

THE USES OF MAGIC

As Ek stood in that cave he could not have known that the sorcerer was as nervous as he was. The magician wore a wolf's skull which still had large clumps of fur clinging to it. The sorcerer mumbled incantations to himself, grateful for the regular guttering of the fires that the circle of men held. The jumpy shadows they cast mesmerised the small crowd and enabled him to mumble his way convincingly through his first public incantation without discovery.

From memory and occasionally by instinct he selected leaves from the circle of shallow pots in front of him. He heard his father's voice in his head singing the names of the herbs out musically. Slavishly he followed the ritual – almost forgetting to ask Ek to repeat the necessary parts of the incantation.

The purpose of this ritual was to make a warrior brave and to weaken his enemy. Ek wanted to defeat Gor in battle. The sorcerer was making him a drink which would make him more confident before casting the naming spell.

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Jenene stood at the sink in that dingy kitchen and focused on making tea. Her mother and sister sat in the other room criticising her furniture, her taste in posters and her cleanliness. Jenene tried to remember how to make tea using tea leaves rather than the bag she would usually squash into a mug. For her family she was using the teapot for the first time.

From memory and by instinct she spooned first small and then large clumps of tea into the pot. She heard her mother's voice warning her to warm the pot first. She tried to follow the ritual. In her concentration she kept forgetting to answer the questions which her mother and sister bellowed through the beaded curtain from the sitting room.

She had invited her mother and sister round so that she could tell them that wanted to leave her long-standing boyfriend, Mike, and move in with Darren, who already two children by two different women. She had escaped from the room to summon up the courage to speak her news and also to play out the tea ritual which the English always performed with such fortitude at times of stress, emergency or war.

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The sorcerer called Ek to step forward. Ek hesitated and peered into the shadowy face framed by the wolf's head. The small wooden cauldron was throwing out a light, heady scent which emboldened Ek. The sorcerer motioned to him again, more urgently this time, fearful that he would lose his authority over the crowd if the initiate seemed not to trust him.

On the makeshift table in front of him, the sorcerer had assembled a piece of parchment on which he had drawn in carbon from the fire a rough likeness of a raven, Gor's shield symbol. He had also fashioned a wax effigy with a black bird's feather

stuck clumsily into its head. After a moment of prompting Ek understood that these items constituted his enemy. Ek did as he was bid and spat on the wax effigy before stabbing it with his knife and throwing it into the fire. Behind it he threw the shard of parchment on which he had spat and wiped himself. The occupants of the cavern stamped their feet with approval as Ek gave them a gap-toothed grin of triumph.

The sorcerer coughed gently to recall Ek's full attention.

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Gavin was sweating profusely in his thin, polyester suit. He was sitting in the row behind his solicitor in the county court. The lawyer was explaining patiently to the judge that Gavin's claim was for damages resulting from the people in the flat overhead causing his ceiling to cave in after flooding their kitchen floor. His neighbours had decided not to attend the court.

Gavin could not have known that the judge was also nervous. It was the first time he had sat as a judge. The judge wore a wig made out of horse's hair which made him look much older than he was. He mumbled points of law to himself and fired questions at the solicitor which Gavin could not understand. He felt himself a spectator. It seemed that his solicitor was not only asking the judge for damages but was also asking the judge to find that the defendants were in contempt of court.

The judge was frowning his brow to hide his panic. He was trying to remember the voice of his university lecturers explaining the principles for an injunction and also for contempt of court. After a while he began to relax. In time the solicitor passed him a piece of paper containing the terms of the judgment which he wanted the judge to pronounce.

The judge noticed that the name of the defendant was spelled differently on the two documents. Both the judge and the solicitor looked at Gavin.

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In the sitting room Jenene had told her mother and her sister that she wanted to leave Mike and move in with Darren. She had told them while they were busy selecting their biscuits from the assortment Jenene proffered from her tin. She had disturbed their ritual. Her mother, flabbergasted, demanded to know again with whom her daughter intended to live.

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The sorcerer looked at Ek and demanded to hear the name. The judge looked at Gavin and demanded to hear the name. The mother looked at Jenene and demanded to hear the name.

'Gor,' said Ek, quietly.

'Timmins,' said Gavin, quietly.

‘Darren,’ said Jenene quietly.

As each spoke the other’s name they cast a spell. Ek cast a spell of war, Gavin cast a spell of legal liability, and Jenene cast a spell of possession.

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In a classroom where fourteen quite young women were enduring double-biology, Kirsty wrote the name “Steve” dozens of times in her exercise book instead of the notes she was supposed to be copying. By writing his name, by drawing embroidered diagrams containing his initials, Kirsty tried to make Steve her own. She tried to cast a spell on him. It made her stomach flip over inside her each time she mumbled his name to herself and each time she tried to remember what he looked like.

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Jenene had run back into the kitchen. On the pretext of collecting more sugar for the tea ritual. As she did so, she spoke the magical name of “Darren” and was carried back to him. Back to fifteen stolen minutes behind the Spar supermarket two nights before. She tried to conjure him up, to will her future through the passion of her longing for it.

Gavin clutched the letter which his solicitor wrote to him three days after the court hearing. The judge had cast a hex over Timmins, ordering him to pay a large amount of damages, legal costs and interest. Gavin listened to the noise from the flat overhead and brandished his spell at the ceiling. On the top of one of the sheets of paper was the crest of the local county court – it was a badge of a strange power from an old man in a strange wig who muttered low curses in that vaulted room. Gavin giggled the name “Timmins” to himself and brandished the letter upwards.

Ek left the cave clutching his knife. Under his breath he muttered the name “Gor” again and again. With a welling sense of triumph brought on by the herbal drink he ran towards Gor’s hut.

Kirsty sat and looked at the clock with a heavy heart. Her lesson was overrunning and she would miss Steve. She began to write “I hate Miss Steel” and drew a gallows with an effigy of Miss Steel hanging from the rope.

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We wish for what we hope for. We still use ritual magic to achieve the things we want, mutter strange spells to ourselves and draw shapes in our minds. We may be modern now and, yes, we are clever swine: but we will never leave our magic and superstition behind.