

Prologue: Omnes Colores

Media vita in morte sumus.

In the midst of life we are in death.

—The Epistle of Saint Paul

I DIED BY FIRE IN THE FALL OF '46 . . . 1846, THAT IS.

The timbers and the colors came crashing down. The fire was a kaleidoscope cracking a thousand, a million colors: omnes colores. . . . Yes, all the colors came. Reds rose from the timbers as they tumbled, and in shattering the windows burned blue. From the bricks there issued a violet hue, though how it was they'd been empurpled I cannot say. Sacks of milled corn burst not as golden bombs, but showed instead the greens of inland seas. Mirrors standing sentinel against the warehouse walls twinned the flames till their backing mercury burned, and it was then all the colors came. . . . Piled rugs of pied thread fast fell to ash. Tea sets, candelabra, cutlery all smelted down to silver. . . . And all of it—the fire, my pyre—seemed a . . . a mere and simple surprise, yes. Surprising, too, that I had no fear; for all the while I burned I knew I would not die.

2 James Reese

. . . He had been right. . . I would ascend to a nameless state. Such that now I wonder:

Am I a god? Am I a goddess? Am I a ghost?

As a teen I'd been told by my saviors, *You are a man, you are a woman, you are a witch.* And so, by the time I walked, nay, *ran* into those flames some two decades later—oh, what a fool I was!—the news of my true state was as naught; for I was what I was, simply so. Ask any dreamer who has had a dream come true and you will hear the same: What had once seemed impossible yet comes to pass, simply *is*. And so I simply *was* man, woman, witch: spawn of two persons leaving no other legacy, but more truly myth-born of Hermes and Aphrodite, and thus fated to bear that appellation I disdained all the long years of my life: hermaphrodite.

The heat of it blistered and blackened the splitting skin, which yet seemed mine. And oh, the pain of such a parting from life! Too, my witch's blood boiled like that of sisters staked and blazed in ages past, burned by those believing themselves allied to Heaven's higher cause, those who held that the only way to stop us witches was to kill us, burn our bodies and our blood—the former but a vessel for the badness borne on the latter—and thusly keep us from accessing an Afterlife. Oh, but as the colors came, as the Work was done, as my body burned and my blood boiled, there came a transubstantiation: from man, from woman, from witch, I ascended, yes.

To god? To goddess? To ghost?

I sit shipboard now, sailing, and would pay heed to neither calendar nor clock—so rarely must we dead contend with capital-*T* Time—were it not for she who hosts me; for though this body is freshly dead, still it begins to stiffen even as I . . .



The Witchery 3

Stay. Understand, sister, and shy not from this moribund fact: In order to write, I must either speak—and the speech of the dead takes many forms—to an amanuensis, some sympathetic scribe; or, lacking such a one, I must insinuate myself into a corpse whose eyes I can open, whose muscles I can maneuver despite a heart grown still and blood that can no longer course. . . . Yes, yes, yes, it's a squishy and slimy and stinking business; but I have grown used to it. So, too, will you, *je t'assure*.

. . . the hiss and whisper of cloth catching flame . . . the sizzle of burning salt . . . the burst, the boom of barreled alcohol . . . the staves like arrows afire flying from off the concussed casks . . . Yes: all the wares of the house went up, and down, down the walls came by the bright light of day; for all, all was lost to the strange play of the elements: fire, yes, but wind and water as well. . . . And when later I was summoned home, was resurrected and rose, I could only wonder what I was:

God? Goddess? Ghost?

I have determined to pass these sea hours purposefully; and the tale I purpose to tell is this: *How it was I died*.

To do so, to tell my tale, I have sought and found this hostess—she in whom I saw the seed of fever had been sown. . . . The newly dead are preferred for their pliability, of course; but here—on this swelling sea—I hadn't much choice, and were it not for Yellow Jack I'd still be silent, searching for a hand, a *literal* hand by which to initiate this volume, this return to the Shadows; for my companion keeps watch in the cabin adjoining, and cannot help. . . . This child—whom her father refers to as Missy, but whose name is Lucy—has fallen to the fever of late. I would guess that she is, *was* not a decade old, but I can say with certainty that she is newly dead, a fact as yet undiscovered.



4 James Reese

ered; for I dissemble well. Whether or not my hostess carried fever onto this ship or found it here, it is too early to tell. Those who will mourn her are yet hale, or as hale as this heaving sea allows; and were I to dwell on a description of their complexions, to paint a portrait in words, I'd opt for pinks and the lightest of sun-born browns, with perhaps just a hint of the greenish hues of the seasick, but not yet that yellow that portends the onset of fever.

Oh, but jaundiced indeed is the tiny hand that holds this pen and that will soon harden to inutility; and it is that same hand, with the memory of so immature a script in its muscle, that renders these pages childlike. . . . Just now I have chanced to try her, or rather *its* left hand: no luck: our little Missy was right-handed in life, and must remain so in death. . . . Begging pardon of said penmanship, I write on with all due haste; for though I may give to this unconscious girl's casing *the semblance* of life—quite easily, in fact, with moans and groans and whatnot; though I worry that I cannot put her mourners off for more than a day or two, whereupon this body will begin to betray its true state—*enfin*, soon this Missy's family will come to this compartment, discover the girl dead and gone, and along with their shipmates grow eager, despite their sorrow, to quote St. Paul and commit her body, *this body*, unto the deep, sending down within it, unto the seafloor, that sickness that might yet make of this ship a floating morgue.

. . . Yes: already these thin limbs are stiffening, the fingers brittling, the vision blurring as the eyes unmoor from their muscle; and it is with effort that I bend this golden brow over the page before me seeking to educate, to edify whosoever finds this testament, this my last *Book of Shadows*: You, sister, I suppose. . . . Indeed, it is with Time that I must contend; and so, onward:

Rather: backward. Back to when the body that hosted my soul was my own. Back to when I was alive and once again on the run. . . . Stay:



The Witchery 5

I was not running. Better to say I'd set off in search of something: *a reason to live*, I suppose it was.

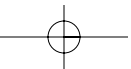
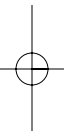
Ironic, that.

. . . The year? Let 1837 suffice as starting point; for by then I'd been Stateside nearly a decade, fugitive from my native France as well as the laws of both God and man. And in the course of those years I'd brought myself low, so low I'd nowhere to go but . . . elsewhere. And so indeed I set off, searching and wondering—as the sad traveler will—would I ever succeed in leaving my truer self behind?

Where was this “elsewhere”? *Alors*, though I know not where my tale will end, I know where it begins, yes; and so, hence:

To Havana.

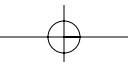
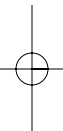





Part One




Digredo





Chapter One



It is a melancholy of mine own, compounded by many simples, extracted from many objects, and indeed the sundry contemplation of my travels, in which my often rumination wraps me in a most humorous sadness.

—SHAKESPEARE, *As You Like It*

WHAT A SIGHT: HAVANA HARBOR SEEN BY LATE DAYLIGHT.

I remember it well; for indeed we arrived at sunset, and sadly heard it told that we hadn't time to enter the harbor before dark. This the firing cannons of the Morro Castle made clear: the harbor, indeed the city itself, was closed till next the sun rose. It was slight consolation hearing our captain opine that it was just as well, that the harbor would be too crowded to navigate at night. And so we found a good offing within sight of the Morro's walls, near enough to hear the bells of the city count out the quarter hours; and there we lay off and on all night, tacking in accord with the winds and the water.

For hours I'd watched the silver-green isle of Cuba rising from the blue, ever more anxious yet knowing not that the *Athée*—aboard which we'd sailed from Savan-

nah—was racing the setting sun. Had I known this, had I known that each evening the Morro's cannons announced that crepuscular closing of the harbor and city, I'd have been sick from nervous upset; for though I'd been sent to Havana, I had only the vaguest notion of what, of *who* I'd find there.

Would Sebastiana d'Azur—my discoverer, my Soror Mystica, who'd absented herself for so long, who'd cast away her courtly renown after the Revolution and retired to her crumbling chateau upon the Breton shore— . . . would Sebastiana herself be there? Who was the “we” of whom the aged witch had written so cryptically? *We have a surprise for you*, said the letter sent to me in St. Augustine. Would I have to face again Sebastiana's consort: the man, the menace, the faux demon Asmodei? He who'd hated me from first sight. He who'd sought to harm me. Oh, but Sebastiana's absence had surprised me once before, had it not? In New York. In years past. When I—so deeply needful, so lost—had gone thither, as again she'd directed, by post, only to find yet another epistle apologizing for her absence and consigning me to the care of a houseful of whoring witches. (Mistake me not, sister: I loved the Cyprians, and still mourn their loss and the dissolution of the Duchess's House of Delights.) More likely I, nay, *we*—yes: I had a companion aboard the *Athée*— . . . more likely we would walk alone among the Havanans with no clue but one: Somewhere in the city there lived a monk whom Sebastiana, in her directing letter, had identified by the single initial *Q*.

And so, though I knew not what, or who I would find in Havana, still I hoped to find such things fast. Thus, each wave separating the schooner *Athée* from its mooring in Havana Harbor was a hated thing. . . . But mark, for so it was the case: the waves had been few as we approached over the Straits, and our six-day sail from Savannah had been smooth, too smooth and slow: often we'd been becalmed, and had lain in want of wind.



The Witchery 11

Finally, *finally* all aboard knew the sight of the Pan de Matanzas—that Cuban mountain molded by a great hand in mimicry of a loaf of bread—and nearer, nearer there could be seen sown fields of cane and coffee bordered by tall, wind-waltzing palms. Nearer still, and the lighthouse could be discerned in detail, so, too, the forts of the Morro and Punta flanking the harbor's entrance: like fists of stone they were, wrapped round the harbor's narrow neck and seeming to strangle the inlet. And beyond, faint as my fate, the city itself climbed the hillsides: buildings in pastel shades, showing roofs of reddish tile.

The *Athée's* sails had been unfurled to steal from those swaying palms what winds there were; and we beat toward the harbor as best we could, forsaking the changeable hues of the Gulf Stream for the sapphirine seas nearer the island. I imagine now that we truly hurried; for our captain must have known that the harbor would close come dark. By the light of a low, westering sun, flying fish rose beside us: silvery knives they seemed, hurled shoreward by the hand of Neptune. Seabirds were ten times more numerous, now we were nearer land. Gulls cried, and signed their chalky *Xs* on the slate of the sky. . . . So near, yes; but it was then, with the gulls wheeling overhead, that we aboard the *Athée* saw a schooner on the opposite tack make for the harbor even as the signals were dropped and the first cannon fired. Of course, I concluded the worst: here were pirates, espied by the Cuban guard and now taking shot. But no: my companion—even more anxious than I to debark, surely—passed to me the dire news had from the captain just as the lighthouse spun to cast its first beam upon the sea: the city was closing.

And so it was that, our suit for entry refused, the *Athée* bobbed another night at sea. Suddenly I found myself in possession of the thing I wanted least of all: long starlit hours to worry about what was to come, and to worry about what we'd done; for yes, a crime had been committed, such that we—the crew and cast of the *Athée*—were now



one fewer than we'd been when setting sail from Savannah. Of course, none but Calixto and I knew the why, the when, the how of the crime that had been committed: murder.

Indeed, we two wanted off the *Athée* come dawn; and all that starry, windless night I sat wondering how best to achieve this. How best to avoid the captain, and Cuban customs, and the inquisition sure to come?

I'd locked and left my house on St. George Street, in St. Augustine, not two weeks prior, my departure prompted by two facts:

Fact the first: As said, Sebastiana had written directing me toward Havana; and promising the disclosure of certain "secrets" in that city; and:

Fact the second: I knew I'd die a wasting death, or lead a lifeless life in anticipation of the Coming of the Blood, that sickening spill that comes—sometimes suddenly, burstingly; sometimes slowly, as a malaise that can have no other cause—to claim every witch on the last of her days, regardless of whether she loves life or has suffered a surfeit of it . . . yes, I'd do naught but long for my own Red End if I were to stay in that house all alone, hearing its walls echoing, echoing the stories of all I'd lost. Through said losses, and the survival of same, I'd grown stronger, much, but only as a witch. As a man, as a woman, *enfin* as me, *I was weak*, and hadn't the will to welcome or use said powers, powers that somehow I'd siphoned off the dead, as we few witches who are death-allied must perforce do whenever we encounter massed souls still clinging to life. . . . *Ego sum te peto et videre queto*. Which is to say, *The dead rise and come to me*. . . . What these powers were, specifically, I could not have said, and cannot say now: The Mystery of Mysteries.

And once I returned home from deep in the Florida scrub, I returned to the shelter, the safety of St. George Street: a ship returned



The Witchery 13

to port; but soon enough—in the accusatory quiet, in the stillness of an unhappy house—I came to understand that though ships may be sheltered and safe in port, they are built to sail. And so I set off upon receipt of Sebastiana’s letter.

Set off for Havana, I supposed; though in truth, I might have ended up elsewhere. Indeed, I’d have gone as happily—that is to say, *unhappily*—to Havana as to another place unknown; for I sought only motion, any sensation that yet proved I was alive. And all I knew as I rode inland from St. Augustine, seeking again the river St. John, was that I would ride its odd, northward flow to the sea, and let the sea decide my fate. This I did, hurrying not; for I no longer held to much hope—of salvation, of happiness—and only hope could have hurried me.

Hélas, I set out over rutted roads and long, long stretches of scratching scrub. Had I been in a hurry, I’d have hired a horse. Or taken directly to the sea at St. Augustine rather than heading slightly northward (as indeed I did) when my desired destination—Havana—lay to the south. Instead, caving to coincidence—I’d take whatever boat would come—as well as a nature too melancholic, and being ever mindful of the river’s living metaphor, I sought the confused flow of the St. John’s and told myself I’d reach the sea in time; whereupon I’d reset my sites toward Cuba. . . . *Motion*—be it northward, southward, or wayward—would suffice for now.

I’d sailed the St. John’s a decade prior, when first I’d come to Florida; and so, when finally I achieved the river again and saw its oaks overhanging the slow flow, their Spanish moss dripping down as a living filigree, I may even have been—dare I say it?—*happy*; for a spell.

I secured passage aboard a passing sloop of slight burden already laden with lumber, named the *Espérance*. I had money enough to ensure that I’d not be expected to earn my keep, neither upon the St. John’s nor in the sloop’s home port of Savannah (not so northward sitting



as to be *wholly* off course, thought I). Mind: I am not lazy, or rather was not lazy then—admittedly, we dead might sometimes be said to laze—but rather, I feared that work of any sort would result in my weaving myself into the ship’s web of ropes, or worse: falling overboard into that river crowded with crocodilians. . . . No: I told the captain *in terms certain* that it was not a working passage I sought. I had not come to “hire on,” but rather would pay handsomely—and *handsome* is aptly chosen, as I traveled, then, in manly guise—to be let aboard, whereupon I’d secrete myself all the way to Savannah so as not to be any bother at all.

As said, the *Espérance* sailed low in the river, its shallow belly full of pine planks. Too, more boards had been laid upon the deck and fastened with strapping. Though space had been left abaft the mainmast for the pumps, sitting close unto the bulkhead, the rest of the sloop was crowded, quite. Pine was profit, and no shipboard space was spared: so very redolent it all was of pitch and planed wood. Neither was there a bunk to spare belowdecks. These—hammocks, in fact, in which the sleeping crew swung—were claimed by those who, to judge from their limbs, tarry to the elbow and knee, had felled, hewn, and stacked the sawn pine. So it was I was told to bed down as best I could. Such an arrangement might have put off another gent—so I hoped to appear: a youngish gent of some means and strange ways; in other words: *a man best left alone*—but of course my relief was great at not having to share close quarters with six well-salted types. No: I’d have bared my breasts and strapped myself to the bowsprit, sailing as the *Espérance’s* figurehead, if it had meant securing that solitude that had long been requisite to the keeping of my doubly-sexed secrets.

The first day of the sloop’s homeward passage ended without event; but not so night number one.

I’d been sitting amidships, well free of all stays and sails and such troublesome stuff, and had scribbled away the late hours of the after-



The Witchery 15

noon. It's likely I dared not write in the *Book of Shadows* I then kept—too dangerous, this—but yet I recall having in hand a stub of pencil and some pages now lost, bound in a book of blackest kid (a hide nearly as dark as my disposition). All was well, with the salts too tired to trouble themselves with me. But then the sun set, and we—nay, *I alone*; for no man of the *Espérance* seemed equally troubled— . . . I was beset by so many millions of mosquitoes it seemed the swarm, with some coordination, could have lifted me bodily from off the deck and dropped me down in Savannah, sparing me the sail. But rather than carrying me thither, those pests determined to sup upon me, to stick deep their syringes and *draw, draw, draw*.

Others of the men seemed immune to the bother and bite, and took no action but to concede as little skin as possible to “the skeeters,” rolling down their sleeves and slacks. A few lit smudge pots and carried them about like lanterns. The reflected lantern light threw ghostly swimmers in the drink. Later, the salts retired to their swinging hammocks to drink and sleep away what stings they suffered. Me? I had no refuge but the night, and the darkness, which—fortunately—hid what happened to those stinging things once they'd supped too much of my witch's blood.

Yes: soon the chore, the challenge, lay not in fending off the skeeters' bite but rather in concealing the myriad specks upon my skin; for the pests, witch-fed, fell dead with their stingers still sunken into my skin. No doubt by daylight I'd have seemed some species of dalmatian dog, bedotted by the dead creatures. Indeed, even by moonlight I could see my exposed skin darkening to black: looking down at my hands, I saw what seemed the black lace gloves of a lady of Spain.

The two men of the watch I heard snigger. One of them winked at me with an ivoried eye, evincing delight that this dandy come amongst the crew suffered so. I thought to refute the sniggering, to say that in fact I was not suffering the skeeters but rather was . . . *both-*



ered by them, merely. Instead, I said nothing. Which is not to say that I did not act in my own defense; for—and now it seems I may have willed this—he of the ivoried eye soon was struck by a thunderous fit of coughing, one which caused him to gulp greatly at the black, buzzing air and swallow down skeeters by the battalion. Had I brought his barking on? I did not know for certain; but yes, there came a *souçon* of guilt, such that I rose and betook myself nearer the bow and further from the men of the watch. But when behind me it seemed I heard more sniggering, the guilt soon was gone and I fell to wondering, pointedly, what I could conjure to stifle the men. Were there catbirds in the shoreside trees who might be willed to dive, to dart about the men's heads? Or perhaps a snake might be induced to drop down from the branches overhead, branches that looked sulphurous now, well nigh infernal in that light coming from the braziers bolted onto the bow and crowded with tarry knots of pine? Such were my thoughts—I do confess it—when I turned to see not the sniggering men of the watch, but another of the crew: the cabin boy, name of Calixto.

Cal—as he was called—had brought me a bit of luncheon earlier on. Whether he'd done so of his own accord, or had been directed to action by the captain, I cannot say. Regardless, I'd been grateful for the fare, though it was but a bit of lobscouse—beef and bread, this is, cooked together without benefit of spice—along with a skin of switchel to wash it back. Now here came the boy again, burdened by a smudge pot and a mass of netting; which latter I supposed he'd cast over the river, for certain species of fish—like certain species of men—surface only after dark; the difference being: such fish one might sometimes seek, whilst such men are best left alone.

But no: on came Cal, toward where I sat. . . . And if earlier the sun had seemed to gild the boy—as indeed it had—now he was ensilvered by the moon sieving down through the trees.



The Witchery 17

As before, he said not a word, this blond, sea-bred boy of some sixteen, seventeen years of age. Rather he set straight to work; and by the scant light of the moon, and the flickering flames of the smudge pot and braziers, I watched in wonder—wonder that soon ceded to delight; and delight that ceded to gratitude in its turn, gratitude deep as the surrounding dark.

He had not come to fish. It was no seine he had in hand. It was netting of a much, much tighter weave: muslin, I suppose. It was a square, one side of which was weighted by a piece of driftwood stitched into its hem. Strings depended from the remaining three sides; and these—in an athletic show, done so fast I knew not what I watched—Cal tied fast to the boom, and to the shrouds, and to a davit, till finally the net hung upon the deck as a tent, a triangulate refuge from the swarming skeeters.

Quickly as he'd come, Calixto disappeared. I stood in wonder. A moment more and he returned, this time burdened by bedding. Crude bedding, yes, true, but bedding nonetheless. This he proceeded to set upon the deck. And then, carefully, he tucked the edges of the net beneath the pallet, all save one side, which now he raised up. With the smile of a gallant, he motioned me into this odd construction. I knew not what to say, knew not what to do. Words of thanks stalled in my throat. But then the cabin boy nodded me on with a measure of urgency, and—as he scratched at his own welts, and I'd not be the one to cause him a moment's more suffering—I verily dove past him, ducking beneath his arm as if the boom were a sort of fallen maypole and he a suitor. Suffice to say: I may have let slip my masculine mask; but if so, I took it up forthwith. From within my shelter I thanked him. I sought some pocketed coin (thinking this was owed to—and sought by—all who did me a courtesy). All the while, the boy spoke not a word.

Having tucked me tightly in, he stood. I looked up at him. Stay: no



doubt *I stared* as if I'd never see him again. He'd not have seen me staring, of course; for I'd long since had to sport, *at all times*, those blue-lensed spectacles that hid my eyes, eyes which—in time with my increasing strength—had grown fixed, and now, no matter my mood, showed constantly *l'oeil de crapaud*, the Eye of the Toad, or the true witch's mark, the sister-sign (so called because the circle of the pupil cedes to the shape of a toad's splayed-toed foot). . . . Yes, doubtless I stared. What? Did I think he'd swim from the *Athée*? That I'd wake to learn he'd ascended somehow, that indeed he'd been the angel he'd seemed? . . . Sadly, soon I saw naught but his back; for he turned on his heel and headed off, dissolving into the dark.

I may have sputtered a second thank-you. I may have bade him good-bye or good night. Regardless, my words broke not upon the boy. He was gone, and I might have spoken with equal effect to the trees or the stars and moon beyond; for now I lay upon my back, staring up. And it was in that same pose that I'd eventually fall asleep, knowing not that age-old superstition of sailors: To sleep topside, with one's face full to the moon, is to invite ill fortune.

. . . Indeed.

