the Iuka Pentecostals. The latter felt like rich or middle-class farmers who wanted to go to the rural version of a magic sideshow. They *wanted* to feel fooled. They *wanted* the shock and awe. The former, the Kell Pentecostals, seemed to want real courage, real faith, real hope, real miracles and they went about it in the dumbest way possible: not a leap of faith, but a leap of folly.

Unlike Barry the cowardly little shit cobra whose poor teeth had been taken, their water moccasin was very real, very fanged, very venomous.

“That’s your cousin,” Remmy said.

“Who?” Hayden asked.

Remmy pointed to the preacher. “One’t handles snakes and tries to heal people.”

“*That’s* our *cousin*?” I asked.

“Son of my great uncle. Both of them Pentecostal preachers that handle snakes and try to heal people. Would’ve been better off in prison just like his daddy would’ve. No better than *his* uncle, that one.”

“What happened to *his* uncle?” I asked. “You mean Great-Great-Grandad Patrick?”

“Other one,” Remmy said. “Other one had a friend who doubted his wife’s honor, so he gave him both barrels of a shotgun right to the belly. Murdered him right there on the porch.”

“He do jail like you?” Hay asked.

“Ten years.”

“Ten years *for murder*?” I asked.

“Sometimes murder’s justified,” Remmy said and spat towards our cousin.

Our distant cousin’s congregation grown very accustomed to handling this thing by the tail — some of their students had even grown up and become nationally renowned herpetologists at world-renowned public zoos and others professionally hunted gators in the bayou. That didn’t keep folk from getting bit, though. And I saw one get bit that day and as they started to die and dropped the water moccasin, Grandad Remmy said, “Nope, nope, nope: we’re out.”

“Oh come on, Grandad, let’s see what happens.”

“See this scar?” He pointed to his cheek where he had a Heidelberg dueling scar. “That’s from a groundhog. If I can’t beat a groundhog, I ain’t taking on no water snake out of water.”

Hayden said, “Yeah, but maybe I could be a snake handler when I grow up!”

“Yeah,” Grandad Remmy said, “You and Indiana Jones. Ask him how that worked out.”

“I’d like to be Indy Jones!”

“Then hit your history books and then we can talk snakes,” Remmy said.

That kid died that week along with two others. In their obituary, it said they didn’t have enough faith. Their mothers cowrote the obit.

But the Odin Pentecostals wanted neither a show nor a show of strength, neither a slick-tongued consensus-building preacher nor a brute force strongman daredevil playing with the fates of folk. Rather they wanted to try and fail. We went back several weeks in a row. They didn’t really want to speak in tongues. They didn’t really want magic in their religion at all or some sort of trickery or daredevilry that tempted fate. They seemed to just be faithful folk living out their lives near the old Texarco oil fields where Great Granddaddy John David used to deliver milk from out of his milk cart.

We went into this small chapel that had exchanged hands through multiple denominations over the years. Young’s Chapel.

“You know,” Grandad Remmy said, “that grandfather clock I got?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Like Dad’s?”

“Your dad and your Aunt Mary and your Aunt Gwen all got one, yes. Well Daddy John. Your Great Granddaddy John David, he hand made those out of the old pews from here.”

“Really?”

“Yup. And we got married here once. Cheap preacher.”

“How much he charge you to get married?”

“Nothing. I beat him shooting dice on the altar before the service.” Remmy cackled. “Old Navy fool.” He laughed.

We sat and listened for a stretch to the Pentecostal preacher. This one sounded a little more studied. They didn’t have a snake, whether a shitty cobra like Barry or a deadly moccasin. They didn’t really care for any of that. Preacher said they didn’t speak in tongues cause they didn’t have anyone who spoke any language other than English, though he swore up and down that he was fluent in Spanish for the better part of five minutes. They just had their service like any old and steady church service that’s been meeting for generations out in the countryside. Then at the end of his sermon — part four of a series in Mark that covered the four arenas Jesus held power over — he asked for people who came up with sicknesses and prayed over them. “Cancer be reduced. Wounds be healed.” A young girl came up with her left leg about six inches, maybe even a foot, shorter than her right. “How long,” he asked her.

“Since birth,” said she.

“Leg grow,” he said. “Match the right.”

She sat down.

He yanked on her leg. “All the way. Come on.” He yanked. He lined her heels up. The left had grown about five inches, both fo them only an inch off now. “Not quite,” he said. “Grow on, leg, come on now. In Jesus’ name.” It grew another inch and lined up. “Stand,” he said.

She did. She had no limp and started crying and giggling simultaneously, running and leaping around the room like a little fawn.

Hayden danced with them and would stop every so often and say, “I’m Hayden Broganer and I’m the hardest working kid you ever seen. Here’s my card.” These he’d made out of the preacher’s business

cards, scratching out the name and number and address and filling it in with his. Hay made a lot of people laugh at that.

After everyone cleared out and the worship music died down, Remmy and I stood in the back of the receiving line.

The Preacher finished up with the last woman — a weepy, shriveled old thing complaining about unsealed mason jars — and he approached us. “Good morning, fellas, how can I pray for you?”

“Morning Howie,” Remmy said.

“Remmy.”

Pastor Howard Holden wore a high-thread count, threadbare old blue button down collar with a well-used hanky in the front pocket. His chubby face looked like the surface of the moon. “How can I help you boys?” He looked at Remmy.

Remmy looked down at me.

I said, “Where’s magic like that come from?”

“Well that’s a miracle, that ain’t magic. Ain’t no control I have over none of that.” He was pointing at the young girl bounding around the churchyard.

“Yeah, but still, where’s it from?” I asked.

“Well the Good Lord,” he said. “Didn’t you listen to my sermon?”

“Kinda.”

“I don’t blame you. Hot in here, close to lunch, and I’m a boring old fart.” He smiled.

“It’s not that. I’m just trying to figure out why I don’t know more magic.”

“Well it’s like I said. The Good Lord’s gonna fix the whole world and firmament and it’s knowing that that makes us speak over these broken things and make them brand new.”

“That’s all well and good,” I said, “but it doesn’t get me closer to making new magic.”

“Well sure it does. You just pray and ask and wait.”

“I want to *tell* the leg to grow.”

“I did.”

“Yeah but you’re not really the one doing it,” I said.

He laughed.

Remmy laughed.

The preacher laughed harder.

Grandad Remmy said, “Oh you are so, so young, Toby.”

I huffed out of there and we went on to the Methodists.

“Oh that building,” Remmy said. “Oh Lord. Oh man, I hate going in there.”

“What?” I asked. “It’s pretty.”

“Oh not you too, Toby.

“What, Grandad?”

“Well I had this interior designer back when I still had a company.”

“Back before prison?”

“Back before even Bren was talking. This lady...” Remmy shook his head. “She was crazy. Maybel was her name. Had the weirdest ideas and strangest taste of anyone I ever met. She did all these nuts things.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Well one time she had me cut all these shelves three inches wide to hang in the house, this was back when I still did spec houses, and she had me and the boys hang all these three inch wide shelves up around the ceiling and halfway through I asked her, ‘Maybel, what on Earth are these things for?’ and she said, ‘Well they’re for books.’ And I said, ‘Oh you have got to be pulling my leg.’ ‘Oh no,’ she said, ‘they’ll fit.’ I said, ‘Oh good grief, Maybel, come on: there’s no such thing as a three-inch wide book.’ ‘There will be,’ she said. I said, ‘What’s that supposed to mean.’ She pointed out to her car and its trunk and backseat and I’ll be damned if it wasn’t chock full of hardcover books. I said, ‘Maybel, ain’t none of those that’ll fit on that three-inch shelf.’ She said, ‘Yet. Go get your tablesaw.’ Well she was a crazy old fool: tablesaw ain’t something you can just get like a hammer cause of the weight of the thing, but I had her pull her car around to the side of the building where we’d set it up next to the outlet. And she just dumped the books out and said, ‘Go to it.’ And I said, ‘Go to what?’ She wanted all them books cut in half so that they were no deeper than three inches against the wall. And I felt like a damned half-Nazi doing it that ways like the firemen in that old Bradbury book — Celsius 521 or whatever it was — but I cut them and then she went and I’ll be damned if she didn’t glue every one of them right onto the drywall and ceiling after having us hang all those rough hewn three-inch shelves. And it looked good, I won’t lie, but man she was crazy. Put tinsel on a ceiling one time. Made us pour big old concrete blocks with wildflower and vegetable and tree seeded soil sprinkled in every so often so that the plants and trees and things would grow up and the sprouts and roots would tear the concrete apart, calling it an art installation when that’s basically what every abandoned parking lot in the county looks like anyways, man she was crazy.”

“Granddad?”

“Yeah Tov.”

“What’s that got to do with the Methodist church?”

“Well everything, Toby. See I had the Methodist church job on the remodel.”

“The one they just did?”

“Well no, Tov, I ain’t in business no more, you know that. I can’t do business in Southern Illinois after that trick I pulled. I mean the remodel one before that big one. My team remodeled the church and Maybel’s one of the congregants there, you see.”

“So she got hired to design the inside.”

“Yes sir.”

“It’s pretty on the inside, I told you that Granddad.”

“Yeah,” Hay said. “It sure is pretty.”

“Oh not both of you, don’t you two start too,” he said.

“Well the ceiling in that room’s got that weird shape, what with the gold and black colors.”

“You know why it’s shaped weird?” Granddad asked.

“Why?” Hayden asked.

“IT’S EGG CARTONS! EGG CARTONS, DON’T YOU SEE? THAT AND JUST PAINTED WOOD AT THE ALTAR!”

Me and Hayden just laughed and laughed at our grandad.

“Fine,” he said, “let’s go.”

But the only fire left in most Methodists is the one they paint on their cross. The spirit of Wesley’s dead in most of them and therefore they didn’t have no answers for us. Even so, my buddy Adam was there sweeping, making some money on the side, and he let us up into the third floor which let us up the ladder into the attic which let us up into the belfry. A belfry’s a magical place, one part sniper tower and one part ranger lookout for forest fires and bears and one part hideaway for hunchbacks and one part dovecote and one part sound hole where the music comes out. From up there, we could see the whole of the Bellhammer courthouse and lawyers and convicts coming and going from the county jail.

“Not like the old days,” Hayden said.

I laughed.

Grandad Remmy said, “Nope, they got a door on the front now.” He yelled down to them. “Hey you old Texarco lawyers! You’d better watch out for yourself!”

The lawyer below started searching around for the source of the sound.

“Grandad,” I said, “I don’t think Texarco cares enough to keep lawyers in the county anymore. Ain’t that much oil left.”

“Cause they already done stole it all,” he grumbled.

I saw the officer who’d arrested me for pushing him.

“Hey copper!” I shouted. “You’d better stop picking on them kids who have magic powers!”

He looked around and around, hand on his the butt of his gun.

Hayden giggled.

The bell hammers struck the bells and started ringing out over the whole county. It deafened all of us and we slipped and slid on white birdshit just trying to get to the ladder, giggling the whole way.

M&Ms and Yoo-hoo and books and gum in hand, we went to the Catholics. The Catholics didn’t have much of an answer either, though they swore up and down that their wine and bread had turned into the literal body and blood of Jesus, their little bell hammers ringing out in triplicate during the service. I didn’t really believe them until an old lady with a tumor on her face sipped the stuff and the whole tumor fell off and the wrinkles shriveled away into clean skin all of a sudden. I tried to ask the priest to keep some of the stuff, but he drank it all down and ate the rest of the bread, which seemed selfish at first, but then I guess it kept kids like me and Hay from pickpocketing the blood of Christ. The Lutherans didn’t have nothing but rusty and thoughtless memories of Calvinism. The Presbyterians had a little of that, but mostly money and business networking — Hayden tried pretty hard among them to get hired. The Anglicans (or maybe Episcopalians? I couldn’t tell) didn’t want to talk about much other than divorce and adultery and gay rights and politics surrounding both — good subjects, for sure, but nothing there about magic. The big Evangelical and Baptist churches didn’t have a coherent thought about anything, but I guess the music and lights were nice in a town that couldn’t much afford to bring in Brookes and Dunne or U2 or Eminem.

Back at Grandad Remmy’s, he said to us, “Well, did you learn anything?”

I said, “I think I need to go further out. Search a little deeper.”

“I never searched deep enough,” he said at something near a whisper and didn’t really tell me what he meant by that.

“You get any business contacts?” he asked Hay.

“Oh sure,” Hayden said with a deckful of business cards. “It’s all about who you know, Grandad.”

Grandad Remmy laughed. “You’re pretty sharp for a ten year old.”

“And handsome too,” Hay said.

“And handsome too,” Remmy giggled.

“Well you go try to get your job, Hay,” I said. “I gotta keep searching.”

“Why?” Grandad asked.

“Cause I need to get out of here and find the source.”

“I think you have,” Grandad said.

“Then why can’t I use it better? No, I need more spells and speaks.”

Hayden went around applying for jobs that ten year olds legally couldn’t apply for, but he did anyways. He applied for jobs shoveling cows hit and for jobs detailing corn and folding papers for this scrapbook place and stacking old signs for this realtor. He applied and applied.

I went further afield.

I started with the local magicians and tricksters. I learned how to tuck a card behind my hands. I learned how to use more subtle tapered decks, false thumbs, and how to sneak a thousand colored handkerchiefs around in my sleeves and in my pockets. I learned how to make things disappear like Copperfield — not as big as Copperfield, but big enough to justify a decent sized crowd at the Carol Burnett Review. Didn’t do nothing but trick those folks.

So I stopped watching the tapes and reading the books and practicing that. I forgot about wanting to go to the Matt King School of Magic and let the bullying persuade me to stop sharing my real cantrips, my real little magical incantations, with friends. I started playing Dungeons and Dragons with friends and that seemed well and good — especially since we convinced the sons of all the preachers at our church to come and play with us and the youth group, so we kind of dodged the religious hate for all of that — but the downside is that some of us started playing evil campaigns, which you ought not ever do. It’s just a bad idea to ever practice being evil in any context. Virtue matters, don’t say it don’t, pretend or not for pretend. Well they started playing a vampire game that seemed okay until they started actually biting each other and drinking each others blood. Sanguinarians. Real vampires. They didn’t have the power to change anyone into undead creatures of the night... and yet they did persuade a lot of people to modify their teeth into fangs with metal files and to use razors on one another. Well I left them for the wiccans, who taught me how to use a tarot deck and a Ouiji board and different alleged “white magic” shields and things. Problem was, they had the sort of naiveté of the spiritists that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle led around the time of Houdini: they didn’t realize that not all table rapping, not all picture frame moving, not all dancing lights and card readings and planchette movements come from people or even from the “good energy” in the room. Sometimes things can only be done by a spirit. And we humans almost never control the things we invoke.

So that was the first time I saw a possession. Not in a church or during an exorcism. During a wiccan invocation.

Incantational magic's a bit different.

Seeing a young teenage girl's skin writhe and boil from the sheer number of demons inside her? That shit was not what I wanted. I started hearing voices telling me to kill myself, to end my life. I went into a spiral of suicidal thoughts. Mom and Dad split up because Dad cheated on Mom with Thelxy because Mom disrespected Dad with the way the home was ordered because Dad didn't love mom for working so hard and helping him cook cause Mom didn't honor Dad with helping him run his business, telling him to do it himself, cause Dad didn't love mom by asking for help cause Mom didn't give him the space to ask and retain his dignity, always seeking better furniture and changes in the house cause Dad grew up in a poorer family than Mom cause Mom's Dad made a ton off of real estate and somewhere in there my cousin ripped my Dad off and the family business collapsed and they divorced.

So I was living in Dad's basement. Orange floor, fake wood panels, cast iron wood burning stove, speakers always playing death metal. I got angry and I reverted back to beating my brother up, who whimpered and begged me to stop and I was crying and saying, "I can't. I can't. I don't know *how*," pounding into his back my fist, feeling the things writhing inside of me that the Wiccans had put within. I threw him through dad's black Jeep Grand Cherokee windshield in that time. That one was over him breaking the trigger on my suction cup toy pistol. Yes. I threw my brother through a windshield because he accidentally broke a toy.

I hated myself and wanted to die.

Mom and Dad agreed that *I* was the problem and so they sent me all over the lower half of the state to seven different psychologists, many of whom more or less blamed me for Dad's narcissistic adultery and Mom's narcissistic manipulation and their mutual financial misfortune and thus the divorce. So I asked for another. And another treated me like a lab rat with their college class looking on from behind the mirror. Another ran tests on my brain with weird scans and shock treatment. The last ended up perscribing me like five serious drugs: an anti-depressant to keep me from suicide, which I hated because it made everything grey so they basically prescribed me crack to get me up, which wouldn't let me sleep so they prescribed Zyprexa (an anti-psychotic that ended up with a class action lawsuit in later years) and I accidentally took that on a youth group trip and ended up sleeping through the whole day, so they gave me something else and something else after that, I don't remember the last two, but I was so drugged up that I wanted to kill myself just to get the crazy cocktail cycle to stop. I told my Dad that and Papa Bren gave me the best advice he'd ever given me:

"It's not gonna get better unless you want it to. If you decide you want it to, I'll take you off the meds."

Well I went into a hole then and started thinking through existentialism and nihilism and atheism and Buddhism and Islam and a whole slew of world views about ultimate reality and ethics and everything, trying to find a way to think of the world rightly. Most of my English teachers were women that hated little boys and made it known to me, but a couple of them were excellent and got me in touch with Tennyson and Keats and Shelly and Coleridge and tons of Medieval works and Inkling thought like Lewis and Tolkien and I was reading Rowling and dabbling with Beowulf and Arthur. The copy of Norse Mythology I had was illustrated by Arthur Rackham and the call of the great expanses of the north sung out in my soul. An old calligraphic hand had written in the front cover a design: *ex libris Jack Lewis*. The same scrawl designed a weird circular thing. It was a compass. Or a gyroscope. Or some sort of whirling

touchstone made out of grass. Had all these schematics for making one. Some days I'd show up early to school and read out on the grass in the sunrise before anyone showed up — it's one of the few ways I could read without getting made fun of in Southern for being a boy and reading. I took the book outside and immediately started messing around with it. I had a phone at this point, you see, one of the early texting dumb phones that cost so much per text that kids were basically bankrupting their parents through uncontrolled phone bills. Fifty cents a text or something.

Anyways, I had that with me and some change and my Swiss army knife and multitool (back when they still let kids have knives in schools for whittling and whatnot). I had one of my paranoid survival bracelets on and a deck of cards, one of those small solar powered flashlights, my flint, a pocket watch that Grandad Remmy had given me, and a couple of granola bars I'd squirreled away after mom went on a particularly fruitful grocery store run thanks to food stamps.

I followed the old British scrawl to the letter out in the schoolyard, the front lawn of BHCHS (a high school that some of the crasser students called *bitches*), piling up the grass I pulled out in front there, asking it to form to the music of the spheres, calling it to align to the Tors (whatever those were) and mounds and stars, asking it to tell me the time and the place, matching it up with all the sweetgrass in the universe...s. When I finished, a clean grass compass or gyroscope of grass sat before me.

I spun it and the earth opened up into a grass tunnel.

I walked inside and it sealed behind me.

The grass tunnel was dark. I felt a buzz in my pants and opened my dumb phone. Hayden had texted on our buddy Adam's phone.

*None of them gave me a job.*

I texted, *Oh buddy, I'm sorry.*

*Where are you?*

*I think I'm inside grassness.*

*Dude, he texted. I'm the only one that's supposed to be high.*

*You smoke?* I texted

*Forget I texted that.*

*You're ten, Hay.*

*Well they don't call me Hay for nothing. Where are you really?*

I looked around, the light of the tiny screen my only light. I texted *I have no idea, but I need to get out really soon.*