

Equinox Society Radio 001

My Dear Strangers,

Some nights you can't sleep because you're fixated—out of the blue, for the first time in a while—on not knowing how you feel about your life, and whether or not the afterlife's real or only a fantasy you need, and how you're afraid of losing something you love—probably *someone* you love, and you know exactly who I mean—and suddenly it's 2 AM and all these terrible fixations come together like a black hole collapsing in your chest.

You don't know how you feel about your life, and you finally *really* believe you're going to die someday, and everything might simply blink out. Go dark. Be like it never happened. No meaning. No answers to the mysteries. No ghosts or second lives. Your struggles and wins, your anxieties and depressions, your hopes and pains and loves fizzling into nothing.

And then there are other nights when mysteries bloom and ghosts materialize exactly when you need them. There are demons, and dreams, and wandering fires. You meet a stranger, and something clicks, and the most deadening week turns into something astonishing and rare.

Some nights there are questions, so weird and insistent, that the need to explore them becomes a kind of hope. There are unexpected signals, and glimpses of illogical things that prove the world isn't made of cement. There are songs that make you think, "Thank God—somebody else felt that peculiar." One minute you're alone, and suddenly there's contact.

This is Equinox Society Radio, and I'm a stranger. Like you.

Society member Amanda Cress is twenty-two years old. She's fantastic. She practices witchcraft.

Amanda sent me the following email. She abbreviates and acronyms like crazy, so I'll just read it the way my brain interprets it.

Hi, Dennis!!!

We've had some weird fires in my neighborhood. One of them scorched a six-foot patch of grass in the high school's baseball field. Another was a dumpster fire, like not a metaphor but an actual burning dumpster, in the middle of the night behind Dunkin Donuts. I bet it smelled good, like burning paper bags and frosting and croissants.

But so anyway there's been a bunch of other fires, and nobody got hurt and nothing was majorly damaged, and it seemed like it was probably regular pyro teens until a house caught fire. The house belonged to a woman with seven cats, and this amazing cat lady managed to get

every one of the cats outside and into her car, and I wish I could have seen the cat car and driven it around and been all cat power. Firefighters saved the house but the smoke and water damage was bad, and the lady and her cats are staying with relatives until it all gets fixed.

The reason all the fires are connected is the spooky weird part. Or one of the spooky weird parts, because the whole thing gets spookier and weirder, but the starter detail is that all the fires make sound. Not a crackly hissy fire sound but more like a snarl. Like a growl. And not an animal growl but a human growl. I know humans are animals but you get what I'm saying.

The fire on the baseball field was spotted by a dogwalker, and when she got close enough her dog freaked out because of the sound, because it sounded like a thing that might kill dogs.

A cop spotted the dumpster fire and called it in, and he said the whole time he waited for the fire department to come, the flames made this menacing sound and he kept his distance, half-expecting a monster to tumble out of the dumpster, which is so not a cop thing to say and that's what makes it interesting, you know? He didn't just think the fire was growling. He thought it was growling at *him*. FYI, my cousin's a police officer and that's how I heard about the cop's monster comment, which I guess he actually said to the firefighters, and now he's been getting razzed about it and his fellow cops are leaving cartoon monster pictures on his locker and stuff. The firefighters agreed, though—the fire sounded weird, like no fire they'd ever heard, and had a growly, human, voicelike quality.

The cat lady said the same thing. She discovered the fire because of the noise. She thought a wild animal or a creepy person had gotten into her house, and she said at first she was almost relieved when all she saw was her sofa on fire.

There's one more story. I've saved it for last to be dramatic, especially now that it's going to be on a podcast and everything. Dennis says we're not doing sound effects so imagine an ominous drone that kind of crescendos at the good parts without being obvious and lame.

There's a man named Lemon in my neighborhood. His name isn't really Lemon, it's a nickname he's had for years because he's bald and his skin's jaundicey yellow and his head's shaped like a lemon, with the little nubby point on top and everything. I know it's mean but he seriously looks like a lemon, and he's had the name so long he calls himself Lemon and he's just Lemon now. He's sweet, I've talked to him a lot. He collects bottles out of recycling bins for the refund money. I think he has a job but I don't know what it is. I always bag my bottles on recycling night so it's easier for Lemon to take them.

He was collecting bottles three blocks from my house last Thursday night, around 10 PM, and he saw one of the fires start. He heard a low growl coming from an alley and thought it was a dog. Lemon loves dogs and dogs love Lemon, so the growl didn't scare him. He figured it was a stray and wanted to help. When he reached the sound, all he saw was a mass of black smoke coiling around the ground. It wasn't coming from anywhere, far as he could tell. The smoke just swirled and growled in the middle of the alley, and then it moved toward him, with no wind,

and ignited the asphalt. Lemon said there wasn't gas or anything flammable on the ground. Then the smoke turned to fire, and it snarled at him and burned toward his feet. He backed away but the fire got really aggressive, growling and writhing on the ground and definitely going after him.

He booked it out of the alley and ran to my house, because he's knows I'm a witch and I've showed him some of my witchy moves before, and he thought if a weird angry fire was coming after him, that was Amandaland stuff and I'd probably want to check it out. Which I totally did. He told me everything that happened, and I already knew about the other growly fires, and we hurried back to the alley but the fire was gone. It had melted some of the asphalt, though. The ground was still warm.

Lemon and I checked the whole alley for clues, and we talked about the fire for a while, and then he asked me out, but he wasn't gross about it and I told him no, I wasn't into dating right now. That was a lie, but only a white-witchy lie because he's nice and I didn't want to hurt his feelings.

So anyway there's attack fire prowling around my neighborhood. Is it an conscious entity, or a natural phenomenon, or a fire somebody's conjuring? I'm working on a hybrid spell to backward-track the fire from the places it appeared and I'm super-psyched to try it out. I'll let you know how it goes.

xoxo
Amanda

See what I mean? She's fantastic. Not only is Amanda the person you go to when growling fire is trying to burn you, she clicks her heels and dashes off to find it. And trust me, she will. Her spellwork's incredible. She lives for this stuff and her optimism is real-deal.

I'm an optimist, too, most of the time. But even for an optimist, there's a built-in risk to feeling energized by a good mystery. I want the rush of exploring something unknown, but part of me wants to hold back. Because a lot of the time, the question is the enlivening factor, and the answer is a letdown. It just brings me back to the same old unmystifying world I wanted to escape when the mystery appeared.

How often have you itched, in your brain, maybe drunk or meditating or having a conversation, and felt that you were right at the edge of understanding something important, and you struggled to get the answer, and the answer came, and it was flat. It was boring. It was the end of the fire instead of the beginning.

Two and two is four, and four is so predictable and dull, we feel tired of our lives, and tired of ourselves, and we want fucking five. We want seventeen. We need two plus two to equal W, or

some mystic symbol that transcends four, and we want to pour gasoline on four and burn it, and press our faces into the fire and see what's on the other side, where something primal and exciting might be hiding undiscovered.

Here's a report from Society member Claire Maple.

Claire is hard to sum up. I've met her in person twice. She's 44 years old and usually lives in hotels and motels. There's a reason for that. She'll explain it some other time. Claire doesn't talk about her past very often, but I know that as a child she escaped from a cult, she has an ex-husband and an ex-wife, and she became a freelance demonologist after a kind of anti-mystical experience in which she met the devil. She hasn't told me that story, but she's referred to it as the worst one-night stand of her life.

She sent me the following email.

Hey, it's Claire.

I had a weekend alone after bailing on the only person I know well around here. I was tired and moody after that mess with the tongue collector, and the person I bailed on is this mega-upbeat guy—bartender, killer G&Ts—who wears glittery lip gloss and the most perfectly fitted pants you've ever seen, and I adore him but he's a nonstop reminder of all the fabulous bubbly things I'm not. I'm midlife antihero sexy and I'm cool with that, but when I'm feeling low, being around someone that bright and clean makes me feel like a stain.

When I feel like a stain, I want to feel it with *another* human stain. If I can't do that, I do it alone. I have stain time. I hole up in a room and drink too much and smoke and sweat and don't shower. Eat grease for every meal. Ignore texts. Obsess over negative thoughts and beat myself up about mistakes. I look at bad porn instead of going out. I give in to every rotten urge I have until I'm so self-revulsed, I finally get motivated to scrub myself up and get back to healthy habits for a while.

This weekend was serious stain time. By Saturday night, I was using vodka as mouthwash to rinse away the taste of cheeseburger vomit. I caught my hair on fire with a cigarette. I gave myself a stick-and-poke tattoo, on my left shoulder, of the Equinox Society symbol. I don't even remember doing it, but here it is. At one point I texted everyone I know but nobody was around. I was so depressed from getting myself off, I almost Lyfted to a strip joint ten miles away to pick a winner from the crowd, which at that hour, at that particular club, would have been like net-fishing in an algae pond.

But it felt like too much trouble to put on clothes *and* buy condoms just to have a midnight boredom fuck with—if I was lucky—someone drunk enough to follow me home without a fuss *and* sober enough to make it worthwhile.

But I'd revved myself up enough to feel frustrated, and my self-revulsion was kicking in hard, and so I drank some more, took out my Ouija board, and tried to summon something I could abuse.

I made a real scene of it, lighting candles and playing Bathory on my phone. I drew that vile symbol on the floor (not the *really* vile one I learned from that maniac I dated last June; I mean the other vile symbol you and I discussed last week), and then I sat in the middle of the symbol with the Ouija board.

I don't remember what I asked to make contact, but an entity showed up fast and laid it on thick. He guided my hands on the planchette, tentatively at first but increasingly in charge of spelling each word. He said his name was James, and that he was all alone and "scared of the red sound", which is just the kind of tantalizing nonsense trickster demons love to toss around. Then he got slippery with his answers and started twisting all the questions back toward me.

"Are you hiding pain?" he asked. I told him yes. "Special pain you've never shared with anyone before?" Yes, I said. "Will you trust me with the secret and let me help?" I hesitated and let myself tear up before pausing the music on my phone and telling him my story.

I shared a long, detailed trauma from my first marriage. About discovering my husband had been having an affair. About the baby he'd secretly fathered with his lover. And then—and this was hard to say—about breaking into his lover's house one night, and standing over the baby's crib, and really, really considering...

Of course I was making the whole thing up. "James" was obviously a newb and not too bright, and I let him salivate over my sham vulnerability for a while. He asked me to open my spirit and let him in "to soothe and warm the injury inside" me. His actual words, I shit you not.

I laughed and couldn't stop. He was furious and started flinging lightweight objects around the room. A lit candle hit me in the chin, and the wax splattered on my tee, and it only made me laugh harder. Eventually he quit his tantrum and disappeared to sulk wherever he came from. I spent the rest of the night watching Netflix and feeling weirdly depressed, but that was probably the gin more than anything else.

I know you've told me not to play around with Ouija like this, but I've got to get my occult kicks where I find them. I kind of regret maybe teaching "James" a new degree of savvy he'll use against others. I should probably feel guiltier than I do.

Later,
Claire

She's right. I *have* warned her about trolling demons with her Ouija board. But I also know that for Claire, being alone in a room for too long is probably more dangerous than most demons she'll encounter. Contact—even questionable contact—is sometimes the only way to stop a bad spiral.

Some of you are spiraling now, alone in a room somewhere. You've got the smeary existential fears and the pain of too much solitude. The day's stimulation fell away and your mind kept racing, and all the anxieties and serious shit you distracted yourself from were suddenly there. Daytime was a summer lake, and there was sunlight and noise and bright little waves, and then everything stopped and you were floating, facedown, in all that terrible dark water.

I'm sorry. I've felt that, too. I don't have reliable answers. But look: there's a lot of weird stuff in the night. Some of it's bad, but some of it might save your life. It can be hard telling which is which. It's hard to know if you're believing in nonsense, out of desperation, or believing something real because it's true.

Either way, it's something. There are things in the night we can't understand—fires, demons, *ourselves*—and when you're lost or feeling dead, and there's no one else around, maybe mysteries and questions are ways to stay alive.

Equinox Society Radio is produced by Dennis Mahoney. New episodes appear sporadically.

Join our mailing list at EquinoxSociety.com, or follow The Equinox Society on Facebook and Instagram.

Our three-note theme is played by Jack Mahoney.

Imagine our closing song is "Apocalypse", by Cigarettes After Sex.

Until next time, dear strangers... take care and look beyond.

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