

TALES FROM RUGOSA COVEN

SARAH AVERY



PRAISE FOR SARAH AVERY

I wish I had known about this perfect collection of novellas when it was first released so I could have recommended it to you then. But better late than never. I am delighted to recommend the second edition of *Tales from Rugosa Coven*, a book I love all the way down to my Heathen bones.

—*Dr. Ceallaigh S. MacCath-Moran, The Storyteller's Guide to Folklore*

The magical elements are subtly woven throughout, balancing the more mundane aspects, and the unbreakable bond between coven members adds emotional heft. There's much to enjoy.

—*Publishers Weekly*

This is one of the most grounded-feeling urban fantasies I've ever read, with deeply developed characters whose real-life issues marvelously intertwine with the magic in their lives, featuring a strongly positive theme of a supportive, inclusive community.

—*Trish Matson, The Skiffy & Fanty Show*

Human, humane, shimmering with wit, and just enough magic to toss possibility out into the world

—*Sherwood Smith, creator of the Sartorias-deles universe*

I absolutely love *Tales from Rugosa Coven*! It reminds me of the best occult fiction, but with better plots and a New Jersey I recognize. I can't wait for more!

—*Nina Harper, author of Succubus in the City*

When I read “Closing Arguments” a few months ago, I was left wanting more. With Sarah Avery’s follow-up to that novella, “Atlantis Cranks Need Not Apply,” I was left salivating.

—*Jeremy Bredeson, Facing North Reviews*

Seriously fine writing about magical matters.

—*Mike Scott of the Waterboys*

First edition published in 2013 by Dark Quest Books
Revised edition copyright © 2026 by Sarah Avery
“Closing Arguments” published in 2008 and “Atlantis Cranks Need Not Apply” in 2009,
both by Drollerie Press

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright act of 1976, no part of this book may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the editor and publisher.

Any use of this publication to “train” generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to generate text is expressly prohibited. The copyright holder reserves all rights to license use of this work for generative AI training and development of machine learning language models.

Please respect authors’ rights: don’t pirate.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

For information, address
Candlemark & Gleam LLC
2523 Solstice Trail, Chapel Hill, NC 27516
mes@candlemarkandgleam.com

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
In Progress

ISBNs: print 978-1-952456-37-4, ebook 978-1-952456-38-1

Cover art by Inkspiral Design
Editor: Melissa Scott
Proofreader: Ellis Duspiva
www.candlemarkandgleam.com

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Closing Arguments	i
And Ria's From Virgo	109
Atlantis Cranks Need Not Apply	249
What I Changed And Why	325

*For all my teachers
of craft and Craft*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the years since this book went out of print, many people have asked me when it would come back. *I lent my copy, I lost my copy, I wanted to give copies to my friends, I intended to buy it but it disappeared before I could.* These peculiar novellas, the first two of which I was sure nobody who didn't know me in person would ever read, have a constituency. Because those readers told me they missed these stories and longed to share them, I never gave up on finding a new home for *Tales from Rugosa Coven* during the years when it was out of print. Thank you, all of you, known and unknown. Old friends of Rugosa Coven may wish to read "What I Changed and Why," the author's note at the end of this book, before diving back into the stories.

The members of the Mythopoeic Society surprised me in 2015 by honoring this book with their award. That surprise is not just modesty on my part—the Mythopoeic Award is for books in the spirit of Tolkien and Lewis. Like those forefathers of the fantasy genre, many members of the Society are devoutly Christian, yet they read my #OwnVoices Pagan book in which the beloved community is a pack of postmodern Witches and the beloved land is New Jersey—a place outsiders tend to regard as the Mordor of the Eastern Seaboard. These ardent readers considered my unlikely book and said, *Spirit of Tolkien and Lewis? Check!* Without their recognition, it would probably have been impossible to find a publisher to bring *Rugosa* back into print.

I am so grateful to Melissa Scott, an author I have long admired and now the proprietor of Candlemark & Gleam, for taking a chance on this book. *Rugosa* is several things that traditional publishers worry they will not be able to sell to readers: (1) a single-author collection (2) of novellas

(3) that has been previously published, (4) by an author who is not already famous. Yet, when I pitched an author's preferred edition to Melissa, she immediately understood all the reasons I believed there was an audience eager to read it. Moreover, when I sought her advice on how to fix a storytelling problem in the previous edition, she saw a solution that had been evading me for the whole decade the book had gone without a home. Ellis Duspiva, who copyedited and proofread the new edition, was a delight to work with. Matt Bright, of Inkspiral Design, took my notes about a possible image and, over several rounds of revision with Melissa and me, created cover art and design that capture the ensemble cast and community dynamic of the characters.

I must thank, also, Neal Levin of Dark Quest Books, who published that previous edition in 2013. Had I self-published, it is likely that *Rugosa* would never have caught the notice of the Mythopoeic Society. Two of these novellas, "Closing Arguments" and "Atlantis Cranks Need Not Apply," had already appeared as ebooks from Drollerie Press in 2009, but Deena Fisher needed to close up Drollerie before I could finish "And Ria's from Virgo" for a print omnibus edition. Neal offered the collection a home, and then when a health crisis forced him to dissolve Dark Quest just a few months after the award announcement, he reverted the rights to me swiftly and graciously, so my book could have a future.

Imaginary gardens only bloom when they have real toads in them, and many people have shared knowledge with me as I have tended my toads. Michael Brown of Simplicity Memorial allowed me to pick his brain for hours on the funeral industry and New Jersey's laws regarding care of the dead. Dave Argentar's explanation of how to run an estate sale gave me one of my favorite scenes in "Closing Arguments." For the attorney characters in that novella, I called often on the aid of my father, Bruce Avery, my sister, Prudence Avery Upton, and Renee Cyr Lasko. For medical matters, I relied on Drs. Anne Kaufhold, Jennifer Hamilton, and Dianne Pulte. Marine biology, nautical terms, and sailing conditions on Raritan Bay called for the expertise of Meagan Cummings. Particular thanks are in order to Meagan and my trio of MDs for the improbable physiology in "Atlantis Cranks Need Not

Apply.” I do not see auras, but one of my protagonists does; without Barbara Brennan’s books *Hands of Light* and *Light Emerging*, I could not have written a character who struggles with that experience. For the astrological aspects in “And Ria’s from Virgo,” I referred constantly to *Llewellyn’s Astrological Calendar*. Thanks especially to Lisa Curran, who mailed me the pages for the key months in 2004, when in 2009 I set myself the slightly insane goal of pegging every incident in that novella to real astrological aspects from the time in which the story is set. Maggie Stewart, who has traveled extensively in the Pine Barrens, helped me with the details for that legendary wilderness. Lemaris Bell advised me on New Age retail. Lara Beneshan placed the winning bid in a charity auction for earthquake relief in Haiti, the prize being that a minor character in *Rugosa* would be named after her. She helped me refine the dialogue so her fictional double would sound at least a little like her. For more reasons than I can count, I wish to thank all the members of several covens in the Blue Star lineage of Wicca that have been active in New Jersey over the years—Clover, Braided Stream, Barleymoon, Balefire, Moonfire, and Torchlight. Two Druid groves, Grove of the Other Gods and Grove of the American Gods, were hospitable and generous with their lore, as was Vingolf Asatru Fellowship. Two founding members of Vingolf went over all the scenes with Asatru characters, customs, and rituals, and offered me indispensable feedback and suggestions. No doubt I have missed some names that should be on this list. All the book’s errors are, of course, my own.

Scenes from all three novellas were workshopped by the Writers of the Weird critique group, affiliated with the Science Fiction Association of Bergen County. I wish to thank all the WotW members who offered feedback, especially Pauline J. Alama, George Galuschak, Richard Herr, Patricia Nash, and the group’s founder and host, Philip De Parto. David Sklar, who introduced me to WotW and who has since become one of my main critique partners, was crucial to every stage of the first edition’s development. So was his wife, Rachel Young, without whose enthusiastic support and several rounds of commentary on every draft she could get her hands on—and her stalwart hosting of playdates for my kids and hers—the book might never have been finished.

Above all, I wish to thank Dan Davis, my husband, and our sons, Gareth and Conrad, who have cheered me on, improvised songs celebrating my stories, and made do without my help at times when it truly was hard so that I could get out of the house and write. They're the loves of my life.

CLOSING ARGUMENTS

APRIL 2003

CLOSING ARGUMENTS

There was no dog, had been no dog for twenty years, but they'd left behind a new dog brush, still in its original packaging, with a receipt of recent date taped to the plastic. It was fifteen years since the last cat they'd kept, but they'd left behind an unopened sack of cat litter. There was no place they needed to be at any particular time, but there were half a dozen alarm clocks in the dining room: two with radios, three in the shapes of various cartoon characters, and one that purported to be a Zen alarm clock, which struck, mechanically, a euphonious handcrafted chime. Charles and Amelia Baines had shared so close a bond all their married lives, they'd hardly needed to speak to one another once their children were grown and gone, and as far as Bob had been able to reconstruct his parents' last year, they'd hardly been speaking to anyone else, but they'd bought several pairs of walkie-talkies. None of those had been popped out of their plastic packages, either. "Is there anyone they *were* on speaking terms with?" Bob Baines asked his sister as he cut one of the walkie-talkies free.

"How would I know? It's not like they were speaking to me, except to lecture me on the phone about money whenever I asked for any." Sophie stepped on one of the squeaky dog toys on her way across the consumer wreckage of the dining room to help him. "And the whole

time, they were shopping themselves into oblivion. Figures. Do you really think they'd have brought a pet into this mess? It wouldn't be right."

"I no longer have any idea what they would have done. Look at this." He held up a worn canvas tote bag silkscreened with the Metropolitan Museum's logo. "Look in here."

She waded a few more steps through the dining room and took the bag from him. "One, two, three, four...eight television remotes?"

"I wonder if we'll find eight televisions." It was a stately old house with too many rooms. Eight televisions could easily disappear into it.

Sophie sat down hard on an unopened case of birdseed. "Oh, Gods."

"What?"

"What if the temple room's like this, too?"

Bob slumped into the chair he'd managed to empty. "I can't face the temple room. Soon, but not today. We need to call the coven."

"Not the lodge?"

"If Mom and Dad had been on good terms with their lodge, they'd have called on the old crowd for help. All these fallings out Mom and Dad had—maybe some of them were for a reason."

"We'll have to tell Uncle Florebo the bad news sooner or later," said Sophie.

"And then there's the funeral."

Sophie started to tear up. She pulled a tissue out of her coat pocket to daub her eyes. "Mom and Dad would have wanted it old school."

Bob added yet another item to his to-do list. *Call Theosophical Society, hire hall.* "I still don't think we should invite the fogies in until we have the place cleaned up some."

"Agreed. You want to call the covenfolk, or should I?"

Bob said, "I'll do it. I need some air. Oh, and here. Have a walkie-talkie."

She blew her nose into the tissue. "We'll need batteries."

"Look in that box between the windows. I don't think we'll have to buy batteries for a year or two." Eventually Bob made his way through the kitchen and out into the overgrown garden. Hellebore flowered red and yellow under an impenetrable thicket of rosebushes just in the first

green of their spring leaves. *Yellow Pages, find landscaper*, Bob added to his list, then crossed it out. This garden required the care of a hard-core occultist, someone who knew horological astrology. It would have been important to his father.

So Ria was the first of his covenmates to get the call. Then Amber and Sebastian. Then Jane, who had troubles of her own. He would have liked to call his wife for comfort, but Ricki and the kids were still at church.



Ria arrived with her gardening tools, an astrological calendar, a ten year ephemeris, and a paperback that claimed to be the all-time definitive compendium of magickal herbalism—that last from a New Age press of very dubious reputation. After a quick greeting hug and a moment with the ephemeris to confirm the alignment of the planets, she put her hair up and got to work reining in the hellebore.

“The all-time definitive compendium?” said Jane when she arrived. “Ria, have some self-respect. Those people will print anything. Hey, Bob. You holding up okay?”

“I still can’t believe they’re gone. I can’t believe they fell apart like this. I should keep a running list of all the things I can’t believe. What am I supposed to tell my kids about their grandparents? Ricki doesn’t want to tell them anything, because then we’d have to disagree out loud about the afterlife again. She doesn’t want the kids to see the house until it’s less scary, and I don’t blame her. I can’t believe how fast it all came unraveled. I should have done something. I should have known to do something. But just Winter Solstice before last, my folks were keeping vigil with my kids by the fireplace, same as they used to with Sophie and me. We only missed one Yule, and now it’s all over. What the hell happened?”

Jane lit a cigarette. “I brought you a casserole. It’s in a cooler in my car.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t let me forget to give it to you to take home to Ricki.”

“I won’t.”

She sat on the hood of her old Corolla and took a long drag. “Maybe no one will ever know what happened. Bob, I’m so sorry. It’s not fair they’re gone. It’s not fair you have to clean up the mess. Believe me, I know from unfair.”

“Sucks.”

“Does. What can I do to be useful?”

Bob flipped the pages of his to-do list. “There’ll be a lot in the next few weeks, I’m afraid. If we can dig a path from the dining room into the library today, tomorrow we can dig through to the filing cabinets. I’m hoping we’ll find the will so I can get it to a colleague before the weekend.”

“A colleague? You can’t do it yourself?”

“Estate law’s nothing like personal injury. Whole other world.”

“Fair enough. If you want a hand with the financial docs, too, feel free to ask.”

“Yes, your CPAness.”

Jane sucked in another breath of tobacco, then reached back into her car to stub out her cigarette in the ashtray. Once Jane was through the kitchen door, Ria started humming the song about the wicked witch from *The Wizard of Oz*.

The last thing Bob needed was his coven sisters’ bickering. He hoped Jane and Ria could keep it to a low simmer, at least until the funeral. “I really appreciate this, Ria.”

“If it weren’t for the sad occasion, the gardening would be fun. Do you know if they’ve still got that asafoetida growing in the greenhouse?”

“Considering the mess everywhere else, I’ll be surprised if anything in the greenhouse survived. Help yourself to whatever you think you can keep alive.”

Ria started singing a Vernal Equinox chant about roots in wet soil, about waking the trees. Bob hummed along while he looked over his to-do list. It was four pages long. *Find will. Phone utilities re billing. Crematorium?*

Sebastian pulled into the driveway in Amber’s Miata. Amber herself was bandaged from wrist to shoulder, her pretty face pinched with discomfort.

“New ink?” Bob asked. “But you already had stuff on that arm.”

“Sebastian’s covering up that old hackwork.”

“It wasn’t bad,” said Sebastian. “She’s just running out of blank skin.”

Amber leaned over the gear shift to kiss him. “Yeah, but you’re twice the artist Big Mike is, any day of the week.”

Bob said, “I interrupted you mid-tattoo, didn’t I? Sorry.”

“When I said call anytime, I meant anytime.” Sebastian still had his work voice going—the slightly hypnotic cadence he used to soothe clients while they were under the needle. He came around the car to offer his girlfriend a hand out. “Whatever we can do.”

So Bob called all the members of Rugosa Coven into the dining room, where Jane and Sophie had started sorting things into piles: electronics, pet supplies, paper goods. Sophie had opened one of the thirty-odd boxes of tissues. Her eyes were red, and the tip of her nose, too. Bob gave his sister a squeeze around the shoulder.

“Oh, man,” Sebastian said as he crossed the threshold from the kitchen. “It looks like the Federation Starship *WalMart* had a terrible transporter accident.”

Amber admired the Zen alarm clock. “There’s some nice stuff in here. Diamonds in the rough.”

Ria clutched her ephemera. “They weren’t like this. The people I met at your wedding could not have lived this way. Charles and Amelia were...I had great admiration for your parents, Bob. The very greatest admiration. They were adepts of the first water.”

“Well,” Jane said quietly, “sometimes people change.”

By dinnertime, Rugosa Coven had dug their way to the library, and after pizza they surprised Bob by making it all the way to the cabinets. The path into the room had crisp edges, as if shoveled through a two-foot snowfall, beyond which masses of undifferentiated paper roiled. Bob and Sophie bade their covenmates good night and searched for the will.



Fortunately, Charles and Amelia Baines had bought several cases of Post-it notes of various colors and sizes, with which the Baines siblings

labeled the cabinets as they finished them. *Financials*, Bob wrote. *Family Photos*. *Theosophical Memorabilia, 1881-1930*. There had been a system, once. Its old logic showed itself in the drawers Charles and Amelia had used least since their children grew up, but in the more current cabinets, the logic crumbled. And it seemed that, for about a year, the elder Baineses had been throwing their mail unopened onto the library floor.

"Check it out," said Sophie, leaning over an open file drawer. "Letters to Great-Grampa Frederick from Madame Blavatsky herself."

Bob sneezed. Too much old dust. "We'd better label the file while we still know what it is." The Zen alarm clock chimed nine. "I'm all in."

"Yeah, me too. Give my love to Ricki and the kids. Tomorrow, nine a.m.?"

"I'll bring donuts." Bob took the file of letters home to read. For all that Blavatsky's life had been wild, he could usually count on her prose style to put him to sleep. And he had not slept well since identifying his parents' bodies.

Since Wednesday, every time he made the drive between the old manse in Rumson and his suburban split-level in Holmdel, Bob reproached himself for letting his parents get so isolated. Fifteen minutes away, just fifteen minutes, and the most important year lost.



It was long past the twins' bedtime when he got home, but Susan was still up, still in her Sunday church finery. She clumped down the stairs, her gangly eight-year-old form showing none of the grace she'd hoped to get from ballet. Bob hugged his daughter. "I'm sorry I missed Sunday dinner."

"We should have brought Sunday dinner to you."

"There was no surface to eat it on."

"I can carry boxes as good as Aunt Sophie can."

"As *well* as Aunt Sophie can. Take it up with your mom."

Susan gallumphed away to sulk.

Bob found Ricki folding shirts in the laundry room. She wrapped

him in her arms, and he bent to rest his head on her shoulder. They stood like that a long time. “How was church?”

“Susan had her solo with the children’s choir.”

“That was today? I wanted to go for that.”

“There will be other solos. She knows this isn’t forever.” Ricki took a deep breath. “There was an incident in Sunday school.”

“Does Susan think I’m going to Hell again?”

“The twins’ Sunday school teacher told them their grandparents are already there. I’ve had words with her. Reverend had words with her—it’s not for us to decide who God’s okay with. Your daughter had such nasty words with her, I had to ground Susan from the internet for a week. But for the boys, damage done. They’re angry at God.”

“This part’s in your hands. I gave you my word. But if you want me to tell them what I think, just say so.”

“If they ask you anything, it’s in your court.” Ricki sighed. “Sooner or later, we all hit the first time we’re angry at God, but to hit it at four.... I hoped the boys would have a few more years.”

Bob kissed her forehead. “It’ll all work out.”

“How was your day?”

“We didn’t find the will.”

“And after...” She checked her watch. “Twelve more hours. Why did they have to make it so hard for you? What were they thinking?”

“I wish I knew.”

Once they’d seen Susan to bed and turned in, Bob sat up beside his sleeping wife, reading Madame Blavatsky’s letters with the bedside lamp turned low. The Ascended Masters this, the Ascended Masters that. Bob had little patience for the Ascended Masters. In the fourth letter, old Helena Petrovna recounted to her disciple Frederick Baines how the ancient sage Koot Hoomi had caused a parchment of his observations about the afterlife to appear midair at one of her séances. Bob tried to picture the scene, but every time he came to the manifestation of the parchment, he couldn’t help imagining it with a cartoony popping sound, and then he’d crack up. Maybe he was cracking up. Rather than risk waking Ricki with his laughter, he turned the light out and lay staring at the ceiling until dawn.



After making breakfast for his family, he walked Susan to the bus stop. He kissed Ricki goodbye and wished her a good day at the social services office where she worked. Then he buckled his twin sons into their car seats in the SUV and dropped them off at day care on his way to Dunkin Donuts.

At last, he reached the house his thrice-great-grandfather Rodolph Baines had built with his Civil War telegraph profits, the house where his kin had lived ever since. Bob preferred the kitchen door over the grand marble entryway. He was early, so he left the donuts in the car and headed back into the garden.

For a full century, the garden had been a meditation on the zodiac made manifest in stone and growing green. He clambered over the Aquarius patch to reach the yew tree at the far end of the property. The yew was unperturbed by the chaos in the flowerbeds. It bent its branches to form a dome of shade and quiet. Bob ducked and crept in. When he was a child, this place had been his cathedral. Now, he could just stand at his full height in the shelter of the branches. The clay god and goddess figures Sophie had made back when she took up pottery were rain-worn and serene, tucked among the roots of the yew. "Lady of the Woodlands," Bob greeted them, "Horned One." He should have brought them something. A donut, at the very least. He had half an hour before he expected his sister, so, for the first time since the terrible phone call from the hospital, there was time for him to tell his troubles to his Gods. He sat himself down in lotus position among the yew needles and let the words come.

"Wisdom," he said, when he'd told them the story he knew they knew. "That's what I need. Common sense is no substitute. What am I supposed to do?"

"Ow! Dammit!" said Sophie, from somewhere in the sidereal clock of the flowerbeds. She limped the rest of the way to the yew tree, her long cotton skirt catching on briars as she came. "Thought I'd find you under here." She sat next to him and slid off her Birkenstocks. "I hope Ria can do something with those rosebushes." She pulled a thorn from the sole of her foot. "Blood offering, anyone?" she said to her little clay

sculptures. They didn't take her up on it. "Did you remember the donuts?"

"Yep. To work?"

They took the donuts into the library, and regretted it the moment they broke them out. "Sticky fingers," said Sophie, dismayed.

"Not good with important papers," Bob agreed. Fortunately, their parents had left them a gross of pre-moistened hand wipes. Around noon, he and Sophie found a threatening letter from the IRS about unpaid taxes, a lively anthill, and several files of old newspaper clippings about international art theft.

Buy ant traps, Phone IRS, Bob added to his to-do list when they'd retreated to the living room. "Whatever fallings out Mom and Dad had with their friends, I'm thinking they were irrational," he said. "I'm ready to call in the old crowd. How about you?"

"I think there's an ant in my hair."

"Right. I'm calling Uncle Florebo."

Sophie sat on the floor and pulled a hairbrush out of her battered purse. Bob took that for agreement and dialed.

There was an answer at the first ring. "Smith and Watanabe residence."

"Hi, Uncle Florebo."

"Robert! So good to hear from you. I take it you got my message after all. Your parents might have returned my call while they were thinking about it, but no matter."

"Message?"

"Kiyoshi and I are celebrating our fifth anniversary by registering a civil union with the state. Just when we were thinking we'd move to Boston, New Jersey finally came around. We wanted to invite you and Sophronia, but we never did get your grown-up addresses. You must come. It'll be fabulous."

"I'll be there. But about my parents." Bob had no idea how to go on.

He could hear Florebo's voice catch on the other end of the line. "Something's happened, then."

"They had simultaneous heart attacks while they were out shopping

at Target. The manager tried defibrillating them, and everybody knew CPR, but..."

"When?"

"Wednesday night. I'm on leave from the firm, trying to sort things out, and Sophie's between jobs, so we're doing nothing but trying to put things in order back at the old place. We want to arrange the funeral the way Mom and Dad would have wanted it, but we can't find anything in writing to tell us what that would have been. We're hoping you or maybe Aunt Pasca can help us out."

"Simultaneous heart attacks."

"Yes. The county medical examiner said he'd never seen a case like it."

"They were lucky, then. There's nothing worse than outliving your mate."

Bob would have liked to say something about how fondly he remembered Florebo's late partner Simon, but the awful thought of outliving Ricki stole Bob's words.

Florebo sounded awful. "If you need anything, Robert, you just name it."

"We could use your help making sense of the house."

"When's good?"

"Would now be too soon?"

"I'll be right over." Florebo hung up unceremoniously. It was probably the only unceremonious thing he'd ever done.

Sophie said, "So he's coming?"

"Right away."

She put her hands on her hips and surveyed the living room. "Mom would have been mortified."

They cleared the deep chairs in the living room, all of them. There was nothing for it but to put the contents right down on the floor. When the bell rang, the room was bright with dust caught in sunlight. Sophie ran to get the door.

Standing on the colonnaded front porch, Florebo Smith and his betrothed stared wide-eyed past Sophie at the heap of full garbage bags in the marble entryway. Were it not for the shock on their faces, Florebo and Kiyoshi would have been the very picture of a distin-

guished gay couple in their sixties. “Oh,” said Florebo. His eyes were very red.

“Be welcome,” said Bob. When had Florebo gotten old?

“They’re really not here. They would never have kept the place like this.”

Sophie said, “Can I get you anything, Uncle Flori?”

A crashing sound emanated from upstairs. No one had yet attempted to clear a path that far. “The temple room?” Bob guessed.

“All right, then,” said Florebo. “Up we go. If I stand still, I’m in danger of thinking.”

The grander of the two staircases was blocked up with cardboard boxes. More cases of Post-it notes, as it turned out. Bob far preferred ferrying those down to the dining room’s paper goods pile over attempting the back stairs. The house had servants’ quarters—though not actual servants for the past two generations—a servants’ entrance, and servants’ stairs. These last, Charles and Amelia Baines had used for their clothes when the laundry chute got full to the top—it was from the bottom that Bob had discovered the state of the chute.

Every few boxes, Kiyoshi Watanabe sneezed at the dust, until the stairs were clear, at which point he fell into a sneezing jag that lasted several minutes. “Forgive me, Richard darling,” he said to Florebo when he recovered. “I think I have to wait on the porch.”

“Quite all right, love. I’m just glad you did the driving.”

“Richard?” said Bob. “I never heard Mom and Dad call you that.”

“It *is* my name, you know. Did you never wonder why we called your parents Aio and Gaudea? They were our Outer Court names in the lodge.”

Bob said, “It never occurred to me to wonder. I got so used to being from the neighborhood’s designated weird family, I stopped questioning stuff like that.” The marble railing was cold under his hand. He dreaded what he might find at the top of the stairs. “Where did they sleep? With the stairs clogged, how could they have gotten up to their bedroom? Were they sleeping downstairs at the end?”

“*Where* would they have slept downstairs?” Sophie asked right behind him. “No place on the first floor’s any better.”

“It’s as bad as when Ciebo died,” said Florebo.

Bob stopped still. "Uncle Ciebo's dead? I thought he just moved to Florida."

"One can precede the other," Florebo pointed out. "It was about a year ago. Kiyoshi and I flew down to help poor Lawrence's children. He had a much smaller dwelling, but it was every bit as full. At the time, I was miffed at your parents that they didn't come to the funeral, but I suppose they were already sliding into all of this."

When they crested the top of the stairs, Bob spotted two of the mystery televisions on the landing. Seven identical shortwave radios had fallen from the top of the larger television. Those radios were the only thing on the landing not covered with dust. "I guess this is our crash." An unwelcome thought was forming somewhere in his mind. "Did Ciebo have the same electronics fixation?"

"He always had, so I thought nothing of it. For your parents, though, it is odd. I never knew them to watch television."

"It's all odd," said Bob. "Find me one thing in this house that isn't odd." He waded through several months of *The New York Times* to reach the door to the temple room. Turning the pressed glass knob, he closed his eyes and took a breath.

The latch clicked. The door swung smoothly—that was a surprise, after all the downstairs doors that had been blocked with piles of purchases. Behind him, Bob heard Sophie and Florebo gasp. He opened his eyes.

The impeccable cleanliness of the temple room, with its jewel-toned velvet drapes and floor cushions, was downright alien after days of dust-coated cardboard in the house's common rooms. Crossing the threshold into the faint lingering scent of good Himalayan incense, Bob felt as if he were walking back into his childhood. Here, his father had tried and failed to teach him astral travel. Here, his mother had instructed him in yoga—Bob's earliest memory was of the cobra pose. Everything was as it ought to be, except that a low table squatted in the middle of the room, surrounded by velvet cushions. On the table was a Ouija board.

Florebo glowered at the thing. Maybe he had the same unwelcome thought Bob was putting together.

Beside the Ouija board, someone had arranged a Montblanc ball-point pen, a shopping list pad, and a sheaf of official looking paper. Bob

guessed right away what that sheaf was. Yes, indeed. “The will,” he said. He picked it up and flipped the pages. They were heavily annotated, with numerous changes, all dated and initialed: AB, CB.

The old Theosophist started arguing with the dead. “Decades of practice, the very best training, and still you came to this.”

There was a Post-it note stuck to first page of the will. Charles Baines’s handwriting said, *Larry’s advice*. Bob asked, “When did you say Uncle Ciebo died?”

That snapped Florebo out of his rant. “It was a year ago at Solstice.”

“All these amendments have dates within the past year next to the initials.”

“Do they? Hm.”

Sophie sat on a pile of cushions to look at the Ouija Board. “It’s just an old cardboard Parker Brothers set.” Bob winced when he saw her pick up the plastic planchette. “It’s the same damn set I bought with my allowance at Toys-R-Us when I was sixteen. Remember the lecture they gave me about refusing to use Grandma’s good mahogany talking board?” She sat up straight and narrowed her eyes in imitation of their mother’s anger. “There is a word for this, young lady, and the word is *slumming*. Your father and I have provided you with a first-rate occult upbringing. Why do you insist on squandering your attention on pop culture kitsch and belated hippie activism?” Sophie laughed. “Oh, Mom. Nobody was more wholehearted about being wrong than you.”

Bob knelt by the table and uncapped the Montblanc ballpoint. He scribbled lightly over the top sheet of the shopping list pad to read the indentations of whatever had been written on his parents’ last page. The impression of the last shopping list was all in big block capital letters, oddly spaced out as if his father had taken dictation, one letter at a time, from the Ouija board. Bob felt his pulse beating in his neck, and the whole world was red around the edges.

“Breathe, Robert,” Florebo said.

“This didn’t just happen,” said Bob. How thick his own voice sounded in his ears. “Someone did this to them.”

Sophie looked up at him with big eyes. “Who?”

“Ciebo.” Bob’s hand shook, but he showed her the Post-it Note. *Larry’s advice*.

"Through a paperboard Ouija set with a plastic planchette?" said Sophie. "He'd have insisted on a full-blown séance with Morse code table-knocking, if he came out to talk at all."

Florebo had an inward look on his face. "Or someone else prodded your parents. Someone who'd prodded Lawrence first. He was only fifty-five. Too young. And for them all to be stripped of their dignity by madness first..." He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a cell phone. Two buttons got him someone on speed dial. "Hello, Elizabeth?" he said. Bob remembered his mother calling Aunt Pasca that once. That, and Betsy. "Yes, it is. It certainly has been too long. Far too long. I have to see you with some pressing news. Where are you?" He slumped. "Which WalMart would that be?"

Bob's teeth ground, and he jammed the folded will into his back pocket. "We're going to get her out of there."

"And do what?" said Sophie.

Florebo held up his hand to quiet them. "And you'll be going straight home after that? Very good. I'll meet you there. No, I really don't mind that your house is a mess. Don't you fret. How about thirty minutes?" He leaned back against the curtained wall. "Why would you need three hours to finish shopping? Have you taken up with a new consort and told none of your old friends? I see. I'll be waiting." He snapped the cell phone shut, closed his eyes, and covered them with his hand.

"We're coming with you," said Bob.

"Damn straight, we're coming with you," said Sophie.

Florebo managed a small smile. "Damn straight? Is that what people say these days?"

Down on the porch while Bob locked up, Kiyoshi said, "What is it?"

"I'll tell you in the car," said Florebo. "Remember how to get to Elizabeth's house?"

"It's been a while, but I think so."

Bob looked over at the driveway, where Florebo and Kiyoshi's sleek little electric car sat. It barely had room for four, and with any luck there would soon be five of them. "You can follow us." It was a good thing he had to stay slow and careful for Kiyoshi's sake, or Bob would have driven like a demon to Aunt Pasca's house.

As it was, Sophie gasped and flinched in the passenger's seat of the SUV. "Slow down, Bob. She won't be home for hours."

Bob said, "Whatever it is, it can't have Pasca, too." She'd baked cookies for all his childhood birthday parties. She'd taught him bawdy songs about Madame Blavatsky. All of the Theosophists who were his parents' world had been disappointed when Bob and Sophie cast their lot with Wicca, but Pasca had gotten over it first. And then Pasca had been kind to Ricki, when Bob's parents objected to their son marrying a Methodist.

"Um, Bob? If you get us all killed on Route 35, who's going to see that it doesn't get her? Oh, shit." Sophie rolled down her window. "There's an ant in my shirt." She plucked it out of her collar and held it in her hand until Bob stopped at a red light. Pitching the live ant out the window, she said to it, "Blessed be."

Bob turned to wish the ant well, but he noticed just then a yellow Post-it stuck to the dashboard. It said, *All the birds come home to roost*. "Hey, Sophie, did you put that there?"

"What? No. Ricki must have been trying to remind you of something." She ran her fingers through her long hair, searching for more ants.

But it wasn't Ricki's handwriting.

He squinted at street signs, trying to remember where Thornbrooke Drive fell in the grand scheme of Shrewsbury. Sophie pointed and said, "There." Two more blocks, and Bob pulled the SUV in front of the familiar Victorian cottage, with its familiar climbing tree in the front yard. The trunk had put out unsightly shoots, the lawn needed mowing, and the flowerbeds had given themselves over to an early crop of dandelions. Bob's rage woke again, and he ran to the porch to peer in through the windows. There wasn't far to see. Enormous plastic-wrapped packages of paper towels occluded the view.

Bob kicked the porch railing. "Motherfucker."

Sophie glowered at the paper towels and wrapped her arms around herself. "You can stop kicking things anytime, you know. Whatever this is, you're not going to be able to beat it up like it was the captain of the fucking football team."

"I wasn't wrong about him."

"I never said you were."

Bob leaned his forehead against the windowpane. "This can't go on. One way or another, I'll put a stop to it."

Florebo and Kiyoshi pulled up behind the SUV. Florebo rolled down the window and said, "Oh, don't mind us. We'll find Thornbrooke Drive just fine."

"Sorry," said Bob.

Kiyoshi got out and looked the garden over. "I take it back, darling. I believe you."

"I told you so." Florebo didn't sound especially pleased about his vindication.

Bob went back to the car for the legal pad with his to-do list and started a new page. *Salt. New broom. Banishing incense. Asafoetida? Consult Ria re ephemeris.* He had two hours to run down his cell phone batteries, calling the members of his coven.

They were all game for his plan, though Jane didn't believe in Ouija boards or psychic attacks. "Sometimes people just go over the edge," she said. "Your parents' sudden turn for the acquisitive—it looks like garden variety addictive behavior, from where I sit."

"Jane, your house is Addiction Central."

"I found a rehab place that would take him."

"Thank the Gods," said Bob. "So he's agreed to try again?"

"Nils agrees intermittently. I may need a hand getting the spousal unit where he needs to go."

"Whatever you need, we're there."

Jane sighed. "Fine. I'm in. I can lay down a line of salt as well as the next girl. But I still think you should be wary of getting sucked into your parents' delusions. I'm worried about you."

Just then, Pasca drove up in a shiny new minivan and pulled into her driveway. "Gotta go," Bob said into the phone.

It took Pasca some time to get down from the majestic height of the driver's seat. "Bob? Sophie? What a pleasant surprise. Richard, why didn't you tell me you were bringing a party to my doorstep? I'd have insisted we go somewhere tidier. I know how poor Kiyoshi suffers from dust." She looked from face to face and saw there was bad news before anyone could say it. "Pressing business, was it, Richard? Have it out."

“Charles and Amelia...”

“Both?”

Bob said, “Simultaneously,” since that part had been some comfort to Florebo.

“Simultaneously? They didn’t combust, did they?”

“Heart attacks,” Sophie put in.

“I see.” Pasca had always been small—she was the first grown-up Bob had seen eye to eye with—but now, beside her massive vehicle, she looked tiny. “We should go out and drink them some toasts.”

“No,” said Bob, “it really would be better if we went inside.”

“But...”

Sophie said, “It can’t possibly be worse than the mess we’re cleaning up in Rumson.”

“I really don’t think...”

“It can’t be worse than Lawrence’s condominium, now can it?” said Florebo.

Pasca laughed a nervous little laugh and looked around as if for someone to back her up. “Surely you understand, Florebo. Or you will soon.”

At that, Kiyoshi strode over to the minivan and reached around Pasca to snatch the keys from the ignition. Without a word, he walked past them all to the cottage door and jingled his way through every key on the ring to let himself in. Pasca just stood there, until he sneezed at the dust. “Bless you,” she said, in a defeated little voice.

Bob went to her and took her by the hand. “Come on,” he said. “Show me.”

“Everything will be all right,” said Sophie, taking Pasca’s other hand. She probably believed it.

While Kiyoshi hovered on the porch, looking in through the open door, the rest of them picked their steps carefully through the detritus in the living room. “I’m sorry there’s nowhere to sit,” Pasca said. “I needed the space for work.” The couch and chairs sagged under the weight of her reference books.

Bob tried not to let on how alarmed he was to see the old alphabetical order of her shelves dissolved. “You’re still working? That’s good.”

She tried to clear them places to sit. “There’s not as much demand

for my crossword puzzles as there used to be. Can't keep up with the pop culture. The second time Puff Daddy changed his name, I knew I was lost for hip hop. But I do still sell them to the senior citizen magazines, where people remember the Vandellas and *My Mother the Car*."

Sophie blurted out the awkward question. "How do you afford all this *stuff* on a few crossword puzzles a month?"

"I took out a reverse mortgage on the house, of course. I don't have long to live." She was utterly matter-of-fact about it.

"You might have thirty more years," said Bob.

"But I won't. I'll ascend long before then." A little more tentatively now.

"Ascend?" said Florebo. "You? This incarnation?"

"To join the other Ascended Masters."

Bob said, "You need to see a doctor."

Pasca held her head high. "Could doctors have prevented the ascension of your parents, dear? I doubt they've even managed to explain it after the fact. If Aio and Gaudea went together, just slid out of their bodies, you can bet *they've* ascended."

It almost made sense, but Bob looked at the squalor around him and steeled himself. Maybe if she got a preview of what she was headed for, he could turn her around. "Would you come back to Rumson with us in the meantime? We're trying to figure out what to do for Mom and Dad's funeral. If you could put off ascending a little longer, we'd sure appreciate the help."

"Oh, I'm not nearly ready to ascend yet. So much to do! We must reconcile with materiality before we leave it, you know."

"We could go over now," said Bob. Seeing Pasca unhinged like this was almost as bad as seeing his parents dead.

She sighed. "Very well. But would you help me unload the van first?"



Half an hour later, Bob and Sophie carried in the last of the dozen torchiere lamps Pasca had purchased and put them next to the air conditioners and fishtanks. "I think that's everything," he said. "Will you ride