

IMMORTAL LONGINGS

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The house on Old Post Road wasn't a showpiece by any stretch, but Bob liked the place, and for no real reason except that it felt somehow like home. It felt as comfortable as a pair of worn Dockers and beat-up Chuck Taylors.

In its heyday, this was the kind of house one would have expected to see in Look Magazine, with a Doris Day type standing on the porch with a wide smile offering a plate of brownies.

Those days were long gone. Now it was the ranch house from hell, but Bob still loved it.

He noticed the blackened weathervane as he approached the once striking house. The copper rooster was still up on its perch, sitting strangely askew, making a vain attempt to do its job in the mild breeze of an early autumn evening.

The home was built of that blonde brick so popular back in the 50s – faded now but still solid – and it was wearing its age and abandonment obviously. The S-curved sidewalk was cracked and weed-strewn, the once well-manicured front lawn had long ago surrendered to saplings and weeds, the windows were cracked and partially boarded, the bushes wild and rank.

No one had lived here for at least five years, and the old lady who last occupied it – a Mrs. Sophie Anderson, who died here – hadn't done a whole lot of maintenance herself. It had entered Bob's listings three years ago, on the direct referral of the lawyer who handled the estate.

A handful of people had taken a fleeting look at it since then, but no one had come close to making an offer, in spite of an increasingly competitive price and Bob's formidable salesmanship skills.

By now, Bob had more or less given up on the old place, and was almost glad that it still stood abandoned, waiting here in the dense woods on the outskirts of town. He liked to come here alone, spend a little time walking around the country or just sitting on the chipped porch swing out front.

Tonight, he was just killing a little time. It seemed he had a lot of that lately. He smiled at the battered rooster up on the roof and went for the tarnished lockbox.

As soon as he applied a little pressure the door swung inward effortlessly.

Someone's been here, he thought. Maybe he forgot to lock up last time.

He felt the tiniest sensation of apprehension, wondering if there was another explanation.

As usual, the first thing that greeted him as the door yawned open was the smell – the mixed odors of moldy concrete, musty drywall and dusty carpet. But there was another element to that smell this time, Bob realized – something he hadn't detected before. An icy sweetness perhaps.

The living room looked like it always did – the flagstone fireplace, Mrs. Anderson's long forgotten furniture, all shrouded beneath a variety of stained and multi-colored dropcloths, the ever-growing cobwebs in the corners where the ceiling met the walls, the garish pink Princess phone inset into the wall with its still-tangled cord. It was the sort of décor that would have been fashionably chic when the Beatles were in the Top 40, but seemed pathetically tacky now.

Off to the side was a sunken den, complete with a long dried-up wet bar with a Formica top, filthy shag rug and hideously dark wood paneling all around.

He continued his cursory tour. The small bedrooms and bathroom were in their usual state of forlorn decay, as was the dining room.

Next, the kitchen.

She gasped when he entered.

He was startled too. He jumped.

She was standing at the counter, a large glass pitcher before her. She had been stirring its contents with a long spoon, making a gentle clinking sound which felt strangely refreshing to Bob.

Now, her hand was still. She looked at him with an expression of mild surprise, gradually turning into a smile.

She was drop dead gorgeous.

The obvious thoughts raced through his mind, all more or less based on the absurdity of a beautiful woman casually mixing drinks in the kitchen of a house that hadn't been lived in for years.

Bob, however, found himself at an utter loss for words. He merely stared at her stupidly.

The female stranger was tall and shapely, with long jet black hair adorning a face that was exotically and powerfully sexy.

"I assume you like martinis," she said, pouring a healthy hit of clear alcohol into a cocktail glass.

Bob could only manage a nod.

He took a sip. It was delicious. He couldn't remember how long it had been since he'd had a drink. This must have been the icy sweetness that he picked up in the room.

As the fire of the gin reached his belly, he found his voice at last.

"I don't mean to be rude or anything . . . but what are you doing here?"

She smiled, unveiling a line of perfect white teeth, and took her own sip.

"I'm Adrienne," she said softly, extending a well-manicured hand.

"And I'm . . ."

"I know. You're Bob."

He paused, both alarmed and intrigued.

"But you didn't answer my question," he said, in a slightly firmer voice. "What are you doing here?"

She took another tiny sip of her martini and softly licked her upper lip.

"I've been dying to meet you."

"Excuse me?"

She grinned mischievously. “I’ve been watching you for a long time. Watching, and waiting for an opportunity to get face to face with you. But none ever came. I noticed that you seem to like coming here, usually at this time of day, just before it gets dark.”

“So you’re a stalker?”

She smiled again, and Bob felt something stir deep inside him.

“Not exactly, but sort of. I’m just a lonely girl who suddenly found herself rather intrigued by this handsome, striking young man. I hope I’m not doing anything wrong. I hope that doesn’t offend you.”

He wondered, for just a second, whether it did. He realized, however, in very short order, that he was anything but offended.

“No, not at all.”

“I’m glad,” she said, taking a wide step in his direction, “because my mother, may she rest in peace, always taught me never to be afraid to take initiative. Never to wait for something to happen, but to make it happen.”

He smelled the strangely old-fashioned scent of her flowery perfume.

“And just what, Adrienne, do you expect to happen?”

She took another step closer. When she spoke, he felt the soft push of her breath on his neck.

“Why don’t we just leave that to nature,” she whispered. “And in the meantime, why don’t we find a chair and get to know each other a little bit.”

She brushed past him, leading him into the darkening living room. She took a seat on one of Mrs. Anderson’s shrouded chairs and offered him the couch. They talked as the evening grew into night, the room romantically illuminated by a single candle that she placed before them.

Adrienne told him a great many things, how she was born and raised not far from here, that she lost her mother at a young age, that she kept mostly away from town and society in general and – with surprising frankness – how lonely she had become, how she had longed for years for the right person, all to no avail.

Until now, she said. Maybe. Hopefully.

Bob listened, offering very little information about himself. He acknowledged her politely with timely interjections and paid attention to every word she said, but he

was really paying much more attention to the spectacular curve of her mouth, the way her bosom rose and fell with each breath, her powerful yet soft eyes, the classy way she held her glass.

He felt himself growing vaguely intoxicated, both from the martini and her.

As to what she was saying, Bob knew better. It was all lies – virtually every single word of it. But strangely, he didn't seem to care. And he was totally okay with her open-faced dishonesty, her obvious game of charades.

He didn't hesitate to accept her offer to return the following evening.

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Adrienne watched him walk away into the gloom and wondered whether her performance so far was up to par.

She thought she had done pretty well. There had been a glimmer in his eye, right from the beginning. That he was attracted to her, she had no doubt. Whether he was in the earliest stages of falling in love was yet another question.

And that was the entire point.

There had been so many men like him – over the years, the decades, the centuries. So many handsome, hopeful, hunting young men. All for naught.

Oh, they had lusted for her. They had wanted her – some as a lover or plaything, some as a possession, others as a decoration, some as a bride.

But in the end none of them had loved her.

No matter the scenario, everything invariably came to a screeching halt.

She could almost hear her mother's sadistic cackle.

No matter how hard she tried, how convincing her performance, how arduous her preparations, the closing act was always the same.

Mother.

She would appear, at the most inopportune moments, in all her horrific and hateful glory. Adrienne herself could hardly stand the sight of her. She could only imagine how her would-be beaux felt when she made her entrance.

Uber-dramatic, to put it mildly.

They left in screaming horror, some with their clothes, some without, never to be seen again, at least by Adrienne.

There was Silas Bohanon, back in 1683. He was the honest, if rather dull, owner of a burgeoning haberdashery on the east side of town. He jumped down his own well.

There was Zebediah Creed, in 1852, a dashing cavalry lieutenant who had been decorated for his service in Mexico. Ranting like a mad man, he ran, naked as the day he was born, through the streets until the constables arrested him. Within a month, he was living as a monk in a forlorn mission somewhere out on the West Coast.

There was George Pennington, in 1927, a would-be entrepreneur who was, at that time, making a good living selling Canadian whiskey to local bluebloods. After his encounter with the witch, he became a penniless alcoholic who roamed the streets endlessly panhandling.

And so many others.

It wasn't fair, Adrienne thought. Her mother had brought the curse more than 300 years ago, and ever since she herself was making sure that the curse would be fulfilled.

“You will never find a man to love you. Never! Never! Never!”

That's what the old hag had sworn to Adrienne – standing at the front of the angry mob – seconds before the townspeople let loose the trapdoor beneath her feet, sending her swinging into an unsettled ever after.

Like it was Adrienne's fault.

She had never wished harm on Zoe. She was her own mother, for God's sake. Even though Zoe had long been notorious for her repeated and effective curses on just about everyone in town, Adrienne accepted her for what she was, even if she didn't follow her mother's unsavory footsteps. She had watched her prepare the spells, spending hours over a mortar and pestle mixing who knows what kinds of herbs, roots and unspeakable ingredients, muttering words in some ancient, no doubt blasphemous, tongue.

Zoe had been a widow for as long as Adrienne could remember. She was always bitter, always angry, and never seemed remotely interested in the finer things of life, such as love.

Or caring about her own daughter, for that matter.

Which is why it so surprised Adrienne when she discovered that she and her mother had fallen in love with the very same man.

Zoe might once have been pretty, but that had been eons ago. By the time Adrienne was a young woman, Zoe looked the part of a witch quite perfectly. Her long white hair was unkempt, her ragged clothing soiled and tattered. Her face was pocked with deep-set wrinkles, surrounding a mouth that seemed in a perpetual grimace.

Not the sort of woman that the Rev. Lionel Foster would fall for.

But Zoe fell for him, in spite of her age, her ugliness, her sustained pact with the devil.

And so did Adrienne.

Rev. Foster was the proverbial cream of the crop in the town, which in those early days wasn't much to speak of. But Adrienne loved him through and through – his dark good looks, his imposing height, his Boston clothing, his eloquent sermons on Sundays.

And he loved her back.

When they announced their nuptials, on a beautiful spring day in 1675, the whole town rejoiced. What a perfect couple they would make, what beautiful children they would have.

But not Zoe.

She seethed. Her already sour disposition grew far, far worse with the sense of rejection and defeat.

Not to mention raging jealousy.

Adrienne herself had no idea of her mother's boiling hatred until the day of their engagement party.

It was a beautiful midsummer day and a feast had been prepared by all the townsfolk. At the big table set up in the middle of the main thoroughfare, in a place of honor, Adrienne and Lionel sat and received the toasts and blessings of all.

Except for one.

Zoe showed up shortly after the apple pie was served. Her face was crossed with rage and hate as she pointed her long and crooked finger at the preacher. She uttered one of her curses in that eldritch language, and when she was done, the effect was immediate.

Rev. Foster gagged and choked for a few minutes, before dropping face first into his apple pie, like a fly falling from the heavens. Dead as a stone.

Within a week, Zoe found herself at the gallows, the knotted rope cleansing her many impurities.

But not before she uttered her final curse, one directed at her own unbeloved and heartbroken daughter.

And the curse had worked.

Adrienne had lost count of the men she had courted in this miserable town over all those miserable years.

Yet despite all the disappointments, she had somehow never given up hope.

In fact, she didn't give up during the next five decades of her mortal life, even though hardly a man in town would speak to her, so fearful were they of her reputation and that of her mother. She died, an aged and lonely spinster, in a forgotten cottage far off the beaten path, and was buried in the local potter's field.

Nor did she give up during her present incarnation. Adrienne had long ago forgotten how many potential suitors she had courted – pursued would be the right word – and inevitably lost, thanks to Zoe.

And now there was Bob, here and now, in this strange 20th century excuse for a house.

So far, so good.

In fact, maybe better than good.

Adrienne was feeling something she hadn't felt since the death of her beloved Rev. Foster. There was a faint stirring somewhere deep inside her, and also in a secret place where she hadn't felt anything in a very long time.

For all these years, all these centuries, her goal had been to make a man fall in love with her. She knew that was the only way she could gain freedom. And in all that time, unbelievably, she had never even remotely considered the other side of the coin – the possibility that she herself might fall in love.

She smiled.

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It was a sight that Bob hadn't seen in quite awhile – the old house actually lit up. As if it were alive.

He approached the door and paused briefly to regard the crooked rooster up above. He winked at the weathervane and knocked.

She answered almost at once, a big smile on her face.

Bob's face immediately returned it. She was stunning.

Tonight, she was dressed in tight-fitting pencil slacks, topped with a white cashmere sweater, showing a generous amount of cleavage. Her hair was done up a bit more than the previous encounter – a sweeping wave across her face, and a touch of highlight. It brought out the amber brilliance of her eyes.

She beckoned him into the softly candlelit living room. He noticed immediately that she had cleaned up the place. The dropcloths had been removed, the carpet swept and the floors polished.

The tantalizing smell of food wafted from the kitchen into the immaculate dining room. She had set the table with fine china and silver. Bob wondered how she had gotten everything on such short notice, and made a note of her cleverness.

“May I offer you some wine?” she asked softly.

They sat at the table across from one another, looking through the candlelight into each other's eyes.

“This is really nice,” Bob said, after a sip of the excellent Bordeaux. “You've done a fantastic job with this place.”

She beamed. “Thank you, Bob.”

She is really impressive, he thought to himself. Pulling out all the stops. She's obviously smart, but I suspect that she underestimates me.

“So Adrienne,” he began, “tell me a little bit more about yourself. After all, we're practically strangers.”

She sipped her wine and licked her lips.

Nice touch, Bob thought.

“There’s not all that much to tell. Like I said last night, I’m just a local girl. Nothing special. A little lonely. And I hope that doesn’t frighten you.”

Fright isn’t the first thing that comes to mind, thought Bob, feeling the wine and the power of her feminine charm warm his insides.

“Not at all. And I’m the kind of guy who likes mysteries. Especially mysterious women.”

She laughed delightfully.

“I don’t think that anyone has ever called me mysterious. It makes me feel like a movie star, or Mata Hari.”

Now it was Bob’s turn to laugh.

“How about beautiful, Adrienne? Has anyone ever called you that?”

She blushed, red and full. And then restored that dazzling smile.

“Once or twice, but it’s been a very long time.”

I’ll bet it has, he thought.

“Okay then, I’ll say it now. You’re quite beautiful.”

Now the smile and the blush appeared together – truly an amazing sight, Bob thought.

“And I’ll say to you, thank you. And you’re not too shabby yourself.”

This time they laughed together, perhaps to avoid the awkwardness that such honesty might engender.

Adrienne started. “Dinner!” she cried. “I almost forgot about it.”

She dashed into the kitchen, pretending not to notice Bob’s watchful eyes.

She’s absolutely amazing, Bob thought as Adrienne finished preparations in the kitchen. He had to admit that he had never met anyone like her. In fact, she had everything he had ever wanted in a woman but had never found. He hardly knew her, but it didn’t seem to matter. He was already in love with her face, her laugh, her allure, and he knew that it wouldn’t be long before he was in love with her altogether.

That had never happened to him before. Women had come and gone, like so many listings, so many mortgage applications, so many closings. He had never felt love for any of them, but Adrienne was different. There was something much more than mysterious about her. There was something magical.

And something missing, which bothered him, even as he delighted in the sensation of his feelings. What did she want from him? He wasn't a bad looking guy, but he knew that he was no Brad Pitt. He wasn't particularly clever, he knew, nor excessively educated. So what was she after?

But she was clearly doing everything in her power to win him over, and doing a damn fine job of it. So what was her motive? Why was she trying so hard to deceive him into believing that she was somebody that she so clearly was not?

And what was his risk in going along for the ride? Or for falling head over heels in love, which he knew he was already well on his way to accomplishing?

The hell with it, he concluded. I'll just go with it. I'll find out what her endgame really is. And something tells me that I'll be finding out before too long.

She returned from the kitchen with more wine, steaming plates of prime rib, mashed potatoes and spiced carrots.

He enjoyed his meal thoroughly, all the while feeling her watchful eye as if she enjoyed watching his pleasure.

He gave her deserved praise for her culinary skills and she gave him another glimpse of that deep blush. Together, they took their wine and retired to the pleasant glow of the den, now as spotless and tastefully arranged as the rest of the house.

They sat close, almost without thinking about it, absorbed in each other. He detected the soft scent of her perfume and paid attention to the easy rhythm of her breathing. Once again, he felt a little intoxicated, not from the wine, but from her.

They didn't speak. They didn't need to.

Their lips moved toward each other like magnets. Their kiss was deep and passionate. It was followed by another, even deeper and longer, and then another. And then Bob felt his lips on her ear, on her cheek, her forehead and her neck – her smooth and fragrant neck.

They paused for a moment and sipped at their wine. Adrienne's face was flushed and smiling. Bob's was smiling too, but part of him was confused.

He had certainly enjoyed women in the past – not a great many of them, just the few who had been able to bring down his emotional wall. That had always been quite formidable, and Bob had always been painfully aware of it.

It wasn't really shyness. It was more mistrust. More cynicism. He always wondered why these women were so willing to share their hearts and bodies with him. What did they really want? What was their real motive?

He wasn't delusional enough to believe that it was his good looks or his wealth or his sterling character. In fact, he realized fully that his lack of trust was utterly illogical. It made no sense, as emotions seldom do, but he had never been able to overcome it. He had enjoyed those women, yes, but only for the short-term. He never let the relationships blossom into romance and he certainly never let love enter the picture.

What really confused him tonight, with Adrienne once more leaning in his direction, was that none of this seemed to matter. He didn't trust her – he knew she was lying to him -- and he couldn't care less.

All he cared about at this moment was making love to this stunning woman. And it seemed she shared the sentiment.

After who knows how long of more caressing and kissing, she finally put her slender finger in front of his mouth, as if to hush him.

“Bob,” she whispered, “will you make love to me?”

His heart raced, his insides felt like something warm and soft was washing over them, and he honestly wondered how many ways he could say yes.

But he hesitated.

“First,” he said, running his fingers through her hair, “I want to tell you something.”

She nodded, her eyes wide with anticipation.

“Adrienne,” he began tentatively, “I think . . . I think I . . .”

And then all hell broke loose.

Actually, Bob thought as the rumbling began, it sounds more like the door to hell was just opened.

“Oh damn!” Adrienne cried, and he detected an unmistakable note of anger in her voice.

The entire floor began to shake. The fixtures and paintings on the walls trembled and banged. The curtains fluttered as if in a gentle breeze and then flapped crazily, as if a great wind were pushing them inward. Their wine glasses shook and crashed to the floor,

spreading crimson stains on the carpet. The sound was like the freight train that tornado witnesses speak of, only louder and more ferocious.

The whole thing quickly grew toward sensory overload. It seemed as if the entire house was insanely spinning and rocking on its very foundation. Bob felt himself growing dizzy as the face of Adrienne became a chaotic blur before him.

And then it stopped, as quickly as it had begun.

He looked at Adrienne, whose expression of anger had only grown more fixed.

“What the . . .” he began.

The silence was broken again, this time with an excruciating sound of friction, much like a thousand pointed fingernails scratching a blackboard.

It was coming from the far wall which itself began to morph. The wood panels began to vibrate and then to push outward, trailing their nails behind them, exposing the white plaster beneath. This too was vibrating and growing lumpy, as if something from behind a curtain were pushing.

As indeed something was.

The figure became clear gradually – a human shape literally pushing itself through the wall.

Birthing itself, Bob thought with a shudder.

And then he saw her.

A classic witch, he thought. Complete with crooked, warted nose, stringy white hair, ratty black dress, long pointed hat and an expression that could kill a moose at fifty yards.

And fingernails.

Fingernails that tipped long and bony fingers, one of which was pointed directly at Bob.

Now completely inside the room – born, as it were – she stretched her skeletal, black-clad form. Each arm and leg made sickening crackling noises as she extended them, as if flexing infernal muscles.

“Ah,” she croaked. “That’s better. Much better.”

She directed her pale colorless eyes in Bob’s direction, her finger still pointing.

“And just who,” she began, her finger extending with that ungodly crackling noise. . .

“Do you . . .” crackle. . .

“Think you . . .” crackle . . .

“Are?!”

He felt the razor sharp edge of her fingernail – attached to a finger that appeared to have stretched across the entire room – on his forehead.

“Mother!” Adrienne cried.

I didn’t see that one coming, Bob thought.

“Beloved daughter,” the witch replied, in a mocking gentle voice that sounded much more like a threat. “Shut your pretty little mouth and let your mother tend to her business.”

“No!” she cried, rising to her feet, arms akimbo, in an obvious stance of defiance. “Not this time!”

“Yes this time, you little bitch, you little slut – and every time, forever and ever!”

The witch backhanded Adrienne, sending her toppling over the couch and thudding heavily onto the floor.

Bob started to rise.

“And you,” she croaked at him, “I have been watching you, you nasty libertine, you seducer. I saw how you were kissing her, tempting her with the pleasures of the flesh. What a rank amateur you are, what a pathetic little boy.”

“Pathetic, maybe,” he said to her face, “but a little boy? Get real, lady.”

She smiled, amused at his sarcasm and bravery. She had never seen such cockiness from any of her daughter’s many suitors. None of them had ever dared speak back to her.

“And a funny little boy, too, I see,” she said, instantly placing herself an inch away from his face. He smelled the fetid stench of her breath, the musty rot of her clothes.

“You are quite the Romeo, are you not, my precious little boy? But I will wager you have never been kissed by a real woman.”

She grabbed him by the hair and thrust her lips against his. She opened her mouth and her tongue protruded. It transformed itself into a narrow snake that slithered slowly and steadily into his mouth and down his throat.

Bob gagged when he felt the creature's own tongue tickle against the back of his esophagus. He gasped when the snake retreated at last and slid back to its haven inside the witch's foul mouth.

He wiped his lips with his sleeve.

"Most impressive," he said lightly. "Disgusting, yes, definitely. Original, too. But not terribly frightening."

Now it was the witch's turn to gasp. Her face was a twisted image of hate and confusion.

"You dare mock me? You will pay for that, whelp. That I promise."

Peering from behind the couch, Adrienne watched the battle.

When is he going to run for his life, like all the others? she wondered. Why isn't he running away?

As a matter of fact, running away was the furthest thing from Bob's mind at that moment. The witch was, as he had already told her, most impressive. But hardly frightening. He felt a certain loathing for the vile creature, a certain hatred once he began figuring things out. But fear? Not at all.

Zoe, on the other hand, was enraged.

At Bob's latest insult, she gathered strength for her next trick.

She expanded.

Balloon-like, her head grew. And grew. It became as large as a medicine ball, as corpulent as a bloated globe. Soon, Bob couldn't see the rest of her body at all. The head seemed to fill the entire room, an Imax feature gone mad. Then it began to crack the plaster of the ceiling, and the roofing above. Rain and wind, punctuated by heavy thunder and blinding flashes of lightning, filled the room.

And highlighting this monstrous head was the eye – a gigantic pale orb complete with pulsating blood vessels that mirrored the lightning from above. It peered down at him, making direct contact with his own, by comparison tiny, eyes.

“You are nothing, boy!” she thundered, each word reverberating in the very frame of the house.

“And you,” Bob shouted back at the head, “are nothing but a dried up old hag. I may be nothing, but you’ve never been. You’re a stinking bag of bitterness and hatred. And this is what I think of you.”

He spat directly into the throbbing eyeball.

Zoe screeched – and what a screech. It was the sound of a thousand banshees announcing an entire town’s impending death. It hurt the ears, shattered the windows, intimidated even the thunder itself.

She restored herself instantly to her normal size. Standing directly before Bob, her formerly pale eyes were now black – no pupils, no irises, no whites. Nothing but darkness.

“I have grown weary of you, wretched boy,” she said, quietly this time. Her finger rose up and a terrific bolt of fire extended from it. Using it as a weapon, she drew it sharply across Bob’s neck.

He stood there before her for a second or two, a surprised look on his face. And then his head tumbled off his shoulders, rolling toward Adrienne.

She screamed.

“No!” she cried. “How could you, mother? How could you do such a terrible thing? I hate you! I hate you!”

The witch cackled. “Of course you do, my darling daughter. This is as it should be. This is as it shall always be.”

She cackled again and rose her arms in what might have been an expression of victory, or perhaps the preparation for her departure, now that her work was done.

But it wasn’t done at all. The head on the floor had other ideas.

“Leaving so soon?” came the voice from below.

Zoe halted in mid-cackle.

“After all,” Bob’s voice said, “we’ve only just met.”

Adrienne screamed again, as she watched Bob’s headless body saunter over to the talking head. It stooped over expertly, picked it up and placed it precisely back on its place atop Bob’s neck.

He gave it a firm adjustment, and smiled.

“No,” Zoe said quietly. “This is not possible.”

“On the contrary, it’s entirely possible. And you Zoe, being such a venerable old spellcaster, should know how thin the line is between possible and impossible, between life and death.”

For the first time, the witch was speechless.

Her daughter was sobbing, also speechless.

The newly restored Bob approached the witch, whose mouth now lay open in a silent ‘O’ of astonishment.

“I think it’s time that somebody finally put you in your place,” Bob said evenly, “and unless I’m terribly mistaken, that place would be Hell.”

“What?” Zoe asked in a near whisper, almost meekly.

“You see, I get it. The funny thing is, you don’t.”

“Get what?”

“It’s obvious that you’ve been doing this routine – this haunting and plaguing of your own daughter – for a very long time. I don’t know how long and I don’t really care. I’m sure you have your reasons and I’m sure they’re wicked ones, if you’ll pardon the pun.”

“I have reasons indeed, boy,” she rejoined, a little of her confidence returning. “And they are very good ones. They have to do with betrayal and dishonesty and theft, and ensuring that Adrienne pays for everything she did to me.”

“I see,” he commented casually. “So that’s why you made sure that there would never be a man to love her. Whenever that possibility arose, you appeared, as you did tonight, with all your worn-out bells and whistles. You put on your best show and scared them off forever.”

The witch managed a tiny laugh. Her pride was obvious.

“But not this one. Not this time.”

Adrienne spoke at last. “Bob, what are you . . .”

He turned to her and smiled.

“I’m in love with you, Adrienne. It’s as simple as that. I have been in love with you since the moment I first saw you. And I want to be with you. Forever.”

Adrienne took his hand and kissed him.

“No!” Zoe hissed. “He is lying! This cannot be true!”

He turned to the witch, now pointing his finger at her.

“You know better. What’s done is done. Be on your way.”

Zoe turned one last time to Adrienne, as if seeking help.

“Come now, darling,” she said soothingly. “Help your dear mother. Tell me that it is not true, that this wretched man does not love you, that nothing is going to change.”

Adrienne turned to her mother defiantly.

“It is true, mother. I feel it. And I feel the same thing for him – how about that?”

The witch’s daughter directed her finger downward, toward the floor. And points beyond.

“It’s time for you to go. Now!”

And go Zoe did.

Her departure was rather pedestrian when compared to her spectacular arrival. This time, she imploded. Instead of expanding, she shrunk. She grew tinier and tinier. Before long, the once mighty witch was reduced to a mere dot of nastiness suspended in the middle of the living room air.

They heard the faintest of screams before the little dot popped and disappeared forever, leaving behind only a tiny wisp of black smoke.

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They made love for hours and hours.

As he made love to her, Bob saw Adrienne in all her many forms, like a montage in time. He saw her in her plain bonnet and severe Puritan dress back in the days of her mortal life, as an aging woman, as a skeleton in her lonely casket, and as a ghost with a wide variety of disguises – in Victorian silk and satin, as a flapper with bobbed hair and short skirt, as a femme fatale in an elegant wartime dress, as a flower-bedecked hippie chick, and finally as she appeared to him in the present.

And she was beautiful to him in all her many forms.

Afterward, as they relaxed in the haunting afterglow, Adrienne shared her whole story with him, and Bob explained everything about himself.

He knew that Adrienne had been a ghost the whole time.

He knew that because he was one himself. He concealed his own ghostliness, he told her, because he could tell that she didn't know. He just thought it might be fun to play along for awhile.

He told her how he had died two years before, outside this very house, when he was preparing to show it to clients. A bolt of lightning had struck the dysfunctional weathervane atop the house and sent its charge directly to the doorknob which Bob happened to be clutching at that very moment. He was killed instantly. And ever since, for reasons that he only now understood, he had been returning to the house.

Now the world was open to him – to them.

She gently led him out of the ranch house, into the cool autumn night, for a casual stroll. He saluted the crooked rooster atop the house and thanked it for having done him such a great favor.

They had a vague notion of heading to Las Vegas.

“We could go to one of those tacky Elvis chapels,” Adrienne suggested, playfully kissing him on the lips.

“Who knows? Maybe we could get the King himself to do the honors,” he said with a smile.

The two lovers laughed as they walked, hand in hand, into the gloom.

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