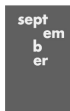


JENNIFER LANE



THE
WHEEL

A WITCH'S PATH
BACK TO THE ANCIENT SELF



An extract from
September Publishing

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First published in 2021 by September Publishing

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Wheel illustration on page xi by Leo Nickolls

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited. www.refinecatch.com



Printed in Denmark on paper from responsibly managed, sustainable sources by Nørhaven

ISBN 9781912836901

EPUB ISBN 9781912836925

September Publishing
www.septemberpublishing.org

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OPENING

31 October

‘Yarrow for vision, mugwort for foresight. Cerridwen, I am ready; show me your wisdom, show me what I must do.’

My eyelids feel heavy with candle wax. The bathwater is up to my collarbones, spilling over the ridges to form soft, milky pools below my shoulders. In the low light, a drift of mist carries the scent of herbs and the bathroom tiles vibrate with the sound of my exhale until I am in an echo chamber of breath.

I really hope the cat doesn’t come crashing in.

Trick or treaters muster in the darkened streets below me. In my mind’s eye, I watch their painted faces squeal and cackle under the street lamps. Their parents have worked so hard on the Dracula make-up and bumpy warts – ‘Hold still!’ Now, mums and dads stand a few paces away in their slippers planning to swipe a few Haribo when the kids are in bed. Once their buckets are filled, the children trundle off down the street to the next house like a troop of eerie orphans.

This is the usual way of Samhain night, Halloween; the night when the veil between our world and the spirit realms is at its thinnest. We

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pull ghoulish faces with the torchlight under our chins. We tell ghost stories under the covers. Children check under their beds more than once tonight. In Mexico, people are making their costumes for the *Día de los Muertos*, painting neon white skulls onto papier mâché, ready to dance for their passed loved ones in a colourful carnival. Across the world, bouquets sit in the hallway, soon to make their way to the graveyard. We might have turned Halloween away from its more macabre traditions and into an orange-and-black plastic parade, but there is still a darkness to this time of year; one that witches revere.

All the witches are celebrating tonight.

In my ritual bath, I slip in and out of a meditative state. The candles flash shadows on my skin like I am a spectral being myself.

Samhain (pronounced 'SOW-in' or 'SOW-eeen', with 'sow' as in 'how') is an ancient Celtic fire festival, a night when ghosts and goblins would roam the village in the flicker of the samhagan or ceremonial bonfire. Quick, put a mirror in your window to ward off the demons; pile salt on your doorstep to keep the bogeys at bay! Fix a rowan branch across your latch to protect the house from evil witches. The shadowy things of this world and the next are out in their numbers, riding on a wave of power. On Samhain, the thrum of magick is in our fingertips.

But Samhain is more than just a chill down your spine.

This is the most important day of the Celtic calendar – the witches' New Year. It is the time when we all must turn inwards to face the darkness of the coming months where we will stay throughout winter until the green world is reborn in spring. Just as the Earth is closer to the sun on the summer solstice, Midsummer's Day, so we are closest to the underworld on Halloween. Over many centuries, people have used this day to commune with spirits, goddesses and their ancestors, taking

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full advantage of the thin slip of fabric dividing the worlds to divine the future and get answers to life's most difficult questions.

Right this second, modern Pagans and witches are raising their arms to the sky or sitting in quiet meditation engulfed by the flickering of the candle flame. We welcome in the Goddess of the colder months, the wizened crone of darkening days; the one who stirs her cauldron in the deep wildwood and has a voice that rasps from her throat like a slowly drawn match. She is Cerridwen, the Keeper of the Gate to the underworld; she is Grandmother Time with her smile that knows our past, present and what will come to pass. Her wisdom will keep us safe as we bury ourselves in the dark womb of winter. Tonight we raise our energies to the moon, to the Goddess and to the dead. Tonight, the world is preparing to be reborn.

But, right now in my bathwater, I feel like I'm barely in this world. I'm floating. The steamy mist, like glowing moonstone, is thick around my head. Tonight, I ask the Goddess to guide me, to show me what I must do next.

'Cerridwen, the great Wheel turns and the year renews; show me your wisdom, show me what I must do.'

I close my eyes and my perception shifts, as though my eyes have sunk back into the shadow of my skull. In a rush, I dream of the woods. I'm soaring over the pine tops among an outcrop of startled crows, feeling the low cloud trail in my long hair. I dream of moss-heavy rocks, my feet skimming sticky ferns, and I see the grey-haired Goddess with her hand outstretched over her cauldron.

She is smiling at me.



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Witchcraft, it's been a while.

Over the past few years, witchcraft and I have drifted apart, like two weird childhood friends that always promised to live two doors down from one another until one family decided to up sticks and move to Skegness. We didn't have a falling out, no fights or pinching under the table; but my life took a different path for a little while, so witchcraft and I had a break.

Thrust into the adult world where I found myself as a copywriter, sub-editor and sometime librarian, things got a little busy. Most of my time was spent in offices with pipes that creaked and air con systems that sometimes gave up the ghost on the hottest day of the year. I was an employee now, reliant on showing up to my day job to afford my little rooms in city-centre flat shares. Evenings weren't spent reading about ancient runes under the covers until after midnight as had been the case in my teenage years and early twenties; they were spent filling in job applications and scrubbing mysterious stains off the kitchen worktop. Things were a little less magical now.

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But how could I ever forget the quiet coils of witchcraft?

Ever since childhood, I had found myself drawn to the slightly stranger things in life. At seven years old, whenever it was my turn to choose what game we played, it was always ‘Witches’. If we weren’t stirring imaginary cauldrons in the corner of the schoolyard and sending bats off to do our dirty work, I wasn’t interested. At home, I dressed up with green plastic fingers covering my own and I would wear my mum’s old black skirts as cloaks, straddling the big old broomstick from my grandma’s garage. It was all a lot of silliness, a bit of fun, but as I grew older the idea of magic and being able to influence the world around you with the twitch of a nose or the flick of a finger became very appealing. Especially as I was a quiet girl who wouldn’t put up her hand in class for fear of the teacher saying, ‘No, anyone else?’ I yearned for magic to be real with a longing that was slightly unhinged, and for a tawny owl to squeeze itself through the classroom window and tell me I was Hermione Granger 2.0.

When I hit my teens and discovered the mystical powers of the internet, I found that the other world I craved was very real. I *could* actually be a witch if I wanted to, minus the flying broomsticks.

For many years, I practised Wicca, a form of ‘white’ witchcraft, in secret in my room and in quiet places within nature. It was an invisible veil I wore over my skin; part of my identity that people could only guess at. But as I got older, there seemed to be fewer hours in the day; I was tired at the end of the working week and those dishes weren’t going to do themselves. There were press releases to finish and trains to catch, conferences to attend and flats to view. People say you ‘make time for the things you love’, but I didn’t know where these folk found the wormhole that could materialise extra minutes. I slowly found my time in nature decreasing and my hours in front of a screen engulfing

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most of my daylight hours – and there was nothing less witchy than a swivel chair.

In late autumn 2018, I realised that some things in my life just weren't working. I was always tired, my hair peeled away from my scalp in spidery tendrils that clogged up the shower drain, and my joints ached a lot more than I thought they would at twenty-eight years old. Maybe I'd missed the memo and everyone worked very hard to keep their limbs, hair and nails clamped to their body as they approached thirty. But it wasn't just the physical falling apart that bothered me. Staring out of the window of my then workplace – across the car park, over to the nearest fast-food joint and then on to the next grey expanse of concrete beyond that – I would stand and search for the nearest speck of green. Two hundred years ago, a bird would have flown over the same area to see a patchwork of fields and peat bog, home to species of butterfly and vole that have long since fled the urban sprawl of Manchester. Now, that same bird would have to fly quadruple the distance to find a tree to rest in; the perfectly planned symmetry of a tarmacked car park not offering much in terms of a hopeful meal. Maybe birds liked popcorn chicken, I wasn't sure. Up in my office, no natural air could enter the second-floor room unless the glass was smacked with an emergency escape mallet. To my horror, the police had recently visited the dual-carriageway bridge visible from this same window to haul a suicidal man back from plummeting thirty feet over the edge. We all watched it happen.

How had I ended up here, sandwiched violently between a drive-thru KFC and a local jumping spot?

Before I took the role just over a year earlier, I had been a full-time freelance environmental journalist and had been doing pretty well, but I took on the full-time job to get myself out of the flat and back

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into the realms of social interaction. Working at home was all well and good, but sometimes the overwhelming pull of the biscuit tin could be a bit too much and, as much of an introvert as I am, seeing another living, breathing human more than once a day was actually quite nice. So, I was back in the rat race. Commute. Nine to five-thirty. Commute. Sleep. Losing my vision in the fug of blue light and fluorescent glare, I soon realised that this new direction hadn't been what I needed. Not what I had needed at all.

I couldn't deny it by this point, I was depressed. Panic attacks rocked my nervous system, leaving me shaky for weeks on end, and seasonal affective disorder (SAD) made my mood dip lower each day as we got closer to winter. But there was much more to it than just the early sunsets and dark skies. I was sad with the nine-to-five-thirty structure of the day, the declarations of climate emergencies lighting up phones across the world and the streams of faces devoid of wonder pouring from the bus station each morning. Every evening on the way home, I blotted out my day with nuggets of sunshine I had stored up in my head from years' worth of summer hikes: the path down to the river bordered by red campion; a walk across the clifftops, where the clear sea air was so rich that I would sleep for eleven hours afterwards. I had always felt this draw to greenery and the small creatures within it. When my peers were at their ballet and tap classes, I was lying under the pear tree in my grandparents' garden, trying to spot their resident greenfinches through an ancient pair of binoculars. I would imagine fairies among their fuchsia patch and every touch of light breeze was that of some beautiful goddess trying to comb my hair. These small golden droplets of nature in my memory had been keeping me going for some time, fuelling my quickstep walks down city alleyways. But the splutter of cars and planes was drawing me away from the green

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core in my heart. In among the screen-glare headaches and sardine-crammed tram journeys through the city, I began to realise with horror how much I had fallen out of touch with my nature-loving roots and the Pagan path I had studied with so much joy and curiosity for almost fifteen years. I found that key festivals, such as Ostara and Samhain, would jump out at me from nowhere; my chaotic mind meaning I'd prepared nothing whatsoever. Solstices and equinoxes went by without so much as a second thought. There was no joy, no celebration. It was like Christmas with beans on toast and all the gifts still in their Amazon boxes. I wondered how I had let it get to this point.

My spiritual connection with the world in my late twenties was in tatters.

Witchcraft, something so closely bound up with my appreciation of the natural world, called to me. No nightmares or screaming cackles; witchcraft had always been a part of me, long before I learned how to articulate my attachment to nature and find the secret spots filled only with birdsong. But as my bond with the natural world had frayed, so did my love of all things magical. I had called myself a witch for a long time, but I had been out of the loop for about two years – almost twenty-six turns of the moon, eight seasons of wandering on this Earth without feeling the world vibrate under my bare feet, without once speaking to my Goddess, Mother Nature, who I loved so dearly.

*

‘Your bloods all came back normal. You’re really, really healthy.’

He gives a little chuckle of disbelief and I look at Dr Khalid blankly. I think he’s misunderstanding here.

‘Sorry, but all my symptoms would say otherwise.’ I’m being tart and I know it.

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‘Jennifer, your ferritin is normal, your blood count is great, your B12 is excessively high; almost above a normal range. Potassium, sodium, blood pressure, haemoglobin. There’s nothing here to explain your symptoms. On a physical level, you are, enviably, above averagely healthy.’

I look down at my hands, past the cannula sticking out of my left arm. There is a smear of translucent blood below it. ‘So . . .’

‘So, what does it mean?’

I nod, wearily. ‘What’s the matter with me?’

‘It sounds to me like you have an anxiety disorder.’ I open my mouth but Dr Khalid raises his head slightly and continues. ‘It might seem like this is a very physical problem and if you had rung us beforehand and explained your symptoms, I would *absolutely* have said come straight to A&E as soon as possible. But these are all also very clear symptoms of anxiety.’

We’re so deep in autumn right now that the bright colours have turned to pavement sludge outside North Manchester General. My hands are slack on my lap in the triage room. The doctors have been telling me this line for months – you’re anxious, stressed, you need to *relax*. I’ve seen naturopaths, three different GPs and several thousand A&E doctors. But how can anxiety be causing my exhaustion, my thirteen-hour naps, the sore joints, the fainting, the bald patches on my scalp, the tingling through my hands and feet, the migraines, the blind patches in my left eye and the memory loss? Hadn’t I just a few days previously woken from a nap and lain still for a further hour because I was too shattered to leave my bed? It. Didn’t. Make. Sense. These all must be symptoms of a blood disorder, an extreme vitamin deficiency, a rare form of bone cancer; something wrong that I can fix with a lifelong course of drugs.

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They must be.

It's not that I want to be ill; I just want an explanation. I think back to the other time in my life when I had symptoms similar to this. A few years ago when I started a job I hated, the very job that had triggered my transition into the full-time freelance world, I would walk into the building and feel the swell of nausea beating the bottom of my ribcage and the idea of taking off my headphones to talk to anyone made my eyes flare in panic. It wasn't that my office comrades were 'bad' in some way or that the work shredded my brain with its complexity; it was a feeling deep in my gut that had its own voice and that voice was screaming, 'Unsafe! Unsafe!' Anxiety or intuition? I'm unsure. But now, in another role that makes me feel physically sick with fear, is it any wonder that these symptoms are rearing their troublesome heads again?

The doctors are right.

I can't believe how ignorant I've been. The Senior House Officer shows me my B12 levels – bordering on that of Usain Bolt – and my iron. I'm fine. More than fine. I'm seriously healthy by the standards of western medicine. Physically, anyway. I do a lot of exercise, I eat a mainly vegan diet; I do my 10,000 steps a day without fail. But, I think back, when was the last time I had spent time in nature? Could it really have been longer than two months ago, three? For almost a year since I returned to office life, my life has not been defined by the nature that I had always prioritised in the past; full days from dawn till dusk at nature reserves, out on the crags, peering at wagtails through my binoculars and finding hidden patches of long grass to hunker down in and eat my sandwiches. I hadn't had my daily dose of lurking frogs and chirruping goldfinch flocks for so long now. I hadn't sat on a bank of moss and grounded my energy into the earth. Instead of wildflower meadows, my

dreams were now often preoccupied with train timetables and unsaved Word documents. Where had all the wildlife gone from my life?

A 2011 study from the University of Houston confirms some of my feelings about the office. According to the research, our constant report writing, fidgeting with emails and the general multi-tasking required in the office environment can lead to feelings of fear and sadness, and can create emotions that have a negative consequence on the whole workplace:

Emotional contagion can spread in a group or workplace [in an open-plan office] through the influence of conscious or unconscious processes involving emotional states or physiological responses.¹

Bad bosses, towering workloads and the frazzle of the digital world all contribute to us feeling like nervous wrecks and, while we have all experienced some stress at work to a varying degree, how many people have you known who've had to get signed off work just so they can get their heads back together again? You might recognise the feeling – the seeping dread, the wide-eyed panic, the dawdling outside the front door at 8.58 a.m.; that's how it all starts. Another recent study shows that half of all sick days taken in the UK are related to workplace stress.²

But the real issue is that none of us, not a single person on this planet, was destined for office life. These kinds of work environments became popularised then normalised in the first half of the twentieth century, with the nine-to-five structure formalised by Henry Ford for his workers in 1926.³ The culture of 'meetings' that we know today rose into being in the 1950s. As populations grew, so did the need for a more structured economic system; advertising and marketing grew to keep

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people buying the same things as the Joneses down the street, the two-by-five cubicle became the most efficient way to pack us in and keep us productive. Surely this life was paradise after decades of mills and smog? But as our means of earning money since the industrial revolution have expanded into job titles once unimaginable, so our access to bathroom breaks, conversation and natural light has diminished.

We have adopted florescent strip lighting as a mocking reminder of our circadian rhythms. We pad up and down concrete stairs to the coffee shop to fill ourselves up with artificial stress to keep our eyes on the prize all day long. These habits built on structure and reward have bled into my personal life so that when I take a run by the Medlock I'm counting seconds, footsteps and milestones, scattering young rabbits and blurring out the sound of blue tits with an enormous pair of Bluetooth headphones. I'm measuring meaningless successes, not connecting with anything around me.

A pre-Christian nomad, someone who once wandered freely where our houses, Tescos and Job Centres now sit, would be horrified by how most of us are living. If these people lived in our shoes for one day, with the fuzzing buzzes and vibration from the devices in our pockets and on our nightstands, they'd be able to see the labyrinth of trappings and expectations placed on us by a society that wants to boost global GDP at any cost. The age-old stones and trees around us experience the world through the slow turning of pebbles in the tide and the gradual wearing away of earth through centuries of storms. But humanity is racing ahead of the limitations set by our bodies and the boundaries that nature puts in place to help us all survive in harmony.

Put bluntly, I feel as if I can't go on living this way.

Having thrown myself back into a standard office setting once more, I have fallen away from myself. I crave a different way of life, but there

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are seemingly no plans for the world's cogs to start slowing any time soon.

Could I change the way I live though?

It's heaving torrential rain as I leave the hospital, my trainer socks squelching out North Manchester grit as I head to the tram stop. I'm not marching with my head bent against the wind, I'm almost skipping. By the time I get in the carriage back to the city centre, my tiredness is evaporating, the tingling sensation in the soles of my feet has drained out through my shoes and into every puddle I pass. It's like each breath I take is trying to heal me after the relief of the doctor's diagnosis. While I'm under no false impressions that a few sentences from a health professional were really all it took to knock me back into the world, I'm still delighted to be feeling something other than the sluggish strain of exhaustion coating my eyes. I'm hopeful for the first time in months, although frustrated that this realisation has taken this long; whole weeks, months, of my existence blotted out by anxiety and my lack of connection with the world.

But, if I'm not physically ill, then what is really going on? If I am honest with myself – I am aware there is an underlying issue here. I could be described as an 'up and down' kind of person; ever since I was a moody teenager wearing too much eyeliner, I have had periods of depression and anxiety. It's something I have often tried to get to the root of, without too much luck. However, as I reached adulthood these episodes became much more frequent and I was less able to get back to myself using the things I enjoyed. Such endorphin-making activities included going for a hike, reading a book and eating copious amounts of chocolate, but witchcraft has always been the one thing that has brought me back to myself with absolute certainty.

There have been so many times over the years when I've felt

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entirely myself. These beautiful moments have been while out in nature, watching lapwings wheeling across the moors or walking through meadowsweet that smells like small crinkles of summer. But the other, perhaps more intimately happy, moments of my life have happened while sitting on my bedroom floor inside a circle of candles, feeling the powerful waves of magick play across my face like a warm breeze.

When I was fifteen years old and a practising witch, I performed an initiation ceremony while wearing a white dress. I lit the candles, conjured up the four elements and welcomed in the Goddess. In that small ritual on the floor of my childhood bedroom, I dedicated myself to witchcraft and promised that I would live my life in tune with the cycles of nature. But what had happened to that promise? I've been realising for some time that my spiritual connection to the world has been fading, power-washed away by city living. The practices that once filled me with such comfort have been replaced by my commute and having to zone out to prepare myself mentally for the working day ahead. I was getting further and further away from the person I knew and that skinny teenage girl who stood strong and tall with her face upturned to the light.

What am I going to do to stop my adult life being a cycle of trying and retreating, working and leaving, pushing myself and then falling ill? I know that *something* has to change. I have to break this cycle. I need to find a new rhythm. Now, as I take the long journey home from the hospital on a wintry November day, after an equally long period of musing, when the wind bites my fingers with ferocity and the brown-clouded sky threatens to splinter into a blizzard at any moment, I decide to begin again.

I know what I need to do next.