

The Witch

I met a witch this past summer, less than an hour off I-95 in New Hampshire. Growing up in Maine, I traveled this stretch of highway hundreds of times, never once thinking that there might be witches living in New Hampshire. Now I know.

I was part of a funny trio that summer. I was the local in our crew. Jacob was a tall, bearded Minnesotan— Gianluca an international student at Bates College from Buenos Aires. Visiting New Hampshire together happened quite spontaneously. It was a brief escape from city life in Boston, with the promise of free camping on the property of an herbalist who happened to be a friend of a friend of our boss. We borrowed a tent, packed blankets, and drove up I-95 to the home of a witch, though we didn't know that yet.

The road to the witch's house was unpaved. It was one of those New England dirt roads that seems to have been made by following a game trail: it meanders and rolls through thick woods, taking sharp turns and creating blind hills and curves never meant to be navigated by cars. Through the dense trees on our right, I glimpsed a marshy pond, walled in by pines. The road ended in a hillside clearing shaded by a massive oak tree. At the top of the hill was a farmhouse, with unruly garden beds cascading to the barn at the bottom of the hill.

The witch was among the garden beds, bent over, rising as our car stopped. She wore a tank top and shorts, an enormous purple sunhat, and decaying pink flip flops. The first words she spoke to us were frantic and excited: "Come quick and look at these beetles! I have no idea what they're doing!" She squatted on her heels again, as fluidly as a child, when we reached her, her eyes glued to the mass of massive black beetles pouring out of a hole in the ground. My eyes

were glued to her. She had a sharp nose and cheekbones, bright silver gray eyes, and unruly dark curls peppered with gray and tucked unevenly into her sunhat.

“Do you folks know what these are or what they’re doing?” she asked breathlessly, only finally shifting her attention to us once we were squatting alongside her, watching the beetles. Meanwhile our attentions were torn between the witch and the beetles she so desperately wanted our opinions on. I offered to use my naturalist app to identify them, which intrigued her. “Broad-necked root borer,” I told her after hovering my phone above one of the little creatures for a few seconds. The name told her all she needed to know: she called to her cat, who pranced out of the garden and delightedly began hunting the beetles. Clearly, she was protective of her plants.

“Can I get you some iced tea?” she asked, once we’d introduced ourselves and there was a lull in the small talk. I was raised to decline these sorts of generousities, but my companions were not, so we sat on her patio and drank her homemade iced tea. The witch’s husband came to join us: an older man, good-natured, with fully gray hair, whose love for his wife was evident in the way he looked at her when she spoke and the way he talked about her when she went into the house to bring us snacks. Her iced tea was infused with a concoction of herbs, whose place in the garden and medicinal properties she described, gesturing across the hillside.

“This place is special,” she said, and her face glowed with something I’d never seen before on the face of an adult. It was a mixture of un-self-conscious joy and the pride of carrying a happy secret, the glow of someone whose inner world is as vibrant as what they bring to the outer one. I’d seen that glow on the faces of young children, but never adults, and it was so striking that I could feel it tangibly when I looked at her. I couldn’t stop looking at her.

“People come here to menstruate into the soil, bury their aborted fetuses, carry out ceremonies, disperse ashes. And the plants are giving all of that life back to us— that’s why they

can heal us.” She inhaled deeply, closed her eyes, and smiled to herself. Her husband gazed lovingly at her, sipping from his iced tea.

The cat wandered over then, jumping up on the witch’s lap. She opened her eyes. “I’ve always known that I was a witch, ever since I was a little girl,” she said, stroking the cat pensively. She continued to speak but I won’t pretend to remember all that she said. She spoke of plants and animals, injury and healing, love and pain, humans and magic. Her words passed through us like a melody as the sun sank lower and we munched on pretzels and her herb-y pesto dip. Never before had I put myself so wholly at the mercy of strangers and felt so unfazed by it. In some way, she never felt like a stranger. There was something about her, that glow, that reached through time and held me in this moment with these people, utterly unconcerned by how I got there or what was to come.

She asked us questions, wanting to know about our lives, our relationships to ourselves and to the earth, our joys and sorrows. Jacob and Gianluca spoke freely, and I came to know them better then, in the company of the witch, than I had living with them in Boston. When Gianluca shared his recent difficulties sleeping, the witch offered to make him a remedy for it. A potion. Frog song carried all the way from the pond. I made small circles with my wrist, swirling the ice in my iced tea glass, as Gianluca pondered this offer. It was almost dark. He said yes.

As the sun left the sky, we found ourselves eating a candlelit dinner with the witch and her husband, sipping personalized potions from antique martini glasses. The potion she made for me tasted like the first warm day of spring, in all of its sensory delights and contradictions. I could scarcely see the food we were eating— the only light came from candles— but to this day it was the best-tasting food I have ever had.

“You three have to swim in the pond before we leave,” the witch proclaimed, as excitedly as she had called us to examine the beetles. The candlelight and whatever was in her own potion had made her face and voice even more vibrant, more magnetic. I bit into the homemade maraschino cherry at the bottom of the martini glass and struggled to make myself swallow. It tasted like hand sanitizer.

“It’s a kettle pond,” she explained, “It was carved out by the glacier. The plants growing along the shore have been leaching their tannins into the water for hundreds of years. It’s like a healing tea.” Just as with the beetles this afternoon, the only sensible thing in that moment was to do as she said we must do. The witch offered to accompany us to the pond in the morning.

We began stacking dishes and shuffling chairs. As I stood, I noticed a toad sitting next to my foot, looking up at me. The witch noticed my noticing. “He’s been there all evening,” she said, just loud enough so I could hear her. My blue eyes met her gray ones and their glow permeated my being.

We pitched our tents under Grandmother Oak, as we had been instructed. Jacob and I set up our sleeping things on opposite ends of the tent, both quiet, processing the evening. I tried to journal but words failed me. So I lay on my back, under a scratchy wool blanket, the only sounds the night sounds of the forest and Jacob turning the pages of his book in the light of his headlamp.

I thought about the girl I’d been for most of my life, and how she never would’ve drunk a potion made by a stranger, let alone a self-proclaimed witch. How she wouldn’t be camping with two men she barely knew somewhere in the woods of central New Hampshire, and how she never would’ve thought that these experiences could take place just across the state border, not

even an hour from the place she called home. I thought about worlds nestled within other worlds and the moments that pull you from one into another.

We awoke as the sun was rising and prepared to meet the witch at the pond. It was a typical summer morning in northern New England: cold. I put on a bathing suit and a sweatshirt over it, wrapping my bare legs in a towel for the walk. We strode along the meandering dirt road until we identified the side trail she told us about, which neither of us had noticed on the drive in. It led down to the brushy shoreline, where a dock began between bushes and stuck out 30 feet or so into the pond, like a long finger. At the end of the dock sat the witch, wrapped in a purple robe, her body folded comfortably, her eyes closed, facing the water. She opened her eyes when our footsteps rocked the dock. We walked out, past the thickets of water lilies and the branches of shore bushes suspending spiderwebs over the tannin-tea water. The witch rose as we approached her. Her face had that glow, and the glow was starting to become more than just a visual experience for me. I could feel it in my being when I looked at her. She existed in a world that was apart from ours— a world I realized I desperately wanted to join.

“Ready?” she asked. In one fluid movement her purple robe was off and in a pile on the dock. Her naked body was a blur as she gracefully launched herself into the water. All was quiet around the pond, aside from the ripples of her splash lapping at the dock and her smooth strokes. Jacob stripped and followed suit. I shivered, partly from cold, partly from fear, before removing my sweatshirt and dropping the towel. I eased myself off the dock and into the water. Looking down at my body, my skin appeared orange, colored by those tannins I guess. I wove my way through lily pads, thinking of frogs and fish and all the things I could not see that lay beneath me, perhaps very far beneath me. This was a kettle pond, after all. Carved by a glacier, fed by a spring, cold and dark and deep, rich with the living and nonliving, a monument to time and

change and continuity. Jacob swam slowly, making a long circle around the pond. The witch floated by herself in the middle, humming occasionally, face upturned to the sun. I tread water anxiously, my brain at war with itself, half screaming in fear and discomfort while the other half attempted some sort of calm. I forced myself onto my back, floating, my ears hearing only from below the surface. I turned myself to face the pine trees along the eastern shore, whose branches the sun was climbing through and would soon overtake. The image of the sun tangled in the pines and my warm breath floating in the cold air above my face is frozen in my memory. I closed my eyes and surrendered.

Noises from below the surface scared me: my own cracking joints as I flipped my feet to keep them afloat, the faint and distant movements of my human swimming companions, my heartbeat, my breath, water popping deeper and deeper into my ear canals. Floating there, I felt fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of the future, fear from the past. I thought that maybe, in this magic pond, there would come a moment when the fear would drain out of me and be gone, and I would be left as a fearless version of my former self.

The fear never left, but it became irrelevant. The sun touched my body sensually as it crested the tops of the pines. My eyelids glowed in my brain and I breathed against the pleasant pressure the water exerted on my lungs. Through the water, I felt connected to my present, future, and past. I began to suspect that they were all happening simultaneously. While my body floated in the pond, my mind traveled far and wide. I know so little about the world, and after this experience I readily admit to knowing even less. I stayed in the water long enough to feel as though I'd left myself and then returned.

It was hard to leave the pond, the witch, Grandmother oak. We picked blueberries on the walk back to Grandmother Oak. The air was still cold, and with my wet bathing suit clinging to

my body, I was freezing. Leaving the witch was like waking up from a dream. I was unsure if this place would be here if I tried to come back. In less than 2 hours, we were back in Boston, surrounded again by noise and traffic and people whose attitudes towards magic fell somewhere between condescension and disdain. The witch told us we are welcome to come back any time. I'd like to take her up on it. After all, I pass her house every time I drive home.