

# PRACTICAL MAGIC

*Alice Hoffman*



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK



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“Hoffman’s best ... readers will relish this magical tale.”

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“Engaging.”—*Glamour*

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## PROPERTY OF

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“Hard to put down ... full of characters who take hold of your heart.”—*The San Francisco Examiner*

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“With her glorious prose and extraordinary eye ... Alice Hoffman seems to know what it means to be a human being.”

—Susan Isaacs, *Newsday*

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THE DROWNING SEASON  
ANGEL LANDING  
WHITE HORSES  
FORTUNE'S DAUGHTER  
ILLUMINATION NIGHT  
AT RISK  
SEVENTH HEAVEN  
TURTLE MOON  
SECOND NATURE  
PRACTICAL MAGIC  
HERE ON EARTH  
LOCAL GIRLS  
THE RIVER KING  
BLUE DIARY

*For Children*

FIREFLIES  
HORSEFLY  
AQUAMARINE  
INDIGO

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For every evil under the sun,  
There is a remedy, or there is none.  
If there be one, seek till you find it;  
If there be none, never mind it.

MOTHER GOOSE

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## SUPERSTITION

FOR more than two hundred years, the Owens women have been blamed for everything that has gone wrong in town. If a damp spring arrived, if cows in the pasture gave milk that was runny with blood, if a colt died of colic or a baby was born with a red birthmark stamped onto his cheek, everyone believed that fate must have been twisted, at least a little, by those women over on Magnolia Street. It didn't matter what the problem was—lightning, or locusts, or a death by drowning. It didn't matter if the situation could be explained by logic, or science, or plain bad luck. As soon as there was a hint of trouble or the slightest misfortune, people began pointing their fingers and placing blame. Before long they'd convinced themselves that it wasn't safe to walk past the Owens house after dark, and only the most foolish neighbors would dare to peer over the black wrought-iron fence that circled the yard like a snake.

Inside the house there were no clocks and no mirrors and three locks on each and every door. Mice lived under the floorboards and in the walls and often could be found in the dresser drawers, where they ate the embroidered tablecloths, as well as the lacy edges of the linen placemats. Fifteen different sorts of wood had been used for the window seats and the mantels, including golden oak, silver ash, and a peculiarly fragrant cherrywood that gave off the scent of ripe fruit even in the dead of winter when every tree outside was nothing more than a leafless black stick. No matter how dusty the rest of the house might be, none of the woodwork ever needed polishing. If you squinted, you could see your reflection right there in the wainscoting in the dining room or the banister you held on to as you ran up the stairs. It was dark in every room, even at noon, and cool all through the heat of July. Anyone who dared to stand on the porch, where the ivy grew wild, could try for hours to look through the window and never see a thing. It was the same looking out; the green-tinted window glass was so old and so thick that everything on the other side seemed like a dream, including the sky and the trees.

The little girls who lived up in the attic were sisters, only thirteen months apart in age. They were never told to go to bed before midnight or reminded to brush their teeth. No one cared if their clothes were wrinkled or if they spit on the street. All the while these little girls were growing up, they were allowed to sleep with their shoes on and draw funny faces on their bedroom walls with black crayon. They could drink cold Dr Peppers for breakfast, if that was what they craved, or eat marshmallow piñatas for dinner. They could climb onto the roof and sit perched on the slate peak, leaning back as far as possible, in order to spy the first star. There they would stay on windy March nights or humid August evenings, whispering, arguing over whether it was feasible for even the smallest wish to ever come true.

The girls were being raised by their aunts, who, as much as they might have wanted to, simply couldn't turn their nieces away. The children, after all, were orphans whose careless parents were so much in love they failed to notice smoke emanating from the walls of the bungalow where they'd gone to enjoy a second honeymoon, after leaving the girls home with a baby-sitter. No wonder the sisters always shared a bed during storms; they were both terrified of thunder and could never speak above a whisper once the sky began to rumble. When they did finally doze off, their arms wrapped around each other, they often had the exact same dreams. There were times when they could complete each other's sentences; certainly each could close her eyes and guess what the other most desired for

dessert on any given day.

But in spite of their closeness, the two sisters were entirely different in appearance and temperament. Aside from the beautiful gray eyes the Owens women were known for, no one would have had reason to guess the sisters were related. Gillian was fair and blond, while Sally's hair was as black as the pelts of the ill-mannered cats the aunts allowed to skulk through the garden and claw at the draperies in the parlor. Gillian was lazy and liked to sleep past noon. She saved up her allowance money, then paid Sally to do her math homework and iron her party dresses. She drank bottles of Yoo-Hoo and ate goopy Hershey's bars while sprawled out on the cool basement floor, content to watch Sally dusted the metal shelves where the aunts kept pickles and preserves. Gillian's favorite thing in the world to do was to lie on the velvet-cushioned window seat, up on the landing, where the draperies were made of damask and a portrait of Maria Owens, who had built the house so long ago, collected dust in a corner. That's where she could be found on summer afternoons, so relaxed and languid that moths would land on her, mistaking her for a cushion, and proceed to make tiny holes in her T-shirt and jeans.

Sally, three hundred ninety-seven days older than her sister, was as conscientious as Gillian was idle. She never believed in anything that could not be proven with facts and figures. When Gillian pointed to a shooting star, it was Sally who reminded her that what was falling to earth was only an old rock, heated by its descent through the atmosphere. Sally was a take-charge sort of person from the start; she didn't like confusion and mess, both of which filled the aunts' old house on Magnolia Street from attic to cellar.

From the time she was in third grade, and Gillian in second, Sally was the one who cooked healthy dinners of meat loaf and fresh green beans and barley soup, using recipes from a copy of *Joy of Cooking* she'd managed to smuggle into the house. She fixed their lunchboxes each morning, packing up turkey-and-tomato sandwiches on whole-wheat bread, adding carrot sticks and iced oatmeal cookies, all of which Gillian tossed in the trash the instant after Sally had deposited her in her classroom, since she preferred the sloppy joes and brownies sold in the school cafeteria, and she often had swiped enough quarters and dimes from the aunts' coat pockets to buy herself whatever she liked.

Night and Day, the aunts called them, and although neither girl laughed at this little joke or found it amusing in the least, they recognized the truth in it, and were able to understand, earlier than most sisters, that the moon is always jealous of the heat of the day, just as the sun always longs for something dark and deep. They kept each other's secrets well; they crossed their hearts and hoped to die if they should ever slip and tell, even if the secret was only a cat's tail pulled or some foxglove stolen from the aunts' garden.

The sisters might have sniped at each other because of their differences, they might have grown nasty, then grown apart, if they'd been able to have any friends, but the other children in town avoided them. No one would dare to play with the sisters, and most girls and boys crossed their fingers when Sally and Gillian drew near, as if that sort of thing was any protection. The bravest and wildest boys followed the sisters to school, at just the right distance behind, which allowed them to turn and run if need be. These boys liked to pitch winter apples or stones at the girls, but even the best athletes, the ones who were the stars of their Little League teams, could never get a hit when they took aim at the Owens girls. Every stone, each apple, always landed at the sisters' feet.

For Sally and Gillian the days were filled with little mortifications: No child would use a pencil on



crayon directly after it had been touched by an Owens girl. No one would sit next to them in the cafeteria or during assemblies, and some girls actually shrieked when they wandered into the girls' room, to pee or gossip or brush their hair, and found they'd stumbled upon one of the sisters. Sally and Gillian were never chosen for teams during sports, even though Gillian was the fastest runner in town and could hit a baseball over the roof of the school, onto Endicott Street. They were never invited to parties or Girl Scout meetings, or asked to join in and play hopscotch or climb a tree.

"Fuck them all," Gillian would say, her beautiful little nose in the air as the boys made spooky goblin noises when the sisters passed them in the hallways at school, on the way to music or art. "Let them eat dirt. You wait and see. One day they'll beg us to invite them home, and we'll laugh in their faces."

Sometimes, when she was feeling particularly nasty, Gillian would suddenly turn and shout "Boo!" and some boy always pissed in his pants and was far more humiliated than Gillian had ever been. But Sally didn't have the heart to fight back. She wore dark clothes and tried not to be noticed. She pretended she wasn't smart and never raised her hand in class. She disguised her own nature so well that after a while she grew uncertain of her own abilities. By then, she was as quiet as a mouse. When she opened her mouth in the classroom she could only squeak out wrong answers; in time she made sure to sit in the back of the room, and to keep her mouth firmly shut.

Still they would not let her be. Someone put an open ant farm in her locker when Sally was in fourth grade, so that for weeks she found squashed ants between the pages of her books. In fifth grade a gang of boys left a dead mouse in her desk. One of the cruelest children had glued a nametag to the mouse's back. *Sali* had been scrawled in crude letters, but Sally took not the slightest pleasure in the misspelling of her name. She had cried over the little curled-up body, with its tiny whiskers and perfect paws, but when her teacher had asked what was wrong, she'd only shrugged, as though she had lost the power of speech.

One beautiful April day, when Sally was in sixth grade, all of the aunts' cats followed her to school. After that, even the teachers would not pass her in an empty hallway and would find an excuse to head in the other direction. As they scurried away, the teachers smiled at her oddly, and perhaps they were afraid not to. Black cats can do that to some people; they make them go all shivery and scared and remind them of dark, wicked nights. The aunts' cats, however, were not particularly frightening. They were spoiled and liked to sleep on the couches and they were all named for birds: There was Cardinal and Crow and Raven and Goose. There was a gawky kitten named Dove, and an ill-tempered tomcat called Magpie, who hissed at the others and kept them at bay. It would be difficult to believe that such a mangy bunch of creatures had come up with a plan to shame Sally, but that is what seemed to have happened, although they may have followed her on that day simply because she'd fixed a tuna-fish sandwich for lunch, just for herself, as Gillian was pretending to have strep throat and was home in bed, where she was sure to stay for the best part of a week, reading magazines and eating candy bars with no cares when it came to getting chocolate on the sheets, since Sally was the one who took responsibility for the laundry.

On this morning, Sally didn't even know the cats were behind her, until she sat down at her desk. Some of her classmates were laughing, but three girls had jumped up onto the radiator and were shrieking. Anyone would have thought a gang of demons had entered the room, but it was only those flea-bitten creatures that had followed Sally to school. They paraded past chairs and desks, black night and howling like banshees. Sally shooed them away, but the cats just came closer. They paced

back and forth in front of her, their tails in the air, meowing with voices so horrible the sound could have curdled milk in the cup.

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“Scat,” Sally whispered when Magpie jumped into her lap and began kneading his claws into her nicest blue dress. “Go away,” she begged him.

But even when Miss Mullins came in and smacked her desk with a ruler and used her sternest voice to suggest that Sally had better rid the room of the cats—*tout de suite*—or risk detention, the revolting beasts refused to go. A panic had spread and the more high-strung of Sally’s classmates were already whispering witchery. A witch, after all, was often accompanied by a familiar, an animal to do her most evil bidding. The more familiars there were, the nastier the bidding, and here was an entire troop of disgusting creatures. Several children had fainted; some would be phobic about cats for the rest of their lives. The gym teacher was sent for, and he waved a broom around, but still the cats would not leave.

A boy in the rear of the room, who had stolen a pack of matches from his father just that morning, now made use of the chaos in the classroom and took the opportunity to set Magpie’s tail on fire. The scent of burning fur quickly filled the room, even before Magpie began to scream. Sally ran to the cat without stopping to think, she knelt and smothered the flames with her favorite blue dress.

“I hope something awful happens to you,” she called to the boy who’d set Magpie afire. Sally stood up, the cat cradled in her arms like a baby, her face and dress dirty with soot. “You’ll see what it’s like then,” she said to the boy. “You’ll know how it feels.”

Just then the children in the classroom directly overhead began to stomp their feet—out of joy since it had been revealed their spelling tests had been eaten by their teacher’s English bulldog—and an acoustic tile fell onto the horrid boy’s head. He collapsed to the floor in a heap, his face ashen in spite of his freckled complexion.

“She did it!” some of the children cried, and the ones who did not speak aloud had their mouths wide open and their eyes even wider.

Sally ran from the room with Magpie in her arms and the other cats following. The cats zigzagged under and around her feet all the way home, down Endicott and Peabody streets, through the front door and up the stairs, and all afternoon they clawed at Sally’s bedroom door, even after she’d locked herself inside.

Sally cried for two hours straight. She loved the cats, that was the thing. She sneaked them saucers of milk and carried them to the vet on Endicott Street in a knitting bag when they fought and tore each other and their scars became infected. She adored those horrible cats, especially Magpie, and yet sitting in her classroom, embarrassed beyond belief, she would have gladly watched each one drowned in a bucket of icy water or shot with a BB gun. Even though she went out to care for Magpie as soon as she’d collected herself, cleaning his tail and wrapping it in cotton gauze, she knew she betrayed him in her heart. From that day on, Sally thought less of herself. She did not ask the aunts for special favors, or even request those small rewards she deserved. Sally could not have had a more intractable and uncompromising judge; she had found herself lacking, in compassion and fortitude, and the punishment was self-denial, from that moment on.

After the cat incident, Sally and Gillian became more feared than ignored. The other girls in school no longer teased; instead, they quickly walked away when the Owens sisters passed by, and they a

kept their eyes cast down. Rumors of witchcraft spread in notes passed from desk to desk; accusations were whispered in hallways and bathrooms. Those children who had black cats of their own begged their parents for a different pet, a collie or a guinea pig or even a goldfish. When the football team was lost, when a kiln in the art room exploded, everyone looked toward the Owens girls. Even the rowdier boys did not dare to hit them with dodge balls at recess, or aim spitballs in their direction; not a single one threw apples or stones. At slumber parties and Girl Scout meetings there were those who swore that Sally and Gillian could induce a hypnotic trance that would make you bark like a dog or jump right off a cliff, if they so desired. They could put a spell on you with a single word or a nod of the heads. And if either of the sisters was truly angry, all she needed to do was recite the nine times table backward, and that would be the end of you. The eyes in your head would melt. Flesh and bones would turn into pudding. They'd serve you in the school cafeteria the very next day, and no one would be the wiser.

The children in town could whisper whatever rumors they wished, but the truth was that most of their mothers had gone to see the aunts at least once in their lives. Occasionally, someone might appear who wanted red pepper tea for a persnickety stomach, or butterfly weed for nerves, but even the wisest woman in town knew what the aunts' real business was: their specialty was love. The aunts were never invited to potluck suppers or library fund-raisers, but when a woman in town quarreled with her lover or when she found herself pregnant by someone who wasn't her husband, or discovered that the man she'd married was unfaithful as a hound, then there she'd be, at the Owens back door, just after twilight, the hour when the shadows could hide your features so that no one would recognize you. You stood beneath the wisteria, a tangled vine that had grown above the door for longer than anyone in town had been alive.

It didn't matter if a woman was the fifth-grade teacher at the elementary school, or if she was the pastor's wife, or perhaps the longtime girlfriend of the orthodontist on Peabody Street. It didn't matter that people swore black birds dropped from the sky, ready to peck out your eyes when you approached the Owens house from the east. Desire had a way of making a person oddly courageous. In the aunts' opinion, it could sneak up on a grown woman and turn her from a sensible creature into something as foolish as a flea that keeps chasing after the same old dog. Once someone had made the decision to come to the back door, she was more than ready to drink pennyroyal tea, prepared with ingredients that couldn't even be spoken aloud, which would surely bring on bleeding that night. She'd already decided to let one of the aunts prick the third finger of her left hand with a silver needle if that's what it took to get her darling back once more.

The aunts clucked like chickens whenever a woman walked up the bluestone path. They could read a woman's desperation from half a mile away. A woman who was head over heels and wanted to make certain her love was returned would be happy to hand over a cameo that had been in her family for generations. One who had been betrayed would pay even more. But those women who wanted someone else's husband, they were the worst. They would do absolutely anything for love. They got all twisted up like rubber bands, just from the heat of their desire, and they didn't give a damn for convention or good manners. As soon as the aunts saw one of those women walking up the path, they sent the girls straight to the attic, even on December nights, when twilight came well before four-thirty.

On those murky evenings, the sisters never protested that it was too early, or that they weren't yet tired. They tiptoed up the stairs, holding hands. From the landing, beneath the dusty old portrait of Maria Owens, the girls called out their good nights; they went to their rooms, slipped their nightgowns,

over their heads, then went directly to the back staircase, so they could creep down again, press their ears against the door, and listen in to every word. Sometimes, when it was an extremely dark evening and Gillian was feeling especially brave, she would push the door ajar with her foot, and Sally wouldn't dare to close it again, for fear it might creak and give them away.

"This is so silly," Sally would whisper. "It's utter nonsense," she'd decree.

"Then go to bed," Gillian would whisper right back. "Go on," she'd suggest, knowing that Sally wouldn't dare to miss any of what happened next.

From the angle of the back stairs, the girls could see the old black stove and the table and the hooked rug, where the aunts' customers often paced back and forth. They could see how love might control you, from your head to your toes, not to mention every single part of you in between.

Because of this, Sally and Gillian had learned things most children their age had not: that it was always wise to collect fingernail clippings that had once been the living tissue of your beloved, just in case he should take it into his head to stray; that a woman could want a man so much she might vomit in the kitchen sink or cry so fiercely blood would form in the corners of her eyes.

On evenings when the orange moon was rising in the sky, and some woman was crying in the kitchen, Sally and Gillian would lock pinkies and vow never to be ruled by their passions.

"Yuck," the girls would whisper to each other when a client of their aunts would weep or lift her blouse to show the raw marks where she'd cut the name of her beloved into her skin with a razor.

"Not us," the sisters would swear, locking their fingers even more tightly.

During the winter when Sally was twelve and Gillian almost eleven, they learned that sometimes the most dangerous thing of all in matters of love was to be granted your heart's desire. That was the winter when a young woman who worked in the drugstore came to see the aunts. For days the temperature had been dropping. The engine of the aunts' Ford station wagon sputtered and refused to turn over and the tires were frozen to the concrete floor of the garage. Mice would not venture out from the warmth of the bedroom walls; swans in the park picked at icy weeds and still they were hungry. The season was so cold and the sky so heartless and purple it made young girls shiver just to look upward.

The customer who arrived one dark evening wasn't pretty, but she was known for her kindness and sweet disposition. She delivered holiday meals to the elderly and sang in a choir with a voice like an angel's and always put an extra squirt of syrup in the glass when children ordered vanilla Cokes at the soda fountain. But when she arrived at twilight, this plain, mild girl was in such agony that she curled up on the hand-hooked rug; her fists were so tightly clenched they were like the claws of a cat. She threw her head back and her glossy hair fell over her face like a curtain; she chewed on her lip until her flesh bled. She was being eaten alive by love and had already lost thirty pounds. Because of this the aunts seemed to take pity on her, something they rarely did. Though the girl hadn't much money they gave her the strongest potion they could, with exact instructions on how to make another woman's husband fall in love with her. Then they warned her that what was done could never be undone, and so she must be sure.

"I'm sure," the girl said, in her calm beautiful voice, and the aunts must have been satisfied because they gave her the heart of a dove, set on one of their best saucers, the kind with the blue willows and the river of tears.

Sally and Gillian sat on the back stairs in the dark, their knees touching, their feet dirty and bare. They were shivering, but still they grinned at each other and whispered right along with the aunts' charm they knew well enough to recite in their sleep: "My lover's heart will feel this pin, and his devotion I will win. There'll be no way for him to rest nor sleep, until he comes to me to speak. Only when he loves me best will he find peace, and with peace, rest." Gillian made little stabbing motions which is what the girl was to do to the dove's heart when she repeated these words for seven nights in a row before she went to bed.

"It will never work," Sally whispered afterward, as they felt their way along in the dark, up the stairs and along the hall to their rooms.

"It might work," Gillian whispered back. "Even though she's not pretty, it's still within the realm of possibility."

Sally drew herself up; she was older and taller and always knew best. "We'll just see about that."

For nearly two weeks, Sally and Gillian watched the lovesick girl. Like hired detectives, they sat for hours at the counter in the drugstore and spent all their pocket money on Cokes and french fries so they could keep an eye on her. They trailed after when she went home to the apartment she shared with another girl, who worked at the dry cleaner's. The more they followed her schedule, the more Sally began to feel they were invading the girl's privacy, but the sisters continued to believe they were doing important research, although now and then Gillian was confused as to what their goal really was.

"It's simple," Sally told her. "We need to prove that the aunts have no powers whatsoever."

"If the aunts are full of baloney"—Gillian grinned—"then we'll be just like everyone else."

Sally nodded. She could not begin to express how deeply she felt about this matter, since being like everyone else was her personal heart's desire. At night Sally dreamed of ranch houses and white picket fences, and when she woke in the morning and looked out to see the black metal spikes that surrounded them, tears formed in her eyes. Other girls, she knew, washed with bars of Ivory and sweet-scented Camay, while she and Gillian were forced to use the black soap the aunts made twice a year, on the back burner of their stove. Other girls had mothers and fathers who didn't give a hoot about desire and fate. In no other house on their street or in their town was there a drawer crammed with cameos, given in payment for desires fulfilled.

All Sally could hope for was that perhaps her life was not quite as abnormal as it appeared. If the love charm didn't work for the girl from the drugstore, then perhaps the aunts were only pretending their powers. So the sisters waited and prayed that nothing would happen. And when it seemed certain that nothing would, the principal of their school, Mr. Halliwell, parked his station wagon outside the drugstore girl's apartment, just as the light was fading. He casually walked inside, but Sally noticed that he made sure to look over his shoulder; his eyes were bleary, as though he hadn't slept for several nights.

That evening the girls did not go home for supper, despite Sally's promise to the aunts that she would fix lamb chops and baked beans. The wind picked up and a freezing rain had begun to fall; still the girls stood across the street from the drugstore girl's apartment. Mr. Halliwell didn't come out until after nine, and he had a strange expression on his face, as if he didn't quite know where he was. He walked right past his own car, not recognizing it, and not until he was halfway home did he

remember he'd parked somewhere, and then it took him nearly an hour to locate the forgotten spot. After that, he appeared every evening at the exact same time. Once he had the nerve to come to the drugstore at lunch and order a cheeseburger and a Coke, although he didn't eat a bite and instead stared longingly at the girl who'd put a spell on him. He sat there on the very first stool, so hot and amorous that the linoleum countertop on which he rested his elbows began to bubble. When he finally noticed Sally and Gillian watching him, he demanded that the sisters head back to school, and he reached for his burger, but he still couldn't keep his eyes off the girl. He'd been hit by something, and it was right; the aunts had gotten to him just as sure as if they'd picked him off with a bow and arrow.

"Coincidence," Sally insisted.

"I don't know about that." Gillian shrugged. Anyone could see that the girl from the drugstore looked all lit up inside as she fixed hot fudge sundaes and rang up prescriptions for antibiotics and cough syrup. "She got what she wanted. However it happened."

But as it turned out, the girl didn't have exactly what she'd wanted. She came back to the aunts more distraught than ever. Love was one thing, marriage quite another. Mr. Halliwell, it seemed, was not certain he could leave his wife.

"I don't think you want to watch this," Gillian whispered to Sally.

"How do you know?"

The girls were whispering right in each other's ears; they had a scared feeling they didn't usually have when they spied from the safety of the stairs.

"I saw it once." Gillian looked particularly pale; her fair hair stuck out from her head in a cloud.

Sally drew away from her sister. She understood why people said blood could turn to ice. "Without me?"

Gillian often came to the back stairs without her sister to test herself, to see how fearless she could be. "I didn't think you'd want to. Some of the things they do are pretty gross. You won't be able to take it."

After that, Sally had to remain beside her younger sister on the stairs, if only to prove that she could. "We'll just see who can take it and who can't," she whispered.

But Sally never would have stayed, she would have run all the way to her room and locked the door with a deadbolt, had she known that in order to compel a man to marry you when he doesn't wish to, something horrible has to be done. She closed her eyes as soon as they brought the mourning dove in. She covered her ears with her hands so she wouldn't have to listen to it shriek as they held it down on the countertop. She told herself she had cooked lamb chops, she had broiled chicken, and this wasn't so different. All the same, Sally never again ate meat or fowl or even fish after that evening, and she got a shivery feeling whenever a flock of sparrows or wrens perched in the trees startled and took flight. For a long time afterward she would reach for her sister's hand when the sky began to grow dark.

All that winter, Sally and Gillian saw the girl from the drugstore with Mr. Halliwell. In January he left his wife to marry her, and they moved into a small white house on the corner of Third and Endicott. Once they were man and wife, they were rarely apart. Wherever the girl went, to the market or her exercise class, Mr. Halliwell would follow, like a well-trained dog that has no need for a leash.

As soon as school let out, he would head for the drugstore; he would show up at odd hours, with handful of violets or a box of nougat, and sometimes the sisters could hear his new wife snipe at him in spite of his gifts. Couldn't he let her out of his sight for a minute? That's what she hissed to her beloved. Couldn't he give her a minute of peace?

By the time the wisteria had begun to bloom the following spring, the girl from the drugstore was back. Sally and Gillian were working in the garden at dusk, gathering spring onions for a vegetable stew. The lemon thyme in the rear of the garden had started to give off its delicious scent, as it always did at this time of year, and the rosemary was less chalky and brittle. The season was so damp that the mosquitoes were out in full force and Gillian was hitting the bugs that had settled on her skin. Sally had to tug on her sleeve to get her to notice who it was coming up the bluestone path.

"Uh-oh," Gillian said. She stopped smacking herself. "She looks awful."

The drugstore girl didn't even look like a girl anymore, she looked old. Her hair wasn't shiny, and her mouth had a funny shape, as though she'd bitten into something sour. She rubbed her hands together; perhaps the skin was chapped, but more likely she was nervous in some terrible way. Sally picked up the wicker basket of onions and watched as their aunts' customer knocked on the back door. No one answered, so she pounded against the wood, frantic and angry. "Open up!" she called out again and again. She kept right on knocking, and the sound echoed, unanswered.

When the girl noticed the sisters and headed toward the garden, Gillian turned white as a ghost and clung to her sister. Sally stood her ground, since there was, after all, nowhere to go. The aunts had nailed the skull of a horse to the fence, to keep away neighborhood children with a taste for strawberries and mint. Now Sally found herself hoping it would keep away evil spirits as well, because that's what the drugstore girl looked like, that's what she seemed to be as she flew at them, in the garden where lavender and rosemary and Spanish garlic already grew in abundance, while most of their neighbors' yards remained muddy and bare.

"Look what they did to me," the girl from the drugstore cried. "He won't leave me alone for a minute. He's taken all the locks off, even on the bathroom door. I can't sleep or eat, because he's always watching me. He wants to fuck me constantly. I'm sore inside and out."

Sally took two steps backward, nearly stumbling over Gillian, who was clinging to her still. That was not the way people ordinarily spoke to children, but the girl from the drugstore obviously didn't give a damn about what was right or wrong. Sally could see that her eyes were red from crying. Her mouth looked mean, as if only bad words could come from between those lips.

"Where are the witches who did this to me?" said the girl.

The aunts were looking out the window, watching what avarice and stupidity could do to a person. They shook their heads sadly when Sally glanced at the window. They did not wish to be involved any further with the drugstore girl. Some people cannot be warned away from disaster. You can try, you can put up every alert, but they'll still go their own way.

"Our aunts went on vacation," Sally said in a breakable, untrustworthy voice. She had never told a lie before, and it left a black taste in her throat.

"Go get them," the girl shouted. She was no longer the person she used to be. At choir practice she wept during her solos and had to be led into the parking lot so she wouldn't disrupt the entire program. "Do it now, or I'll smack you silly."

“Leave us alone,” Gillian said from the safety of her hiding place behind Sally. “If you don’t, we’ll put a worse curse on you.”

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The girl from the drugstore snapped when she heard that. She grabbed for Gillian and flung her arm forward. But it was Sally she slapped, and she struck her so hard that Sally lurched backward and trampled the rosemary and the verbena. Behind the window glass, the aunts recited the words they were taught as children to hush the chickens. There had been a whole pen of scrawny brown-and-white specimens, but by the time the aunts got through with them they never screeched again; in fact, it was their silence that allowed for them to be carried off by stray dogs in the middle of the night.

“Oh,” Gillian said when she realized what had happened to her sister. A blood-red mark was forming on Sally’s cheek, but Gillian was the one who started to cry. “You horrible thing,” she said to the drugstore girl. “You’re just horrible!”

“Didn’t you hear me? Get me your aunts!” Or at least that was what the drugstore girl tried to say but no one heard a word. Nothing came out of her mouth. Not a shout or a scream and certainly not an apology. She put her hand to her throat, as though someone were strangling her, but really she was choking on all that love she thought she’d needed so badly.

Sally watched the girl, whose face had already grown white with fear. As it turned out, the girl from the drugstore never spoke again, although sometimes she made little cooing noises, like the call of a pigeon or a dove, or, when she was truly furious, a harsh shrieking that was not unlike the panicked sound chickens make when they’re chased and then caught for basting and broiling. Her friends in the choir wept at the loss of her beautiful voice, but in time they began to avoid her. Her back had become arched, like the spine of a cat who has stepped onto a burning hot coal. She could not hear a kind word without covering her ears with her hands and stamping her foot like a spoiled child.

For the rest of her life she’d be followed around by a man who loved her too much, and she wouldn’t even be able to tell him to go away. Sally knew the aunts would never open the door for the client of theirs, not if she came back a thousand times. This girl had no right to demand anything more. What had she thought, that love was a toy, something easy and sweet, just to play with? Real love was dangerous, it got you from inside and held on tight, and if you didn’t let go fast enough you might be willing to do anything for its sake. If the girl from the drugstore had been smart, she would have asked for an antidote, not a charm, in the first place. In the end, she had gotten what she wanted, and if she still hadn’t learned a lesson from it, there was one person in this garden who had. There was one girl who knew enough to go inside and lock the door three times, and not shed a single tear as she cut up the onions that were so bitter they would have made anyone else cry all night long.

ONCE a year, on midsummer’s eve, a sparrow would find its way into the Owens house. No matter how anyone tried to prevent it, the bird always managed to get inside. They could set out saucers of salt on the windowsills and hire a handyman to fix the gutters and the roof, and still the bird would appear. It would enter the house at twilight, the hour of sorrow, and it always came in silence, yet with a strange resolve, which defied both salt and bricks, as though the poor thing had no choice but to perch on the drapes and the dusty chandelier, from which glass drops spilled down like tears.

The aunts kept their brooms ready, in order to chase the bird out the window, but the sparrow flew too high to be trapped. As it circled the dining room, the sisters counted, for they knew that three



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