

I

The crescent moon peered through the canopy of oak leaves at just the right angle for Mary to see it as she walked down the hill. She stopped halfway to gaze at it, imagining it as the beautiful white-robed goddess she knew it was, wishing she could only be with her in her sanctuary, that she could worship her and greet her as a sister... But the men had waged war on her long ago, destroying her temples and burning her priestesses, and when they had found they still couldn't get rid of her they had renamed what was left "the Virgin Mary" and assimilated it into their own patriarchal religion. It was incredible that any woman could be a sincere follower of it, and yet hundreds of millions were.

Mary continued past a muddy, leaf-filled streambed into the cluster of yew-shrubs with their thick green fronds rustling in the cold wind, the last of the shriveled berries still on them. She turned a corner and her friends came into view: Liz leaning against the trunk of the oldest yew, twirling her magenta hair, Cloud and Jayden slumped on a patch of garlic stalks, laughing and sharing a bottle of wine. A plastic pumpkin full of Halloween candy and a red Solo cup sat on a nearby boulder.

"Mary! Blessed be!" said Liz, running out to embrace her. The two kissed. "I was so worried your mom had found out. Do you have the offering?"

"I do," said Mary, who reached into her bra and took out a small, torn piece of bread. "Not much to look at, is it?"

Liz laughed. "Wow, what a lame god. They just let you take this?"

"Not even. You just go up and they give it to you. There's supposed to be restrictions, but nobody cares. You got the athame?"

"Here." Liz pulled a black-handled knife from her pocket and slid off the sheath to reveal the copper blade. "It's been soaking on my altar all month. Yahweh won't know what hit him."

"And it looks like our two alcoholics over there have the chocolate."

"Why chocolate?"

“I don’t know, they say Hecate likes it. I think it’s an aphrodisiac or something?”

“That’s the last—”

A faint rustling, accompanied by a muffled panting, startled the two girls, who whipped around to find that Jayden had splattered some wine on the crotch of Cloud’s skirt and, white-knuckling the neck of the bottle, was dutifully engaged in licking up the spill. Cloud, for their part, lay back on the ground with their eyes closed and their mouth lolled open.

“Men,” sighed Liz, rolling her eyes.

“That’s why I stopped dating him,” said Mary. She reached an arm around the other girl’s bare waist and squeezed. “Nothing like you, of course, my pure little lesbian.”

“Who better for a good Catholic girl like you?”

Both girls giggled.

“Well, we should really get started,” said Mary. “Jayden! Cloud! Keep your pants on until after the ritual. Once Hecate blesses us you can have all the sloppy sex you want.”

Jayden and Cloud continued to fondle each other.

“Whatever, we can just offer their pleasure to Hecate too. Help me with the candles.”

Mary smeared soil in a pentacle on top of the boulder while Liz rooted around in a cavity at the base of the old yew. Soon the clinking of glass announced the retrieval of the votive candles and their lighter, which Liz brought over and set at the points of the pentagram. Mary placed a piece of candy at each of the inner vertices and put the Solo cup, already half-full of wine, in the middle.

“With this flame,” began Mary, lighting one of the candles, “I banish the darkness of fear.”

“With this flame,” added Liz, lighting another, “I banish the darkness of shame.”

“With this flame,” said Mary, lighting the third, “I banish the darkness of guilt.”

“With this flame,” said Liz, lighting the fourth, “I banish the darkness of grief.”

The two girls set down the lighter together, saying, “With this flame, we summon the light of love!”

Liz raised her arms to the moon and chanted, “O Laganan Hecate, daughter of Asteria, Light-Bringer and Savioress, behold we have brought Thee for offering the flesh of Thy most zealous persecutor. Draw near to us therefore, we beseech Thee, and deign to accept it from our hands to Thy great pleasure and potency.”

Mary plunged the Eucharist into the cup and stabbed it with the athame over and over until the wrath left her.

II

Martha dipped her fingers into the font and made the sign of the cross, then entered the darkened nave of the church. A few people she didn’t know were scattered throughout the pews, kneeling. She walked hesitantly down the aisle toward the altar, upon which stood, flanked by candles, a golden star with a white disk at its center; the fancy struck her that it looked like a reverse daisy. *He never did like daisies. Always used to complain about how they were “fly-pollinated”...*

Martha came to with a start a few feet from the altar. She knelt on one knee before the Sacrament and crossed herself. *This is Our Lord Himself*, she thought, shuddering, imagining all other thoughts being dispelled by the presence of God.

I hope he’s with Him too, she thought as she made her way over to the left side aisle and into a pew. The resurrected Christ looked out at her from a stained glass window, accompanied by angels and so shining from the mouth of His tomb that the centurions guarding it crumpled to the ground in fear.

She knelt and made the sign of the cross, then began to pray silently: *Breathe into me, Holy Spirit, that my thoughts may be holy. O God, I repent of all my sins with my whole heart, and I detest them...*

She tried to reflect on the sins she had recently committed, but could only focus on one: She had allowed her grief to distract her from her other obligations. In particular, she had intended to go trick-or-treating with Silas and Luke, but by lunchtime she'd realized she wouldn't have the energy to congratulate them when they received a jumbo Reese's Cup or a full-sized Babe Ruth, or even to smile; better not go at all than go sullenly. Besides, Mary was old enough now to look after them, and it would be a good introduction for her to the responsibilities of motherhood, best learned sooner rather than later. But that was no excuse. *She* was their mother; she should have been able to be there for them.

She'd thought she had been ready to burn some of the wood Jack died chopping—wouldn't he want his labor not to be wasted?—but when she had thrown the first piece onto the fire and couldn't find the tongs in time to pluck it back out it was as though she had lost him all over again. And yet this time was different. When Jack's heart had failed him, her own had been pierced as though with seven swords, and she had cried out to Our Lady of Sorrows for deliverance; now there was only a dull ache, a queasy sense of wrong that did nothing but darken everything else like mud.

There was a statue of Mary—the other Mary, the Mother of God—in a niche at the front of the church, looking past Martha to the confessional at the back. She was draped in a blue robe with her arms held out by her sides, beckoning those who loved her, or were at least willing to trust her, to come with her and enter into a closer relationship with her Son. No, even those who hated her she beckoned, even, perhaps, the vandal who had broken off her hands two years ago, whom the priest had condemned in a biting homily that later, in private, he'd numbered among his greatest failures as a pastor. *Then perhaps*, thought Martha, smiling wearily, *there is hope for me yet*.

Martha took a Bible from the back of the pew in front of her and opened it to the Beatitudes, the Gospel for All Saints' Day. "*Blessed are the poor in spirit,*" she read, "*for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.*" *What does that mean, "poor in spirit"? All my years and I've never looked into it further! Luke says "poor," but Matthew says "poor in spirit": maybe those who act as if they're poor, even if they're not, by disdaining their wealth and spending it wisely? Or maybe those who have little spirit, or*

faith, in which case it's good that God looks out for them—for me too, I hope. Jack wouldn't have needed that blessing, he was full of faith...

Tears welled in Martha's eyes, but she kept reading. *"Blessed are those who mourn..."*

Quietly, so as not to disturb the other worshippers, she wept.