

Witchy Femmes,
Queer Conjurers,
and Magical Rebels

BECOMING DANGEROUS

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WEISER BOOKS

no coincidence that when I picked my new name, I chose one you can only turn into 'Bravery'.

I'd hoped that Poole Grammar School would be a learning environment in which I could finally feel comfortable. The school seemed like a potential escape because you needed to pass a test to become a student there. One part of my identity I'd always been confident of was 'genius' (yes, I'm yet-another millennial told she had limitless potential). I was sure both that I'd get in and that since my fellow students would also be a bunch of nerds and boffins, we'd create a more gentle and understanding learning environment. I figured that I was headed for a school full of people like me, and I'd be safe from bullying, fear, and loneliness.

I was wrong.

After years of the harsh real world deprogramming my millennial delusions of grandeur, I know now that I wasn't a brilliant student. The test to enter Grammar School wasn't even that hard. And my classmates and I? We weren't some rarefied breed of super-intelligent diplomats. We were a bunch of children thrown into a competitive, testosterone-heavy environment, and so the bullying only got worse. I was teased and taunted; my possessions were torn and broken, even thrown from the top of the building; they beat me, choked me, and, on one occasion, held me down and forced me to eat food from a rubbish bin. I've suffered from depression my entire life (even, I think, as an infant), but those initial months at Poole Grammar were the first times I ever considered suicide as a solution to my problems.

I tried other coping methods first, though. I tried to pretend things weren't so bad, and that I could defuse the situation by becoming friends with my adversaries. That led to them setting

Before I Was a Woman, I Was a Witch

Avery Edison

An all-boys high school is no place for a young girl.

Of course, nobody knew I was a girl yet, including me. A conventional narrative (and a self-perpetuating one, since any doubts or deviations from society's expectations of trans people's experiences are weaponised as excuses to deny us treatment) is that transgender women feel their real identity from birth or soon after. In my case, that wasn't necessarily true. I didn't know I was trans. But I knew I was different.

Other people knew, too. Especially other kids. Children are attentive to differences and vicious once they notice them. Throughout early and middle school, I'd been bullied by my classmates, who made fun of my size, my devotion to reading, my perennial teacher's pet status, my refusal to play football during morning break and lunch, and, most of all, my tendency to burst into tears. My name then was Kyle, which was all-too-easily adapted as 'Cryle'. It wasn't intentional, but maybe it's

me up on a fake date with a girl from our sister school so that they could find out personal details about me and hone their jibes. I tried to limit my exposure to the worst of my peers by hiding, at every opportunity, in the library. But they merely waited to ambush me on my way to and from it, or else distracted the librarian on duty and used the books to beat me. As a last resort, I went to my teachers, even though experience had shown me that they only ever made things worse by punishing the bullies in a way that made them angrier or else just ignored the problem, making me feel even more alone and vulnerable.

At Poole, it was the latter. The school had long had a problem with abuse among students, and the party line was that it was just 'boys being boys'. When I wouldn't stop asking for help, begging the head of my year to do something, the school nurse referred me to outside counselling so that I could 'grow a thicker skin'. (It didn't help, but my sessions with the therapist were the first times I ever vocalised that I didn't feel like a boy, which was an essential first step in my eventual transition.)

It seemed hopeless. I resigned myself to trauma. I dreaded school, I cried constantly (which did not help at all with the bullying), and I began to consider suicide. But before I could take such drastic action, my body's internal systems engineered an escape for me: in the late spring of 2000, I started suffering from constant, debilitating diarrhoea. All my stress and anxiety stopped pouring out of me as tears and instead flooded out of me as shit.

Nobody wants to read too many details about my bowel movements, so I'll try to be brief. Every single day, for six weeks, I needed to go to the bathroom at least five times an hour. I was in intense pain, sometimes dull and prolonged, occasionally

sudden and sharp. Despite a history of crying wolf, my mum could see that there was something seriously wrong with me. When I didn't get better after two weeks, she called our doctor (visiting the clinic was impractical, because our car didn't have a toilet in it), who referred me to a gastrointestinal specialist, who scheduled me for an endoscopy to find out what was happening inside me.

The working theory was coeliac disease, the inability to process gluten. The presence of shortened villi in the small intestine confirms coeliac diagnoses, but after I woke up from sedation with a Polaroid of my insides (I'd asked for a souvenir), my doctor told me that my gut was perfectly healthy. Clean, naturally, but stinky. They found nothing. If they didn't have my mother's assurance that, yes, our downstairs toilet was my bedroom at this point, they would've sworn that I was making it up.

I'd been hoping for a solution, an end to the discomfort and annoyance of my illness, even though I knew it would mean going back to school. The exchange of peer-led suffering for self-contained pain was a grand bargain at first, but as my condition persisted and my time away from the classroom grew, I began to forget just how horrible it was there. I was bored of daytime television, and I missed the enormous school library and the few friends I had among my fellow students and, yes, teachers. By the sixth week of my illness, I was needing to excuse myself less and less, and over the weekend I felt completely normal. I went back to school, healthy again.

All I'd needed was time. Time away from the stress and torment of a school environment to which I wasn't suited. But that's something I realise in hindsight. At the time, there was a less nuanced, more obvious solution.

Magic cured me.

My Aunt Agnes has always been into holistic medicine and New Age philosophy and practices. My early memories of her are of visits when she'd make me swallow disgusting-tasting aloe vera supplements, or talk me through my astrological chart, or explain to me the law of attraction and how I should use it to have a perfect life. I didn't buy into any of it, but I appreciated the attention (and the gifts she would bring, usually a book token I could spend on a new Roald Dahl). She was adamant that I was an 'Indigo Child', an ill-defined term that indicated that I was special. (How many of us limitless-potential millennials heard this moniker growing up?)

When I got sick, Agnes was ready with a list of possible reasons and remedies. Perhaps the microwave oven was upsetting me. Or the fact that we lived below power lines. There was a good chance our house had a ghost, probably a poltergeist. And I'd been spending time on the school computers—that couldn't be good. She recommended solutions like acupuncture, urine therapy, and even exorcism. My mother, who is more cynical and averse to spirituality of any kind (even the pomp and circumstance of a standard funeral is too much for her: 'When I die, put me in a cardboard box!'), vetoed anything extreme or invasive. But she did let my aunt arrange a visit from a psychic she'd recently met, a crystal dowser named Sarah.

Sarah didn't fit the stereotypical, cartoonish idea of a psychic. No flowing robes or gaudy jewels in turbans, and indeed, no crystal ball. She was simply dressed, an ordinary mum of a girl two years below me at my previous school. The only mysterious thing about her was the slight tingling feeling she gave me when she talked (something I now know to be ASMR),

but I'd experienced that with my optometrist, too, so it wasn't that strange.

Sarah calmly explained that she worked with a small onyx crystal suspended from a chain. She would talk to me, asking me questions while swinging the crystal back and forth, gaining insight from its movements. It seemed silly but no sillier than anything my aunt had previously endorsed, and I wanted to hear more of her calming voice. We talked about my interests, my family, my school, and, of course, my illness, all while the pendulum swung at varying speeds. Sometimes it was slow and lazy, but occasionally it would whiz around in circles impossibly fast.

I couldn't discern the connection between the specific points of our conversation and the activity of the crystal, but Sarah assured me that she was cleansing my aura and that I'd begin to feel better in the next few days. And I did already notice a small change—either her technique had calmed me, or the conversation had allowed me to vent some of my frustration and anxiety in a way I'd been unable to before. Whatever the reason, I felt calmer and less fragile. My aunt paid Sarah her fee and set up another appointment for a week later, asking if there was anything we could do in the meantime to maintain or even bolster the positive effects. Sarah recommended meditation, and also, perhaps, purchasing a crystal of my own.

I was well enough, a few days later, to go crystal shopping with Aunt Agnes. She knew our local New Age store owner well, and after they helped me pick out a rose quartz pendulum and chain, they stood at the front counter and caught up on the latest holistic trends and conspiracy theories. I hovered nearby, browsing the bookshelf, as I preferred to do in any and every store. My mum used to say, '[She's] always got [her] nose

in a book.' Sometimes she even said it like she thought it was a good thing.

A bright yellow and blue box drew my attention to the bookshelf. It was a starter kit for teen witches, which included a booklet on the history and practice of Wicca, a couple of candles, a pentagram necklace, a few small gems, and a pack of salt. I've always been a sucker for instructional packages; despite having a supposedly-prodigious intellect, I've often found learning too dull and time-consuming. The promise of the all-in-one beginner set is that it's everything you need to know to achieve some level, even a small one, of expertise. Even the act of owning it grants you a little more status in the field — after all, you have both the information and the tools.

I stared at the box. I picked it up and turned it over, put it down, read the blurb over and over, turned away from the shelf entirely, and then back to check it out one more time. I was performing my interest in the set, for the audience of my aunt and the store owner.

After what felt like forever, Agnes finally asked me what I was looking at and put on her very own performance of not being sure if she could buy it for me. I never doubted she would, though, because this was the first time I'd shown any unprompted interest in her world, and there was no way she'd quash that. Even though her lingering childhood Christianity made her wary of witchcraft, as she would warn me on the drive home. 'Be careful with all that. You don't want to attract something unpleasant by accident. I'm not saying it would be the Devil, but you never know...'

Somehow, the two small candles and pinch of salt didn't end up summoning the Dark Lord to my bedroom. They didn't end

up doing much at all. On reading the guidebook, it seemed that Wicca was far less exciting than I'd hoped. Growing up on comic books and superhero cartoons had primed me for an easy acceptance of extra-normal powers and abilities. The feelings I'd experienced during the session with Sarah and the irregular movements of her pendulum, along with the starter kit's talk of magic, had me hoping for grand spells and hexes to change my life and ruin my enemies.

Instead, I found meditations on nature and respect for all people, and a description of spellcraft as gentle requests that worked a subtler, less noticeable power. A glamour spell wouldn't let me change my appearance; it would, at most, make me feel a little more confident in myself. There was no incantation to bring people back from the dead, but there was a ritual for acceptance of loss and help with grief. Even the passages on working with spirits to generate money were just reiterations of the same law of attraction stuff my aunt had told me a dozen times before.

But there was still power for me in the identity. If I knew I was different, and everyone else did too, then the least I could do was try to harness that difference as protection. I kept an altar and started saying 'Merry meet' to people so I could tell myself I was doing enough to call myself a witch. I wore the pentagram necklace and carried my rose quartz and gems with me so that other people, especially my bullies, would know that I was one. I hoped that they would be, if not scared, then at least cautious.

I was not subtle about it. Every morning before our first period, my class would gather in our form room so that Mr Partridge, our tutor, could take attendance and read announcements. Then we had twenty minutes of quiet reading time, which, in

practice, were twenty minutes of chaos. Full of kids laughing and joking, running a black market for copied CDs and beating up the weakest among them. I dreaded these early mornings and hoped every day that my classmates would be distracted by their conversation or another victim, or that Mr Partridge would be paying enough attention to my safety that I could get a few moments of peace.

One morning, soon after I returned from my illness — 'We hoped you were dead, Cryle!' — I pulled out my bag of charms as the announcements finished and dealt out a pack of cards in front of me. Then I swung my pendulum over each card, focusing intently on its movements. I was playing a game I'd devised as 'practice' for my dowsing abilities: I would pick a card and ask 'yes' or 'no' questions of the crystal, using process of elimination to determine the card's value.

'Is this card red?' I muttered.

The pendulum started swinging counter-clockwise.

'Is this card a spade?'

Clockwise.

'Is it a face card?'

Clockwise.

'Is it the king?'

Counter-clockwise.

'Is it the queen?'

A final swing clockwise.

I turned the card over.

Five of diamonds.

Apparently, the crystal didn't always get it right. Or, instead, I didn't get it right. I knew enough about the autonomic nervous system to figure out that the movements of the chain were down

to small adjustments in my wrist and hand, rather than some mysterious force. But that's explained by thinking of the act of dowsing as a way of manifesting and making clear one's own psychic or clairvoyant gifts. I just needed to hone the power that was in my head and I'd get my ratio of correct guesses to false ones up.

And, in the meantime, there were small victories — whenever I correctly discerned the colour of a card (a 1-in-2 chance), or its suit (1-in-4 chance), or if it was a face card (4-in-13). I knew I was on the right track. In those moments, I would let out a small, knowing smile, trying to convey the confidence of hidden power. I knew that making my bullies cower was out of the question, but I wanted the vibe around me to be uncomfortable enough that they would give me some distance.

Mr Partridge was a devout Catholic and watched me with curiosity and worry. He usually spent the mornings reading or cutting out Far Side cartoons from the Sunday paper and pinning them on a noticeboard at the front of class. But when I huddled over my deck and dangled my crystal, he craned his neck to close the small gap between my desk and his (sitting close to the teacher had never protected me, but it didn't hurt to keep trying). After I'd spent a few minutes whispering to myself and turning over cards with a smirk on my face, he finally spoke.

'So what's the belief system behind what you're doing there?'
 'Oh, um,' I responded, 'It's sort of nature-based. There's a lot of — The environment is important, and Gaia and stuff.'
 'And who's the god? Who do you pray to?' His tone was sceptical, now.

'I'm not sur — For me, it's not about a god. Or goddess. I'm thinking of the universe as its own thing, rather than... Uh...'

I trailed off and looked at Mr Partridge vacantly, searching for the right words to convince him that I was genuine. They didn't come, probably because I wasn't.

I hadn't thought a lot about the theology behind Wicca. The starter kit had been somewhat evasive — there was plenty of talk about the tone of magic practice and the general mood and vibe, but none of the mythology of the more common religions. I wished for an epic work to describe, like the Abrahamic texts, or a pantheon of gods to reference.

'Well, as long as you're getting something out of it, I suppose,' he concluded. Then he went back to his book, leaving me stumped on the subject of my own faith. The bell for first period rang, and I packed up my works, sullen and obviously dejected. That knowing smile vanished from my face, and the aura of mystery I'd been trying to cultivate was demolished. I don't know if my classmates had even been slightly threatened or unnerved by my magical demonstration, but if they had been, that was over.

I still remember that conversation with Mr Partridge because it destroyed my confidence and conviction in practising Wicca. I went through the motions for a few more weeks, doing drills with my playing cards, maintaining my altar, and parting the invisible curtain I'd put around my room whenever I entered or left it. But the bloom was off the rose. Failing to adequately describe my relationship to Wicca, let alone its fundamental tenets, made me confront the reasons I was experimenting with it at all. I'd put aside my corrupt motivations until then, but I had to face it: I was faking my faith so I could take on an identity.

I left Poole Grammar the next year. I'd stopped wearing the pentagram necklace, and I'd not touched a crystal for a long

time (although I still had sporadic sessions with Sarah, who my aunt always credited with my recovery, even as I had occasional relapses once I was back at school). My witchcraft period had become yet another thing for my bullies to taunt me with, and on my last day, as the final bell rang and everyone filed out of the building, I heard Jason Lingham-Green tell Charlie Hunt, 'Punch the witch! One final blow, a goodbye goose-egg.'

I transferred back to my local comprehensive school and the friends I'd left behind when I took the grammar school entrance examination. They were (understandably) a little cold at first but soon welcomed me back into the clique. I still got occasional jibes from rougher classmates, but nothing anywhere near as bad as what I'd previously suffered. My friends didn't know about my attempt at being a Wiccan, and one of them even invited me to check out his church's youth group. I went along to the weekly meetings and became a member, now identifying as a Christian. I wasn't a fervent believer, but I liked the feeling of community, and attending a Church of England elementary school — as well as, obviously, growing up in the UK's Christian culture — meant I was well versed in the Bible and associated figures, practices, and stories.

I didn't stay Christian for long, though. A year later, I was a militant atheist, devouring Richard Dawkins books and regurgitating Christopher Hitchens talking points. Then I calmed down and tried to shirk my nerd status by failing all my classes and approaching everything with an ironic distance, putting on the outdated but still powerful 'slacker' identity. Then I bought a uni-cycle and learned to juggle while riding it, sinking into a bizarre clown phase. Then my mum finally paid for internet in our home, and I became obsessed with upgrading my computer over and

over, rebranding as a tech geek. Every teenager has to reckon with finding themselves, and my inability to confront and deal with my gender dysphoria only exacerbated that. By the time I came out as a woman, my friends and family were tired of my trying-on and discarding various personalities and assumed that 'trans' was just the latest in a long line of temporary phases that I'd soon abandon. I'm sure that now, ten years into it, some of them are still expecting me to mass-email a de-transition announcement.

I've never entirely abandoned any of those identities, though. I remain an atheist, although I long ago disavowed Dawkins and his ilk. I enjoy riding my unicycle, even if I refuse to do it here in London; I don't want to die and/or get laughed at. I still keep a close eye on tech and computing culture, although my Apple partisanship would be anathema to my former dedicated PC-builder self. And I work as a comedian, which is only slightly more respectable than being a full-on clown.

We keep parts of our past selves. And even though I was never a real witch, I still remember and hold dear those early feelings of confidence and power. I don't believe in the supernatural, but I believe in the placebo effect. So I believe that casting a spell won't change the universe around you, but will help you approach situations with an insight or perspective that's just as good. I believe that carrying a few crystals or gems won't give you supernatural abilities, but will give you confidence and a feeling of safety. And I believe that meditating on your intentions and creating a sigil won't magically make a problem go away, but will focus your mind on it in a way that merely being pre-occupied or worrying about it won't.

That's the part of my practice that I actually still practise: sigil craft. Back when I was playing around with Wicca, sigils were

merely silly doodles to me. But one thing that's been consistent about me is my love of comic books, and they led me to a talk by writer Grant Morrison in which he spoke about the importance of sigils in his work. He discussed the radical effects they've had on his life and gave instructions for creating them.

A simple (and reductive) version of his method: pick something you want, write it down as if you already have it, remove the vowels and repeated letters from what you wrote, and use the remaining glyphs to make a symbol. There's your sigil. You can do something like writing it on paper and burning it or crafting it onto a piece of jewellery, but I find it motivating enough simply to create the thing. So much of our brain-space is taken up by the clutter of keeping track of tasks we need to complete, and one of the principles of internet to-do list culture is that getting that jumble of tasks out of your head and onto paper will make you less distracted and more able to actually do the work. And what's a sigil if not a beautiful, personally encoded item on a to-do list? Or, since sigils predate task management culture, perhaps it's better to ask: what's a to-do list if not a tedious attempt to reduce the complexity of sigils?

I don't use sigils for everything in my life (in fact, I probably use to-do lists more than sigils, because I am boring), but I use them for important things. I made a sigil when I moved back to the UK from Canada, to acknowledge the importance of the trip and release some of the anxiety around it. I made a sigil when I was getting ready for a significant stand-up gig and hung an enlarged version of it on my wall, to remind me to put in the work and attention necessary for a good performance. I made a sigil before I wrote this essay and used it as the centre of the mind map I used to plan it. The trip went well, the gig was

great, and this essay, you can judge that for yourself. Maybe the sigils had nothing to do with those results. But they certainly made me feel better, and in this nightmare world, I'll take all of that I can get.

I'm a sceptic and an atheist, and I'm kind of a bore about it sometimes. But I've done extraordinary things in my life—like surviving my awful school experiences for one, and changing my entire gender—and I like to leave a little room for the extraordinary outside my life, too. I'm not going to guzzle turmeric to ward off cancer or perform an exorcism when I move into a new apartment, but I'll happily draw a little picture. It always feels good to move your hands and make something.

The Avery who was a witch still lives in my head. She may not have been the person I wanted her to be, but she's part of the person I am. She was there before I was a woman, and that kind of service deserves a little input now and then. Just as long as it's more nuanced than clockwise and counter-clockwise.

Undressing My Heart

Gabriela Herstik

When I was seventeen years old, I walked into Northpointe Mall in Alpharetta, Georgia, and paid five dollars for a 'bang trim' so a hairstylist could shave off the left side of my hair.

This was the first time I had done anything drastic to my appearance and the first step in my initiation into fashion magick. Just shy of seven years later, my shaved side has taken over half my head. I like to keep it shaved to the skin, which I did for the first time when I was twenty. The barbershop is always full of men who avoid looking at me, or look through the side of their eyes. I'm disruptive just by existing, and shaving my hair is a ritual to honour this. It may seem silly, but having a freshly shaved head makes me feel sexier than nearly anything else. It's like wearing my favourite black lace bra at all times. And now, in the era of Trump, it's my way to disrupt binary fashion while flipping a double bird at all the men who think I'd be beautiful if I had long hair.