

Swampmaiden · *Edith Pearlman*

I'M NOT MUCH of a witch. But an elderly childless ex-actress living alone does acquire some equipment. A cat. Scents. Syrups. Letters with foreign stamps. I commune mainly with the living, although I speak, or mutter, to various dead lovers and husbands, who don't answer back. As for predicting the future—never. I have no talent for mancies.

The neighborhood children suspect me of trafficking with the devil, or maybe with the School Committee, and they keep out of my way. But Samantha Brody, who is now fourteen, sees me as an undemanding type. She drops in often. A girl needs an old woman, she once flatteringly explained. Her own grandmothers live out-of-state.

One December afternoon Samantha was moving through my apartment, hunting for Lotte. The cat had not betrayed her whereabouts by so much as a hair, but the girl on her search was dropping everything. First flew the gold mesh evening purse that she uses for bus tokens. Then her parka failed to land on the hall chair. Gloves and hat found their way to the floor. Next a brass bangle. "It fell off twenty times today," Samantha informed me in the voice of a despairing parent. She stooped to pick it up, releasing from some corduroyed pocket a crumpled candy wrapper. By the time we were at last seated in my living room—the cat, discovered on the couch, had been pressed to Sam's unevenly pancaked cheek and reverentially replaced—Samantha's trail had proved that she was not cut out for espionage.

"Espionage!" she cried when I mentioned this. "Why would I want to become a spy? I want to be a check-out clerk. In a supermarket. Oh, nobody understands me."

The lament might have been appealing if uttered in a shy tone. But Samantha's voice had thinned to a whine.

"Check-out clerks have to be tidy," I said.

"What's wrong with being a check-out clerk?"

"Did I . . . express disapproval?"

"You had that look, Mrs. Levant. My mother's look is wickeder"—here Samantha gritted her teeth and pressed her lips together—"but it's basically the same expression. And Miss Edmonson at school . . . 'Sam, with your IQ you must *do* something with your life.' Whose life is it, any-

way? I don't happen to want to read *My Antonia*. I don't want to practice law. Every teacher I meet tells me to become a lawyer. Why aren't *they* lawyers? I don't want to improve my penmanship. Dad says my script looks like shorthand. Who can say?—maybe it *is* shorthand.”

“You know perfectly well it is not.”

“Everyone thinks I'm smarter than I am. IQ tests are crap, if you'll excuse my vocabulary. I'm not very smart, really.”

“I'm afraid I'm beginning to agree with you.”

“Why are you afraid? It's all right to do average in school,” said the unkempt girl, sounding desperate. “Just like it's all right to be uncovenantal in your choice of career.”

“Just *as*,” I corrected. “Unconventual.”

“Mrs. Levant, can we have a bit of your crème de cacao?”

“Unconventional,” I said, finally getting it right. Then I meditated on the propriety of her suggestion. Samantha misinterpreted my silence. “Can we *please* have a bit of your crème de cacao?” she said crossly.

“You may have a drop, in some hot chocolate.”

We went into the kitchen. Samantha grew several new elbows. She sipped her chocolate without raising the cup from the table. First she brought her face down into the steam, and slurped the drink; then she spooned the stuff up, holding the spoon as if it were an oar. When she had finished she remembered to thank me.

“You'll be bored as a supermarket clerk,” I said.

“That's okay,” she cheerfully replied, and took herself off.

Samantha's mother, Barbara Brody, had defied her own parents by wearing glasses all the time, even on dates. Also she had enrolled in graduate school after college instead of finding a husband. Now, contact-lensed and married, she teaches psychology at the local university. She treats Samantha with as even a temper as she can manage. When she needs to wring her hands, she does it at my place. This past year she's been a frequent visitor.

“I can take the slobbishness,” she said in January. “I can take not studying. I can even take the backtalk. What I can't take is the . . .”

“Handwriting?”

“Oh, I can take the handwriting. *I* don't have to read her exams. What I can't take is the goddam room.”

“What's wrong with the goddam room?”

For answer she showed me, leading the way down the carpeted stairs of our building. The Brodys' apartment is larger than mine, and more sparingly decorated. I always enjoy visiting there. The Moroccan rug in the living room is a prize. The walls of the dining room are lined with books, and in earlier years Samantha did her homework there. These days, her mother told me, she enters her room right after dinner and doesn't emerge until morning. "Some night she'll perish from the miasma. The room doesn't exactly smell, but I get the impression that there is organic growth in the bottom layer, the one you can't glimpse. But here," she said, pushing open the door. "See for yourself."

I had expected posters of rock stars to be taped to the walls but the walls were bare. Their pale green looked harsh in the wintry light that entered through uncurtained windows. I had expected clothes to be strewn all over an unmade bed, but the bed was adorned only with its rumpled quilt. Even the desk had been denuded. Everything was on the floor—everything that might have lain on a surface, or stood on a shelf, or hung from a hook. Jeans, books, quantities of unsorted notebook papers, records, underwear, empty but unclean cereal bowls, a calculator, a phonograph. Even a lamp. As Barbara managed to open the door a little further, the papers—which were everywhere, everywhere—stirred. It was as if a wind had disturbed a fen. I picked up one of the papers but could not interpret its runes. The bookshelves were bare. I bent down and selected the book nearest my foot. *Cry For Joy*, it was called. Joy was a cheerleader. "The closet is empty," said Barbara. "Everything she owns is on the floor. Did you see it heave?"

I too think IQ tests are crap. However, I am partial to heroines who lead a life of the mind despite their grossly sensual relatives. Also to tongue-tied ones who will one day lead a revolution. I admire the decisive princess spinning for a century while her prince hacks his way through the forest. But ungrateful chits grieve me. I was short with Samantha next time we met. She didn't seem to notice.

"Does she take drugs?" I asked her parents on another occasion.

"She doesn't do drugs," said Barbara.

"She doesn't do anything," said Samantha's father.

Barbara sighed. "She'll never get into college."

"She doesn't want to go to college," he reminded her gently. "We'll find her a good check-out school."

Samantha's eyes are a pearly green. When she came knocking on my door that Saturday night they looked darker than usual. "I'm scared shitless," she said. By her unaccommodating language I knew that she was truly frightened. Indeed, her teeth were chattering. She wore her quilt as a wrapper. Her bare feet were quite clean.

"A bad dream? Come in."

She seated herself on the couch, roughly displacing Lotte. "There was this dwarf. Chasing me, chasing me. Slimy, dripping with stuff. Ugh; and I couldn't get away. Tried screaming, nothing came. You know?"

"I know, darling," I said, though at that moment she was a most un-darling personage, all ragged nerves and streaked make-up (apparently she bathed only her feet). Her eyes, less frightened now, looked vacant. I wondered if Samantha, in her waking life, had the wit to escape a malevolent pursuer . . . "Everyone suffers nightmares. I myself . . ."

"Could we have some *crème de cacao*?" she gracelessly interrupted.

I closed my own eyes and commanded myself to be merciful. Why should this flaccid and unambitious girl want to hear about my dreams? "*Please*," she sighed.

"Yes. We'll have it at your place."

She half-wore, half-dragged her quilt. It was a wonder that she didn't fall down the stairs and break her neck. I followed, the bottle under my arm. In the Brodys' front hall a pad with a restaurant's name and number was propped up in front of the telephone. "Two glasses, please," I said.

She brought extremely sticky ones. ("We try to criticize only those actions which seem committedly self-defeating," her father had said in his mild, law-professor's voice. "Like wandering in front of a truck," explained Barbara, *her* voice unsteady.)

I drank my drink without comment. She drank hers. She went to the bathroom. I washed the glasses like a sneaky apprentice and refilled them, and Sam came out, and we drank some more, and she grew soft and sleepy. "What *do* you dream about, Mrs. Levant?"

"Betrayals. Conflagrations. Impoverishment. Have you any idea how important position is? How pleasant success?"

"Yes. They're too important. That's why I'm going to be a check-out clerk and live among the poor."

"Doing good?" I said hopefully. "Improving their lot?"

"No," said Samantha. "Just being poor," she said, her fist striking the

arm of her chair. “Just banging the cash register.”

“There is a difference between the unconventional and the merely ruinous.”

“Supermarkets have to live, too.”

“You possess a magical power, Samantha. Do you know what it is?”

“No. What?”

“You are able to give a headache to everyone you meet.”

She stared. Then, to my surprise and relief, she laughed.

I drew a breath. “Young woman! Listen to me. Generations of over-achievers are right now groaning in their graves. Was it for this that they fled pogroms, peddled old clothes, pushed dry goods, saw their sons make Law Review? For the sake of a girl who, if you’ll forgive my vocabulary, doesn’t give a shit? Who doesn’t want to read? Or to study? Or to work?”

“I want to work,” she said quietly. “I’m even willing to arrange cans on the shelves. If a dwarf doesn’t catch me, that is.”

“The dwarf in your dream,” I interpreted, “may represent the defiant part of your nature.”

“The dwarf was a dwarf.”

“Which defiant part everyone has,” I hurried to add.

“Was a dwarf! You didn’t see him, you know. He was my dwarf. You may think that no dwarf could find me worth chasing . . .”

“Sam!”

“. . . but you could be wrong. Did *I* say anything about a dream?”

She then favored me with a gaze, a lengthy gaze, a green gaze, a gaze that reduced me—me, the prevailing sorceress, the closest thing to a witch for miles around—to the status of some meagre fairy who hardly makes it to the christening. I could not doubt that she qualified as heroine. Dwarfs don’t waste time on girls without destinies. And if the conventions of unconventionality could not extend to a beige-faced whitefooted virgin reading trash while various godmothers tried to tell her a thing or two—well, it must be time to revise the conventions.

“I’m going to bed now. Thanks for being kind.” Samantha kissed my cheek and stumbled off to her room, leaving me to make a servant’s unescorted exit.

I didn’t exit right away. Not every practitioner gets dispelled so neatly, and I needed time to recover. I hung around, drinking my own liqueur

and reading the Brodys' magazines. After a while, when I was sure Sam was asleep, I ventured down the dark hall. Her door was open. The room had not improved since the afternoon I had last seen it. At night it had an even boggier quality. There was a trace of a path in the spongy matter on the floor, indicating the route of Samantha's flight from the dwarf. Here and there something gleamed, caught in the light of the street lamp—a gum wrapper, probably; a bracelet; the mesh evening purse. Maybe the gleams were Rhinegold, I thought; maybe fool's gold; maybe ordinary money, useful at the supermarket; maybe the bioluminescence of decay. The girl snored like an ogre, guarding her mysterious talents; and I stood in the dark, member of a familiar troupe: the relatives and friends of all the damsels who ever wrote poems in the attic, or refused rich suitors, or dressed up in boys' clothing in order to sail joyously before the mast.