J.E. Reich

Old Country

In Mexico, they get altars festooned with marigolds and candy skulls pin-pricked with plastic gems. In Slovakia, some widows wear black for the rest of their lives. At my house, we light a yellow candle for the dead.

We live near a cemetery. Instead of a backyard, I see rows of ragged tombstones outside of the kitchen window. Andie Rosen, who used to be my best friend, told me that you're supposed to hold your breath when you walk past a graveyard. Even so, I don't think that this is why I've never had a lot of friends come over to my house.

Jessie! We're lighting candles, says my mother from the bottom of the stair, *Come down, or I'll start without you.*

There it is, in its usual spot for its semi-regular visit: the yellow candle, the wax cradled in a glass casing, squat and thick, no taller than a teacup. On the label is a silhouette of a woman in a long shawl, turned away from me to an imaginary window, circled by a Hebrew script that reminds me of spider legs. I don't know who my mother is lighting it for tonight, which is also somewhat normal for me. It turns into a guessing game. This great uncle, that grandmother, maybe a step-cousin-in-law. For a small family, we have a lot of dead relatives. At Hebrew school my teacher said that these candles of mourning were only meant for immediate family, but when I told Mom, she said that sometimes teachers are the last ones to get it right.

It's just us, says Mom, retrieving matches from a drawer.

My younger brother Milo is away for a sleepover tonight at his friend Zach Levine's house. Zach's mom picked him up, which is great, because Zach's older sister is this girl named Lauren, who I know but don't. She sits in front of me in Civics class and always wears her hair in a serpentine blond ponytail. Lauren passes handouts back to me without looking at my face. She and Andie sometimes sit together during lunch and laugh over things I wish I could hear. Every time we drive over to Zach and Lauren's house, I stay in the car and look out the window, pretending to be somewhere else.

There are unopened letters on the round kitchen table from the electric company, the gas company, the phone company. I've heard the word *debt* before, this vague idea, and have the sinking thought that everyone eventually has it, in some way or another. With one hand, my mother

swipes the sealed envelopes into a haphazard pile, burying one of my textbooks. It's October, closing in on Halloween, and in school we're learning about the mourning practices of other cultures in a handful of classes: History, Spanish, English, even psychology. The weatherman said that we could expect rain right before sundown, but it's an hour later, and a slick patter has only begun to fall outside. My father is away on business again. Three weeks.

My mother smiles so wide that she could weep.

But tonight will be good, with the two of us; tonight, I will learn how to bring back a soul from the dead.

It was my mother who told me that we were witches. *You have to keep it to yourself*, she cautioned, her voice benthic, something ancient and unseen. *Jewish people already have their share of problems. Jewish witches…?*

She let the question drag through the air, finding its own conclusion. I knew what it was: you don't need that kind of trouble. You avert your eyes in the hallway and in the locker room. You say nothing so that you can get by without someone else's revelation.

Mom was a late bloomer. It was only after her mother died in her sleep, an almost-empty pill bottle and a wine glass rimed with dried spackles of burgundy; only after my mother took yet another flight down to Miami to settle my grandmother's affairs; only after she arrived at the flat-roofed, one story house she had grown up in, a house the color of opaque cartoon ice; only after she tore open the flaps of a damp cardboard box and found a book of spells, did she finally know her calling. As for why Grandma kept the spell book ferreted away, maybe she was scared of the things that power trembling and clamoring inside her could unlock.

The book was bound with twine, halfway between a diary and a textbook. She took it home with her, the pages made from yellowed calfskin, written in a cramping, law-abiding script, recorded by her mother before her, and so on, and so on. To me, it looked like a spell book from one of those 90s movies about teen witches.

We're descended from the Maiden of Ludmir, the first Hasidic female rabbi ever, who exorcized ghosts, held a court of women, and probably never married. I know this because my mother explained it—it's all in the book. I've never read it myself to find proof in its pages, just looked at it in my mother's hands. She says I'm not old enough, even though I had my bat-mitzvah two years ago. But Mom never tells a lie.

She gives me lessons every Friday night, when Dad and Milo ar-

en't around, passing me typed-up handouts with diagrams on levels of interpretation of words or spells. They sort of remind me of fractals in math class, except they connect back to each other, these lines, instead of webbing off into places that make my eyeballs numb when I think about them too much. Paper sheets on how the lines in someone's face can tell you all about their soul.

It's *kabbalah*, at least, part of the magic is kabbalah, the other part a mix of wisps other ancestors and rabbis teased out from other, later books, places they weren't supposed to. This magic, kabbalah: a word a teacher mentioned once or twice at Hebrew school. I go there on Sundays in a black-stone building that used to be a church. In classrooms that are slightly more empty than classrooms during the school day, I learn Hebrew phrases that will get me around in Israel (*ani rotzeh lalechet la'sherutim*, *I need to go to the bathroom*; *ani lo medaberet ivrit*, *I don't speak Hebrew*), or maunder with slack-mouthed sophomores over passages from the Torah about women turning into pillars of salt. One time in class, Morah Slifkin said something about how you're not supposed to study kabbalah until you're forty, because you'll go crazy. Your tongue will speak in languages no one will understand. You'll become a zombie, but alive. Mom tells me this is crap. *Women have an innate spirituality*, she reaffirms, *we're strong enough to handle it.*

So, okay, Mom didn't say that we're *actually* raising the dead. But we're making something old new again. Her witch workshop is in the basement—me and Milo have always been forbidden to go into the basement, and I never want to go down there by myself anyway—and tonight is the first night she's letting me descend with her. The season is right, the air crisp and brutal and logged with the smell of fire. We live near a cemetery. We light candles for people whose names no one can recall. I'm not an idiot. It can only mean one thing.

Kabbalah means to *receive tradition*, so I guess that's what loneliness is, too.

The Celts buried swords and flagons of wine with their dead. Ancient Greeks put coins on the eyes of corpses to keep their lids sealed, to pay the gondolier who would take them across the river Styx to some kind of afterlife. The Egyptians, well, you know.

But now these empires are gone.

On Friday nights, I used to never be home. Usually, I'd be at sleepovers with Andie, over at her house. My mom would say she had a *spread*, that is, her room was basically the entire third floor, with a bed whose edges I couldn't touch even if I lay there spread-eagled, grasping for the corners, and her own TV set mounted on the wall.

Andie never slept at my house. It wasn't just the cemetery.

Your mom is weird, she told me one night when we were thirteen, before we decided to watch *Cruel Intentions* for the second time, and after she had taught me how to stuff an artichoke down my bra, because we were bored and because it's not as painful as you think.

But all moms are, I said. Andie wrinkled her ski slope of a nose in a way that unfolded a bulb under my ribs, petal by petal.

Those candles, she said, *who even does that for people they don't even know?* She was talking about the dead relatives we'd never even met.

What I didn't say: that my mother's father came from Latvia, a country I can't find on a map unless I'm looking for it, how he hid in pyres of hay until he stopped hearing bullets a farmer's field away. That he refused to say ever again the names of the unclothed, raw bodies he found not too far off, in a trench that had never been there before. He found his father's shovel spiked between the shoulder blades of the local flower girl. He died before I was born. This was the one thing he told Mom about the war. And now I knew, too.

But I didn't mention any of this. Instead, I did what girls are supposed to do.

Okay, well, whatever.

Because I liked the way everything Andie said could sound real and true, making decisions for me. She was the hollow in the tree from childhood games of hide-and-seek that no one else ever knew about, dusk and soft-grounded with moss, a place where safety was almost like a pair of arms around your shoulders when you closed your eyes.

After that, we turned on the movie, and Andie kept her eyes hitched to Sebastian's lips. *G-d, he's so freaking hot. Too bad he's, like,* old *now.*

In small moments, I just looked at Andie.

The first emperor of China was buried with thousands of terracotta soldiers in a hill near a jade mine. With weapons in their hands, they were placed there to protect him, and then forgotten for centuries. He, too, did not want to be afraid.

We finish our dinner of roasted chicken and spinach kugel, leaving rinds of challah bread and spliced noodles on our plates. On Fridays likes this, Mom doesn't even make me do the dishes. The yartzheit candle burns near the windowsill, ignoring us.

Like always, Mom and I push our chairs back and sit on the floor, facing each other. Bending like the stem of a dandelion, I pull my knees to my chest, open them wide enough to fit my head through, and then cradle it between my kneecaps. I press the bend in my legs against my ears, closing my eyes, and for a moment, there is a thread of blue.

Remember, Mom says, *focus on the words you choose. Just those words.* There is a shuffle, and she, too, is lost in the folds of her body.

According to the spell book, you're supposed to say a tractate from the Mishna—another book some dead rabbis wrote—but Mom says other words are fine, too, as long as you *only* think of those words. It can be one word, if you want. You just have to need it. Mine insists on boomeranging around in my head, deflecting, coming back for more. It wants revenge. It wants an aneurysm.

Please, I mouth between my knees, in my own dusky shell on the brown kitchen tile.

Please, please, please, please, please, please.

These words want something to change, but nothing has. Outside, in the rain, droplets shiver and break on yellow squares of window glass.

On another Friday, when Dad was on another trip and Milo was upstairs in his room pretending to be asleep, reading one of his video game magazines, even though we don't own any video games, I found her dead-mouthed on the couch. I mean, she didn't look asleep, and she didn't look like my mother. Her legs slung from one of the sofa armrests in a neat pair. Her arms above her head, bridged at the wrists. The television was shut off, a lamp grinned from a table in the corner. We had studied this before, scrying in your sleep; you don't need a crystal ball, only a few words in Hebrew to write with a pen, and a bowl of water to soak the calligraphy through and through. If Milo had seen her, he wouldn't know any better. But I did. Trancing somewhere between here and a blanched dawn. The same words, like when we meditate, facing each other in a womb. My father's name. I switched off the lamp.

Please. Please. Please. Across the street and over a spear-tipped gate, the dirt keeps the rain from washing the dead.

Hundreds of years ago, some rabbis would meditate by bowing on the

graves of saints, consulting their souls six feet below.

Mom and I never know how much time passes, but we always end our words in unison, uncurling our backs and facing each other at the same time, like a private three-ring act. I get up first, dusting my jeans, and hold out my hand for my mother. When we stand face-to-face, it's looking at a mirror in a half-dark room—we're the same height. But I'm not done growing.

The moment after meditation stops, gold filigree settles in my marrow. It's like wiping water down your body in scrolls and ripples after the shower is off, making it new. Like being a baby and waking up.

Okay, says Mom, pulling back a chair, *it's time to review.* She scours through the jumbles of envelopes, some stamped in red and some with threatening, tight script. She retrieves two worksheets and hands one to me. On it dangle two words in Hebrew.

ספר הסוד

I know what the first word means: *sefer*, book, but the second is out of reach.

Hasod, says Mom, *it means secrets. The Book of Secrets. Repeat after me. Sefer Hasod.* I recite it just how she says it, even though I really don't have to. These words trumpeted out of the mouths of witches before me; they're inscribed in my blood.

This is the book we will use tonight, she says, *to do what we have to do.*

There is thunder in my belly, blue and quick, even if thunder doesn't have a color. I want to ask her where the book is—and what, exactly, we'll do—but my tongue pushes against my teeth, blocking that moment.

In Madagascar, families dig up their dead and hold parties in their honor. They call it *famadihana*, turning the bones. Spraying their bodies with wine and perfume, they invite them to dance.

At fifteen, Andie and I weren't watching movies anymore. Instead, we poured vodka into plastic water bottles and water into square-pegged vodka bottles, hoping that her parents weren't alcoholics, and therefore wouldn't notice the blocks of ice we left behind in the freezer, suspended like pliable galleons in glass. After her parents fell asleep, we went down

the stairs on the quiet balls of our feet and walked out the front door—as easy as that. Andie and I rustled along absent streets to the houses of juniors and seniors with out-of-town parents, or took city buses from our neighborhood of cemeteries and house plants hanging under the eaves of porch roofs to frat parties in the neighborhood where the college kids live, which they called the *student ghetto*, where Andie made up different names and majors for us each and every time. Andie took to cups of beer froth and the mouths of boys with a hunger I didn't know how to possess, not toward the things that seemed normal. I followed her from room to room like an imaginary friend, taking sips of alcoholic drinks that tasted like neon colors, only to have something to do; I watched Andie coax sentences out of complete strangers, invent entirely new personalities for herself, perform small miracles. These parties usually ended with Andie caught in a state of stumbling, eyes half-closed, as if remembering a recent dream. After crawling under Andie's covers, she would fling her arm over my belly or chest without even realizing it, and I'd tell myself the joy that made me breathe in quick halts happened to everyone: a thrill so ordinary that no one bothered to mention it.

Jessie, you have to stop being strange, she'd whisper, already in that truth-telling space between awake and asleep, *Okay? You know what I mean. You just have to.*

I always promised her I'd try. Only she never told me how.

Before we left for those parties was the time I liked best: sitting on her bedroom floor, the off-white carpet stippled with glittered nail polish in celestial blues and reds, facing one another with the ease of twins from the same kaleidoscopic womb. We had known each other since second grade, but the fact I couldn't remember the first day we met made it like we had known each other since before we were born. Andie was a fact so solid in its existence that it didn't need to be justified by a memory. So on the floor she took my face in her hands and applied liner to my eyes, smirches of plum and rose onto my lips, painting a mask of the version of myself she saw as my best.

I can't believe your mom never taught you how to do this kind of stuff, she said, *who even does that?*

Once or twice she taught me how to actually kiss, because she heard from Stef Mandelbaum that it was seventy-six percent certain that Josh Bendas would definitely hook up with me. It's not that I didn't know how to kiss someone—I had kissed a boy named Matt at Benny Dorfman's bar mitzvah twice, once during a game of Truth or Dare for nine-and-a-half seconds, all cold saliva and concerned, unsure lips, and again when we

found ourselves alone in the lobby of the JCC because there was nothing else to do. But Andie didn't know this. She didn't know that afterwards, at home, I had brushed my teeth and gurgled mouthwash until my gullet brimmed with fire.

So Andie told me to keep my lips soft, but not *too* soft, to pretend I was breathing like a movie star. After she leaned forward and caught me with her mouth, after it ended too soon, Andie wiped off the frost of my lip gloss with the back of her hand. *There, it's over. You're welcome.*

The last time I slept in her room, Andie had made out with Sam Kalson, arms around his neck in a galvanic suck that made me question the laws of physics, amid a wreckage that was once the living room of Marissa Sable's parents. I had helped Mikey Tofovic decimate a jar of peanut butter, spooning thick dollops into our mouths in between sips of beer, but it didn't help stave off the whirl of alcohol that made me open and close my hands to check to see I was still able to do so with a remnant of sobriety. After we came back to her house, after I prayed that Andie's parents slept more deeply than spelunkers dive, after we lay on top of her bed with our shoes on and her arm on my hip, she asked me why I hadn't kissed Mikey, as if peanut butter meant something.

I'm not sure I like kissing boys, I said. What that really meant was, *I think I like practicing better.* I thought what I said would be left and forgotten on the outer trim of slumber.

Oh, said Andie, turning over, burrowing her knees into her chest, contracting into herself. She slept.

After that, Andie spent a string of lunch periods in the library—she had a project to do, she said—but she spent time in there longer than any project could last. The first Friday after the last one I slept in her bed, she had a family thing, or something. The next excuse I can't recall. Andie started sitting at a cafeteria table with Lauren Levine. I stopped going to parties. And then my mother sat me down, and told me about a book.

▼

When people in my family die, they're supposed to have a proper Jewish burial. If things happen the way they are supposed to, a burial society collects their bodies, removes jewelry, headcoverings, the things they clasp in their fists. They bathe them with the delicacy of an infant, and dress them in a prayer shawl the color of unfertilized egg shells. They sing quiet songs for the body about celebration, as if it could hear.

But like everything, the dead leave. And then they go out and collect another body.

▼

I don't want to scare you, says Mom. *Look, if you're not ready for this, then that's okay.*

But I want to be an adult, for everything to be concise and clear. I imagine that's what being an adult *is*, like staring down the quartz tunnel of a microscope in biology class, fine-tuning the focus knobs so the blood cells, or skin cells, or whatever cells sharpen and fix, show you what you are made of.

Mom, I say with a whining edge, *I'm* fifteen *already. I'm not a baby anymore.*

She's been leaning on the table over all of the papers, sorting them in an order I can't keep up with, but after I say this she snaps her head back, her eyes staring in my direction, but seeming not to stare at all. She tilts her head slightly to the left. *Right*, she says, the word almost delicate, right, right, you're right.

I already want to take it back.

The Book of Secrets is downstairs in the basement, my mother tells me as she opens the door.

The lightbulb down there has been blown out since before I can remember. My father has never bothered to fix it, and my mom is too short to do it without a ladder, which wouldn't work anyway, not on the haphazard steps. As we descend, I ponder which names of the archangels we will intone as we try to imbue someone with life. We go, like Orpheus before he knew better, stair by stair by stair.

In Latvia, my grandfather came across a mound of bodies, their naked arms and legs akimbo, in a gouge of earth near the town of Bauska. All of them were women and girls—Romani, he could tell: some had lived near his village—and their clothes were bright and hallowed against their blighted skin, drilled with bullet holes the color of winter dirt. He recalled that there was a ritual that had to do with knots: to tie a single knot for each of the dead each day for the first unbearable forty. He took the shoelace from his right boot, and with thick, frozen hands fastened and strapped as many as were possible. The tips of his thumbs cracked open. In that old country, he left it in the palm of a dead girl his age. If it weren't for this hell, she was a girl he could have loved.

This is a story he also told my mother, to tell her how everyone suffers.

After school today, Andie and Laura Levine walked past me down the

main hall at school, their faces glued in conversation, backpacks strapped to a shoulder apiece. Because I am hopeful, and because today seemed a good of a day as any, I waved, my elbow trembling. Andie didn't see it—at least, that's what I'd like to think—but a lump of vengefulness almost burst in my throat, and a hot pink welled on my cheeks. So I counted to twenty, Mississipis included, and followed them.

It wasn't hard to keep them in sight while they meandered down Bigelow Boulevard, pausing to laugh with secret laughs, sometimes doubling over and slapping their thighs. I walked on the balls of my feet, like Andie taught me when those laughs were mine, and ducked behind obese elms along the sidewalk almost a second too late, because I hoped that she'd see me through some eyes in the back of her head, because I was doing this for … I was doing this for a word I wouldn't name. I couldn't name. No. *No.*

Past Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall, with its grandstanding, well-hewn lawn; past Fifth Avenue, the only one without potholes; a right onto Forbes. I wondered where Andie and Laura Levine would end up. It wasn't Hemingway's, the clouded student bar where they almost knew Andie on a first-name basis, and it wasn't Avalon, the vintage store with the moth-eaten skirts and pushpin anarchy buttons, or the record store a block away, because Andie had an iPod and thought vinyl was for dads. They moved down the street with the ease and carelessness of fortunate people, and I would've known where they ended up if I hadn't seen my dad exit from between the ample stucco columns of the Wyndham Garden Hotel.

He was supposed to be away for business. It'd been three weeks.

Even across the street, his face looked the freshest I had ever seen, so much so that it almost convinced me it didn't belong to Dad. But there's a brimming of blood with that kind of recognition, which made me want to run toward him, arms outstretched. Like I was lost.

Backtracking made a cavern in my chest, because Andie would be truly gone, dissipating into the throng of high schoolers with Laura Levine, far from the realm of a casual hello or goodbye.

I tailed my dad from across a pot-holed avenue blaring with desperate car horns, evading college kids in broad-lettered fraternity sweaters. Even from there, it was simple to track him by his bald spot, despite the rest of his thick dark hair. He passed the Carnegie Museum, the statue of Stephen Foster oxidizing into pale green, and the slight campus hills. Dad stepped into a brick building with no windows, marked only with a trim rainbow flag that barely waved. He took out the thin black brick of his cell phone, stared at the screen, and put it back into his pocket. A moment later,

the door opened, wide enough for me to catch the profile of a man. He had the moustache of a cowboy from the kind of Western my dad watched with me when I was a kid, before he had to go away for business so often, when he had time to watch movies. He pulled Dad inside with the kind of hand that my dad would let someone pull him in with, the kind he knew, the kind he had to have known.

It was only then, tucked behind a parked car, I whispered a blessing my mom had taught me many Fridays ago: *Baruch atah adonai, mechaye hametim.* It's supposed to be said after you run into someone you haven't seen in a long time, or in certain cases, to ask G-d not to test you.

Blessed are you who revives the dead.

And then: *please fix it, fix it, fix it, whatever it is, please.*

In some countries, they believe the dead come back as flowers.

Zombies, vampires, even ghosts, in their way, they all come back from the dead.

But they are not the same.

My mother makes no sound in the dark, and for a minute, it is impossible to believe that one thing ends before another begins. That Mom and the basement and me and whatever lies beyond—the body in the casket, the book filled with secrets, the cement walls that house us—aren't all in the same. That each exhalation of breath is irretrievable.

Mom? I ask. *Mom?*

She won't answer, and panic rattles somewhere behind my heart. *Please answer me*, I say. *Can you answer me?*

There is another light down here no one ever switches on, at the opposite wall, because no one likes to go this far into the basement, no one except my mother. I navigate with my palms to find it, pressing splinters into the pads of my fingers when I use the unfinished wood shelves to find my way. Spells and blessings she taught me clot in my brain; I can't pick one out to save us. Whatever we came down here to tame, whatever decaying soul, whatever furied vision from a horror movie, is going to win.

I don't realize I've flipped on the light until the basement is flushed with a fluorescent bareness. The first thing I see is my mother, cowering in the middle of the room, her face tucked behind her hands, knees on the cement ground, shuddering back and forth. The next thing I see: a pale, ordinary basement, lined with half-used cans of paint, wilting cardboard

boxes, and flowering dust-bunnies.

I just want to be new. I just want to be new. I just want to be new. She explains this, but I never ask the question. Now, I know I should have.

With my mother sobbing on the floor, there is a hollowness in my veins where I had felt my powers dwell. They might have never been there at all.

The dead we lit candles for, they would laugh at us. Us, with our limited sorrows, unimportant to history.

As my mother quakes back and forth, a hostage of her body, I ascend the stairs, step by step by step.

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