

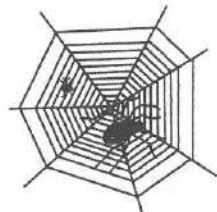
Penumbra

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“A man must make his own penumbra . . .”—Angela Carter



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A Green Shade

Geoffrey Reiter

“And in þis he shewed me a lytil thyng þe quantite of a hasyl nott. lyeng in þe pawme of my hand as it had semed. and it was as rownde as eny ball. I loked þer upon wt þe eye of my vnderston-dyng. and I þought what may þis be. and it was answered general-ly thus. It is all þat is made.”

—Julian of Norwich

“Annihilating all that’s made
To a green Thought in a green Shade.”

—Andrew Marvell

Isabella and Abigail checked their coordinates, looking for the witch’s house. The trails were far behind them now, and they were wending through a maze of scabrous-skinned birch trees. The sun was bright but arcing westward, and they saw its rays only in the shreds of light that clawed through the dense foliage above. The tattered sunlight mixed eerily across Abigail’s blue eyes with the reflection of the GPS image glowing from her phone. Isabella was a step or two behind her friend, but her nut-brown eyes were directed ahead of her, toward Abigail and the trees and Magus, their German Shepherd.

“Are we any closer to the spot?” Isabella asked. Magus had begun tugging obstinately at his leash.

“I mean, I think so,” Abigail replied, still staring into the screen. She pointed to the map, and Isabella peered over her shoulder. If their calculations were accurate, Rachel Bourne’s residence would be within a mile of this place.

If they were accurate. The two women knew there were countless variables, which meant innumerable ways they could be wrong—three and a half centuries was a long time. Yet they also felt

an inexorable desire to identify this destination, a yearning as though they were on a pilgrimage and not just an indulgence of curiosity. Some recess of their souls felt a longing to discover what had become of Rachel Bourne.

They had learned about her by accident. Abigail was scrolling through university archives for her thesis, investigating Puritan expatriates to New Hampshire, when she started catching references to “that foule witch Goody Rachel Bourne, who hath made sundry and divers couenantes with the Devil.” Intrigued, she began ignoring the tedium of her thesis, hunting instead for any snatch of seventeenth-century gossip about this “foule witch.” The hunt was slow going—it seemed no one *wanted* to speak of her, and she was scarcely the only Rachel Bourne of her day. But Abigail gradually tracked her movements and her history—or at least the skeleton of her history.

Rachel Mayhew came as a child of the great migration in the 1630s, granddaughter of a minister, and her family settled in the Connecticut River Valley. She married local boy Forthright Bourne in 1642, seemingly as an ordinary churchgoing young woman. How she went from Puritan wife to scorned sorceress remained unclear. Forthright disappeared from the record by 1647, and the next references to Rachel were depositions accusing her of calling down profane curses on the local livestock. To Abigail it fit a familiar pattern: the townsfolk spurning a woman isolated, on the fringes of the community. When another local couple died, presumably of smallpox, suspicion fell on Rachel, who apparently fled (or was cast out). She was next heard from in Portsmouth, where she seemed to dispense herbal remedies for a few years and may have served as a midwife.

But by 1654 she had once more become estranged from a community. The records now broke the pattern; whatever circumstances turned the town against Rachel, they were never mentioned overtly. Oh, there were still the references to her pacts with demonic forces, but no allusions to hexes and neighborly strife. A few documents

seemed to suggest odd happenings during a particular week early in the year, the “heavens’ deformation.” Then she was gone.

This was where Isabella had come in. Knocking down mochas past midnight at The Magic Bean, she and Abigail started doing what graduate students do: talking about their theses. And Abigail realized that Isabella—with her background in IT and her obsession with geocaching—would be the perfect partner. So together, they followed every scrap of remaining evidence to identify the last known location in which Rachel Bourne was sighted. Finding clues from this point was almost impossible; but fur traders and Abenaki at that time occasionally talked about a woman living alone in a small cabin up in the northwest section of the state.

After months spent poring over algorithms and digitized manuscripts, the two had extrapolated a plausible location, a little patch of earth that apparently survived unvisited even in twenty-first-century New England, one that would have been almost inconceivably isolated in the seventeenth century. What could have drawn Rachel, barely in her thirties at the time, beyond the reach of English or French or even Indian settlement? Abigail couldn’t say for certain, but one line of Rachel’s deposition stood out to her, the officials asserting that she “claims she hath on sundry occasions summoned forth a great green power.”

What secrets lay hidden in that phrase, this “great green power”? Who could say? But for a woman, a widow, alone in a wild frontier, the pursuit and prospect of such a power was surely tantalizing—tantalizing enough, it appeared, that she would forsake all human bounds to seek it.

And so they hiked, Abigail in blue jeans with a red flannel shirt hanging loosely over her church camp tee, Isabella in merino wool and jogger pants. They were well past paths and the painted markings of the formal trails at which they had begun, beyond even the seemingly ubiquitous signs of human presence, the granola wrappers and plastic water bottles and old condoms. Aside from their shoes on the dirt snapping sticks, the explorers heard only natural

sounds—the phrases and trills of sparrows, the quack of waking wood frogs in vernal pools, the bellowing of a waterfall like a distant dragon of the prime. It seemed to them pristine, unspoiled, nature untarnished by the malices of man.

They had parked the car about two-thirds of the way up the mountainside, and at first they had continued to ascend. Now, though, they mounted an acclivity, and then their course sloped down, somewhat sharply. It was no mean feat to navigate through the tangle of creepers and roots, dodging spiderwebs thick as linen. Even as Abigail followed the route proffered by her device, she increasingly began to feel she was descending into a maze, an Escheresque convolution of impossible geometries, a labyrinth populated with the denizens one would expect of a labyrinth. *Where’s my thread?* she thought to herself, meaning it as a joke, though she didn’t laugh.

Magus began barking abruptly, causing Abigail to gasp in surprise and shift her attention to Isabella. The dog was straining at his leash, bared teeth and black-brown eyes fixed at a thicket to their west, not far from the gradually sinking sun. Abigail caught a glimpse of movement amid the hawthorn.

“Who’s there?”

The voice came from the thicket, and a figure emerged. He was perhaps forty, with a bronze-blond hedge of beard leading up to a green visored cap. An orange vest blazed out over his wine-dark flannel shirt, and at his side was a bolt-action rifle. He regarded the two women quizzically with faded blue eyes.

“Didn’t expect to see anyone else around,” he added after a pause. “You ladies should probably be careful out here.”

Isabella’s eyes narrowed as she stared at him. She made no attempt to soothe Magus as she responded, “Why is that?”

The man shrugged. “I just figured. We’re a hell of a way from town here.”

“I think we know that,” Abigail replied as levelly as she could.

Shrugging again, the man said, “Sure. I just meant be careful.

Even I don't usually come out this far, but I imagine there could be other hunters around." He scratched at his beard. "I wouldn't want anyone to get . . . hurt."

The man straightened his posture, keeping his gaze on Abigail and Isabella. Then he turned away, heading north through the thicket. Abigail looked nervously at her phone. "It looks like we may be headed in the same direction," the man stated without turning back. "I'll let you know if there are any problems."

"We'll be all right," Isabella shot back through half-clenched teeth. The man didn't answer, and soon his large strides took him out of their view as he was swallowed up by the wood ahead.

Isabella exchanged a glance with Abigail. Magus had stopped barking, but his leash was taut. She could feel the pulsing of her heart, the tightness of her trembling muscles, and she could see the same in Abigail.

"Do you want to keep going?" Abigail inquired.

Isabella squinted incredulously. "Hell, yes," she confirmed.

Abigail nodded. "Right. I don't want to stop when we're this close. Just . . . keep your pepper spray handy."

They resumed their hiking, even more attuned now to the environment around them. But because of this renewed awareness, they noticed an odd feature of their surroundings: the forest grew strangely quiet as they advanced. A true wilderness is never silent; life is boisterous, noisy, carefree, and away from human populations, scampering feet, sudden wings, and plaintive mating cries ride the breeze. The odd unnaturalness of the stillness wasn't exactly reverent, as though some awe pervaded the wood. It felt—though neither could say how she knew this—like a stifled, strangled, choked reticence.

So silent was it that Isabella actually cringed at an abrupt crackling sound, one so unobtrusive she scarcely would have heard it on a normal hike. Looking down at her feet, she saw she had stepped on a dried hazelnut. Ahead of them, deeper in the valley, were several hazelnut shrubs, their catkins dangling like narrow coffins, and little

magenta blooms like blood bursting. Their V-veined leaves hadn't begun growing in the nascent warmth of spring; the branches looked gaunt as pietàs in the midst of the surrounding verdancy. But the ground ahead was covered in nuts, which puzzled Isabella. These hazelnuts must have dropped last summer; yet how could there be so many strewn about the ground? The fauna of this region ought to have devoured such a feast months ago.

Magus had stopped barking as well, but he was moving erratically, his legs juddering, his tail curled under his belly, more like an ill-trained beagle puppy than his usual sturdy self. Isabella glanced up at Abigail, who was looking back at her phone, following its lead.

"We've got to be close," Abigail mumbled.

"I hope so," Isabella grunted. "This place is . . . I don't know, a bit weird, yeah?"

Abigail paused and looked up from her device, glassy eyes glinting as she turned back to her friend. "Isabella, that dude is way ahead of us now. And the dog would warn us if we were in any trouble."

Isabella shook her head. "It's not that. Don't you feel it? Like something was nearby? Not a man or anything, but . . . something. *Diablo*, girl, I thought you were the one who believed in shit like that."

Abigail laughed, lightly but not unnervously. "I believe in God, not ghosts, Izzy. Not somethings. If you want, you can come to church with me on Sunday."

Isabella scowled. "Twelve years of mass didn't exactly make me a choir girl, and a walk in the woods sure as hell isn't going to."

Abigail shrugged. "Fine. Then let's go find us a witch."

They resumed their course, emerging into a thick realm of maple, beech, and the ubiquitous bone-white birch, interspersed with ridges of coarse quartzite. Isabella's vision seemed to grow indistinct for a moment amid the crowd of tree trunks. She looked back the way she thought they had come, but she could no longer see the hazelnut shrubs.

"We're almost there!" Abigail shouted excitedly. Her voice burst into the stillness so starkly that Isabella nearly cried out. She bit her tongue and castigated herself. Abigail was happy; why shouldn't she be? It was a beautiful spring day, and they were nearing their destination, the culmination of months of work.

But this place did not look like nature as she knew it, not like the parks she and her *abuela* had visited on the outskirts of town, not even like the trails she used to hike with her ex-boyfriend, when she would leave him half a mile behind her amid the groves and the copses. Every detail of growth here seemed sickeningly, uncannily clear, as though she were aware of the rustling of maggots in rotten bark, though still she heard nothing. That stump lying prone at her feet: it looked horribly like a terrified rabbit, as though some small creature had been swallowed by the bark and transmogrified while writhing to escape. Yet if she looked at the same stump from a different angle, it once again appeared to be only a dead, diseased slab of maple, as one might find in any forest.

Then there was the scream. It was a human scream, sharp and short, and soon replaced by a guttering gurgle, and then once more by quietude. The woods weren't dark, but the canopy kept out a clear view of the sun, and Isabella couldn't tell what direction it came from, any more than she could now tell where they were.

"Abby, what the hell was that?"

"I don't know," Abigail replied tersely. She pointed ahead of her. "It came from there . . . I think?"

"Where's there? And where are *we*?"

"I don't know," Abigail repeated, snapping at Isabella because she was angry with herself. "My phone's not working."

"You told me we'd have no problems!" Isabella growled. "There are supposed to be towers nearby. Did you charge . . . ?"

"Yes, damn it, of *course* I charged the stupid thing." Abigail pried her eyes from her screen's dark glass, which now showed only her panicked reflection, and cast her gaze about their surroundings. "This way," she beckoned, striding ahead with all the boldness she

knew she did not have. Isabella followed behind her, and for a time, they began to walk together in feigned purpose.

Suddenly, though, Magus bolted, with so little warning that he pulled his leash free from Isabella's hand. The dog bounded ahead of them about ten feet and stopped for a few seconds, his teeth bared, his body spinning uncertainly. Then he started up again, racing over a rise. Isabella didn't hesitate, running past Abigail toward the little slope where he had disappeared. Abigail was hardly so sanguine about chasing the dog, but she had no desire to find herself alone in the wood, and she pursued them. Even as she did, though, she felt as though *she* were the one pursued. The darkening green of the wood that surrounded her looked unreal—symbolic, yet a symbol that stood for nothing living, like the painted face on an ancient coffin.

So they ran. On the other side of the rise, the ground sloped deeper into the valley, shadows tessellated like netting on the earth. Dodging trees, the friends' momentum carried them farther and farther down, until Isabella stopped without warning. Abigail quickly came to a halt beside her.

"What?" she asked.

Isabella didn't answer; she didn't need to. Abigail could see what she saw.

"Oh my God," Abigail whispered, her throat dry, but with bile threatening deeper in.

It was the man they had seen . . . or it had been. His beard and cap were unmistakable. But his body was encased in a birch trunk, had become melded there. The outlines of his vest were visible but had been made the same mottled, dry white as the bark, and Abigail couldn't say where he ended and the tree began. Every detail they could see looked preserved, down to the hairs around his chapped lips, which were slightly parted, making a hollow of his empty throat. It might have been a sculpture of a man, expertly whittled down from a log, but his body protruded in a way no tree could extend.

And just fifteen feet farther on, they saw the remains of Magus.

They found him at the bole of a white ash, and his body was entangled with its roots, so that much of his lower half was indistinguishable from the vertical creasing of the tree's gray bark. His mouth was twisted into a howl he had never had the chance to utter. One of the front paws twitched slightly, as though it remembered what it had been like to be a dog, bounding free across open earth. But that was the only sign of life—except, of course, for the empire-slow sap-life of the vegetation that Magus had become.

Abigail could barely breathe for fear, and this only increased the horror—was she to be next? She whirled around shuffling away from trees as much as she could, while Isabella stood beside her, sobbing, teeth clenched.

"Why?" Isabella whispered with ferocity. It was all she could say; only questions remained.

Abigail grabbed her hand. "Let's go, Izzy."

"Go where?"

"Anywhere but here."

Abigail tugged, and Isabella acquiesced, so the two of them ran once more, though they could not say where; beneath the canopy of green that filled the dimming sky, all geography seemed to vanish. Nothing looked familiar in the sporadic shards of sun that broke through the leaves like glass splinters about the peaty ground. But Abigail was right, of course; whatever else, they had to move.

It was thus that they stumbled into a glade, a little hollow in the thick press of forest, where one sight was visible with appalling clarity. It was a fireplace, an old stone hearth and chimney, standing alone within a ring of trees; the work of centuries had torn away the rest of the house, and only that narrow, mortared tower of the home remained. Isabella knew what it was in an instant; they had come at last to the site they sought.

It was not the lonely, denuded hearth itself that caused her stomach to churn, however, but what was within it. Isabella saw *her*, Rachel Bourne, for she stood, like Magus, like the hunter, engulfed inside the very stone of the erect, desiccated chimney. There she had

remained, for three hundred years and more. In some ways, time and the elements had done their work; fingers were missing, small patches of shale worn down. Yet her image endured in ghastly familiarity. Isabella could see the coarse texture of her wool frock, even what looked like a berry stain on the left sleeve. Frozen fringes of once-flaxen hair spilled from beneath her bonnet and framed her face. It was a young-looking face, slightly plump and speckled by pimples, with close-set eyes and a little nose and large lips—lips that had been screaming in an ecstasy of terror since before America was a nation.

And here, Isabella truly felt *its* presence. Past faith or doubt or science or any knowing that might track through her synapses, deeper than blood or marrow, Isabella now knew the nearness of the thing that Rachel Bourne had summoned. It was the great green power for which she had been cast out, and Isabella had always understood why Rachel, a woman alone in a dark society, would seek out a power, but now she understood why the people had sent her away. For what Rachel had brought forth in her quest for strength was a darkness beyond all human reckoning—beyond space, beyond gender, beyond nature yet embedded in it, a parasite of matter and spirit, a green that grew from the earth like the wasp from the caterpillar. Isabella knew too that it did not seek her annihilation, but its unfathomable intelligence had its own alien ends. It hadn't sought to destroy Rachel either, or Magus, or the hunter, but it had moved inside its little sphere of creation, and it *had* destroyed them, and another such movement might destroy Isabella or Abigail too. And they would find themselves absorbed into the landscape, like monuments shrouded in mosses, their consciousnesses dwindled to the unminding existence of the vegetable or the desolate coldness of rock, and their screams too would be drowned out by the silence of the shade.

"Aunque pase por valle tenebroso," she murmured by an ancient instinct, "ningún mal temeré, porque tú vas conmigo." This time, she grabbed hold of Abigail. Her friend's arm was still, so still that

Isabella feared that it would break off and crumble, that Abigail too had been transmogrified into the hellish ecosystem. But her resistance was only the stiffness of nightmare, and in a moment, her sky-blue eyes caught Isabella's.

"Abby, come," Isabella said, and sparing a tear for Rachel as she ran, she led Abigail away from the grisly glade.

They still didn't know where they were going, though, and who knew what were the boundaries of the green power? Isabella could still sense its inhuman thoughts oppressing her soul and her viscera, like the pressures of a deep abysm. Abigail was no help; she went along unresistingly, but her countenance was glazed with a sheen of dread. All around them, the tree trunks still rose skyward like stakes, and the burning green of the leaves above occluded more than ever the rays of the westering sun. If she could *see* the sun, Isabella might know where they were. But when they ran, she felt like they were locked in an endless track, like tracing the perimeter of a compass when she wanted to be following a point on the rose.

And then, she heard the crunch, the tiny sound of a splintering shell. She looked down at her feet and saw the hazelnuts. Beside her and Abigail stood the little row of shrubs. Isabella picked up the shell she had stepped on, regarding it for the briefest of moments, and then she knew where they were. Pulling Abigail along, she ran, with the same urgency as before, but now with direction. Beneath her tight pants her thighs burned, but at this she rejoiced, for now they were climbing, ascending from out the valley. Her grip on Abigail slackened, for Abigail too was striding with purpose, and the pain in her legs was a pain that *meant* something. Her chest heaved with the force of it all, and yet she breathed freely, for the weight of the green shade was lifting. They were emerging from its dominion.

So it was that some minutes later, the two women found themselves on an outcropping en route to their parking space. They sat on rocks in a clearing, trembling, inhaling and exhaling, never speaking, for words seemed absurdly inadequate for what they had seen, what they had known, and it all made them weep as they never

thought they could. They embraced each other in their exhausted relief, and Isabella could feel her friend's heart against her own and exult, because a tree or a stone has no heart to beat. When they released each other, she looked back down the way they had come. The sun had dropped beneath the horizon, but a roseate glow suffused the west, illumining in red and pink all manner of things above the shadows. She held between her fingers the untimely but ripe hazelnut, and carefully she raised it up into the light of the sky, where it glowed like a round little world in the night.