

Equinox Society Radio 002

My Dear Strangers,

In our previous broadcast, society member Amanda Cress told us about a mysterious, growling fire that's been appearing around her neighborhood. The fire appears spontaneously. It's burned a number of things, including part of the high school baseball field, the contents of a dumpster, and a cat lady's living room. Someone Amanda knows was chased by the flames, as if the fire were a conscious entity or under the guidance of an unknown party.

She's been developing a spell to trace the fire from the places it appeared. She sent me the following update.

Dennis!!!

So I studied and experimented and practiced my new spell. I'm calling it the Mystery Fire Backtracker instead of being pretentious with a name like Mysterium Ignis Backtrackerus or something. The spell has too many words and moves to explain it all here, but I made a bunch of small-scale attempts and refinements until it worked.

You remember Lemon, the man who collects recycling bottles and told me about the fire after it chased him in the alley. Lemon helped me experiment. I had him light three little test fires near my apartment, and then I told him to hide somewhere within three blocks of my house. I cast the spell, and what it basically did was triangulate what started the fires, like when somebody tracks a cellphone signal. The spell worked perfectly and led me directly to Lemon outside the bodega with the bottle exchange. He gave me a high five.

I thought he was going to ask me out again, but he seemed to control himself and respect that I'd already turned him down last week, and when I told him I wanted to do the big fire spell alone, he looked disappointed, but all he did was wish me luck and leave without a fuss. Lemon's basically the best. Just not the kind of best I want to date.

Casting the real-deal Mystery Fire Backtracker took more effort, because the fires weren't as recent as the ones we tested near my apartment, and the places where they'd burned were way farther apart, and I had to walk to three locations—the high school baseball field, the alley where the fire chased Lemon, and the dumpster behind Dunkin Donuts—before I knew if the spell was even gonna work.

I did the spellwork at the first two spots and ended up at Dunkin, and then I did the spellwork there and waited with a coffee and a pink sprinkle donut. What happens is that the burn locations show a heat memory, like ripples in the air on a super-hot day. The ripples move

toward each other, converging at the source of the individual fires. All I have to do is follow the ripples. But the ripples aren't real. They're like inklings in the mind, and nobody can see them except for the spellcaster, which is ideal because otherwise it'd be all like, "Don't mind me. I'm just a regular girl strolling around town with a mysterious heat distortion."

But so the dumpster ripple started moving and I followed it for seven blocks. Then the rippling air meandered a bit, like it was doing its best but kinda confused, until the ripple from the alley showed up, and the two ripples swished together, and the resulting stronger ripple had a much better idea of where it wanted to go.

I walked another ten minutes. The ripple from the baseball field took forever to catch up because it had started from so much farther away. But when it finally arrived and swirled into the rest, it led me to a house. The rippling effect in front of the porch was so intense, you'd have sworn there was actual fire causing the distortion.

I ended the spell and the ripples vanished.

I've got to be honest, I was disappointed. The source of the fires was an ordinary house with beige siding and the kind of totally common bushes you see around the parking lot of a new McDonald's. I'd been hoping for a cavernous pit under a bridge, with a pulsing glow and scorched bones around the entrance.

Except yeah, a boring house was probably creepier, because now I was dealing with people, and creepy people are creepier than anything.

But growling fire that spontaneously appears and chases people isn't exactly classic psycho-arsonist material. The supernatural element gave me confidence because supernatural weirdness is totally my jam. Plus it was broad daylight, and the fires always start at night, and so I built up my courage by reciting my secret Amandaland power mantra, and then I walked onto the porch and rang the bell.

The door had a half-circle window at the top. An old woman's head peeked out and said, "Hello? What do you want?" She sounded worried but irritated, and the irritated part seemed to be winning.

I realized ringing the bell might have been impulsive. Because considering how and why I'd gotten there, what was the right thing to say? But I had this lightning-quick thought of Claire and how she always just goes for it, and so I thought to myself yeah, I'll just go for it.

I said, "I'm here about the fires."

The woman had glasses that made her eyes look big, and they bugged out extra buggy, and I couldn't tell if she was afraid or aggressive or just like *who's the crazy girl on my porch and*

should I call the cops. But you know I'm small, and more or less totally unintimidating physically, and I gave her my chipperest cute-girl smile and she opened the door partway.

The woman said, "What fires?", like she knew exactly what fires. I said the ones in the baseball field and the alley and the dumpster, for starters, and she opened the door all the way and said, "You've been dreaming of them, too."

I'll skip the meet-and-greet details. We ended up sitting at her kitchen table. Her house smelled like a Rite Aid. I don't mean medicine. I mean floor cleaner, and plug-in air fresheners, and that cardboard-and-plastic smell of a thousand different household and hygiene products. Her furniture and decor had the same generic vibe, like anything that hadn't been well-reviewed by a million other people was too radical to even consider.

Her name's Janet. She's eighty-two. She's a widow and lives alone. No pets. No plants. She has that older woman tentativeness, like she knows ordinary life is getting more dangerous, but she also has this confidence that borders on aggression. She sees the world a certain way, and any other way isn't just wrong, it's *offensive*.

I wanted to get her talking but had to explain how I'd found her, so I took a chance and told her I'd seen her in a dream. I said it all heartfelt and wonderstruck. She nodded like yep, makes sense, and then she told me about her own dreams, and I asked a lot of questions, and here's what I learned.

Janet's dreamt of every weird fire in the neighborhood for the last three weeks. Her dreams are extremely vivid and detailed, and it's always her watching the scene just before the fire starts. She hears a growl in her head, and her sinuses feel inflamed, and then the fire starts burning and she watches it a while. She didn't know she was dreaming about real fires until she saw the Dunkin Donuts dumpster on the news.

She passes the dumpster every week walking to the library, and let me tell you, Dennis, Janet has serious opinions about that dumpster. She said it stinks, and the employees leave it open all morning, and she just knows it's drawing rats, and she even went into Dunkin and complained about it to the manager, and the next week she walked by and there it was, still open and stinking and probably full of rats. The night of the fire, she dreamt the dumpster was burning, and when she learned the fire had really happened, she was amazed and immediately knew God was showing her visions in her dreams.

I asked her why she thought God was showing her a dumpster fire. She said there was no other reasonable explanation.

I said there might be a *few* other explanations, but she shook her head like I was a dumb little bunny and set me straight.

There's a woman named Carol at Janet's church. The two of them have gone to the same church since they were kids. Janet said Carol's been disruptive since kindergarten. A real troublemaker. A couple of Sundays ago, Carol convinced the pastor to change the parish's annual bake sale into a raffle with goodie baskets as prizes. Janet thinks it's a terrible idea. She's a hardcore bake-sale believer. She sees Carol's basket raffle as a crazy attack on tradition, right in line with female priests and birth control and really just one more part of Carol's revolutionary masterplan to ruin everything.

So things got heated and the women argued, and Janet told Carol she was gonna pray for her. Which she did. And then she prophetically dreamt that Carol's house caught fire, and she was going to warn Carol the following Sunday at church, but Carol's house caught fire before Janet had a chance.

Yep. Carol was the cat lady.

I asked Janet if she knows Lemon, and she looked at me like I was bananas. I explained who Lemon is and Janet said, "Oh, *him*. That awful homeless man who roots around my bottles. I called the police about him but they haven't done a thing."

I said, "He isn't homeless. He's nice. He just collects bottles for the refund."

She said, "I don't care if he's nice. He steals my bottles."

I told her Lemon was almost burned by one of the fires, too. She said, "I dreamt about that. I was going to warn him next time he came to steal my bottles. I don't like him, but I don't want to see anyone get hurt."

"But what if secretly you do?" I said. "What if your subconscious is turning your anger into fire? What if you're conjuring the fires without even meaning to?"

Which I totally shouldn't have said, but I was excited because it all added up. I guess I assumed Janet would be excited, too, because dream-conjuring fire is way more awesome than plain old prophecies or visions. But Janet got sooo mad, and she kind of reverse-flushed? And her face went sickly pale, and I had this terrible thought that her blood was rushing into her subconscious and boiling there, just waiting to explode the next time she slept and dreamt about me.

I tried to smooth it over, saying I didn't mean she was violent or evil, and that it was actually really cool—that she might be able to do all kinds of amazing things in her dreams. But she told me to leave, and she scolded me the whole way out, saying I was rude, and how dare I, and it was blasphemous to say her prophecies were evil. She accused me of accusing her of witchcraft, as if calling her a witch was the nastiest thing a person could do, and Dennis... I just nodded and apologized and let her show me out.

I went home and felt edgy and twitchy all day. Like I said, the fires always happen at night, but what if Janet napped and sent an afternoon fire in my direction? My roommate Katie burned popcorn after dinner and I burst out of my room as soon as I smelled it, just to be sure the apartment wasn't burning. But I made it through the day, and Katie went to spend the night at her boyfriend's, and I locked myself into my bedroom and started my defenses right at sunset.

I cast a circle in my room and lit a candle at each direction. Then I undressed and lay in the middle of the circle with two moonstones—one in my bellybutton and one on my forehead. I meditated a while to get to the moon juice flowing, put my earbuds in, and played white noise from my phone's sleep app. I was improvising, but I've practiced lucid dreaming a lot this season, and without getting weedy about it, I lucid-dreamed myself into a semi-subconscious awareness. I could move and see the room while my body was immobile on the floor.

Janet must be an early sleeper, because sometime around 9:30 P.M., dream Janet walked into my room as if the door wasn't locked. It was hard knowing if I was in her dream, or if she was in mine, but I think it was more like our dreams were smooshed together. She looked surprised. There she'd been, having a perfectly nice dream, and suddenly she was standing in a room with the weird girl who visited her house, and the weird girl was doing naked witchcraft in a circle of candles.

Black smoke started coiling in the corners of my room. I heard the growl everybody had described. It was low and mean, like a phlegmy, back-of-your-throat type rumble, and I could tell it was Janet's voice coming from the smoke. Like a feral, ugly Janet voice. The smoke growled and writhed at me. It couldn't get into my protective circle, but my dresser and bed and the rest of my apartment were gonna be toast if the smoke turned to fire.

I stood and said, "We're dreaming. You're mad at me and your subconscious wants to hurt me."

Janet backed against the door and looked defensive and confused. But the smoke growled louder and pressed against the circle, filling my room until I was standing in my safety bubble and all I could see outside of it was Janet.

I said, "You didn't mean to attack Lemon. You didn't mean to burn Carol's house. You don't want to burn me, either. You can dream something nicer if you try. You have to try."

Then everything happened at once. I saw a flash of understanding on her face. She looked amazed and horrified, scared of me and scared of the smoke. There was a roar and a huge burst of light. The smoke exploded into fire, and for a second, I thought her emotions had gotten so strong, she'd blown up the house and even my circle wouldn't protect me from that.

But then it was over. I snapped out of my lucid dream, and I was still lying on the floor with my moonstones and earbuds. Janet was gone. The smoke and fire were gone. Nothing had burned, but there was a stink like somebody had lit a hundred weird matches. Kind of sulphury but also

kind of emotional? Like the smell you get in your head when you're super hurt or angry. Am I the only one that happens to?

So anyway, Janet must have woken up before the fire really started. Now that I've talked to her in person *and* in her dream, I hope she takes it all seriously instead of dismissing the whole thing as nonsense in her head. I think if I visit her in person again, and tell her about the dream we shared, I might be able to convince her it actually happened. I'm going back to her house first thing tomorrow.

No way I'm sleeping now, though. I need to be ready in case she dreams of me again and comes back even angrier. I'll send you an update tomorrow!!!

xoxo
Amanda

I know people that angry. You talk to them, you feel their energy, and you just know they're going to hurt someone in their dreams or consciously fantasize about it. That's not always a bad thing. A lot of good art and conversation and insights come from getting pissed off and fantasies about what you're going to do about it, and then using it somehow. It's energy. It's fuel.

Things go bad when anger starts fueling itself. Like movies where the scientist ignores all the warnings, and uses the unstable element to generate power, and the experiment goes berserk. The element starts powering itself, and you end up with a radioactive monster, or a machine that's going to vaporize Manhattan.

I'm scared of angry people who ignore the warnings, including their own internal warnings. They pretend they're happy, they don't go to therapy or ask for help, and some of them honestly don't even recognize their own rage. I see it more often in men, but there are definitely Janets in the world. They become pressure cookers full of nails and broken glass. Or they find the wrong outlets and really start to enjoy it, like internet trolls who *need* constant targets, because their anonymous anger lets them pretend they aren't anonymously miserable.

And what could be more anonymous than dream violence? Usually, that's no big deal. I've had violent dreams, and I think it's my subconscious working things out. But anyone having violent dreams on a regular basis probably ought to figure out why. Because eventually dreams aren't enough to deal with that much anger. Eventually, those dreams are going to turn into something real.

The day after Amanda's report, she sent me another email.

Dennis, I screwed up bad. I'm so stupid. I should have seen this coming, and there's nothing I can do about it now.

I spent the night writing to you and then lucid dreaming again, waiting for Janet to dream herself into my room again, but she never came back. I felt so good at dawn, like I might have gotten through to her last night. I figured she'd either stayed awake, having realized she was responsible, or she'd fallen back asleep and dreamed something nice. Worst case scenario, her subconscious had burned something *else*, but at least I'd planted a seed in her head. I thought if I talked to her again, and she had some daytime awareness of her power, it wouldn't be totally subconscious anymore. I could help her take control of it. I really thought she'd listen.

I walked to her house and it was burned to a shell. It had caught fire after midnight, about three hours after our encounter in my bedroom. Janet's dead. I don't know the details yet, but I'm assuming the fire started in her room. It might have started on her bed. It might have started in her body.

I can't stop imagining it, Dennis. How awful it must have been.

I don't think she meant to kill herself. She just got angry at herself in a dream. I should have known it might have happened. I should have warned her. I should have left some protection at her house. It never occurred to me she'd turn the fire inward.

I'm a mess. I've been crying on and off all morning. I wasn't ready for this. I should have done better somehow.

Love,
Amanda

This all happened last week. I've been trying to boost Amanda's spirits ever since. We've talked every day, and I took her out for breakfast a couple of times. There isn't much I can do except be her friend and listen. We went to Janet's funeral together and sat in the back. It was a good service, well-attended. Seems a lot of people liked her.

Society member Claire Maple sent Amanda an email I'd like to share. Claire wrote:

Hey, babe.

I heard what happened. Not your fault. You think you played with magic and things went wrong, but this wasn't about magic. It was about an old woman who was so mad at everything, one part of her prayed, and a deeper part of her *really* wanted to torch a fellow churchgoer because of a bake sale.

That woman's anger was the problem. It's like when somebody gets drunk and starts yelling hateful shit, and then they blame the alcohol instead of the hateful shit that's been stewing in their head.

I get that you feel responsible, and think you missed an opportunity to warn her, but give yourself a break. You stopped the neighborhood fires, and you know you would have saved Janet if you could have. You can't blame yourself any more than you can blame Dunkin Donuts.

Love you. I'm here if you want to talk.

Claire

P.S. I hope this isn't insensitive, but did you ever find out why she hated the grass on the high school baseball field? But that's my point again, really. I mean Jesus, who gets that mad at grass?

I agree with Claire, and I'm sure once some more time passes, Amanda will forgive herself for any perceived mistakes in how she handled the situation. Her own subconscious is working it out right now.

But it all leaves me wondering. How did Janet's ability emerge? Why her and not someone else? What kind of nightmarish powers might be growing in my own subconscious?

As for Janet herself: I do believe there's some kind of afterlife, and if I'm right, I hope she's out there, in one form or another, and I hope she isn't angry anymore.

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

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Our three-note theme is played by Jack Mahoney.

Imagine our closing song is "Untitled 8" by Pom Pom

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