

# Witch Jesus

I discovered the church of Witch Jesus at the library. I was there in my dressing gown on my day off, letting the government pay to heat me up. Because I disliked books I read the newspapers, cover to cover. I read a story about bodies missing from graveyards, recovered later with bite marks on their bones, in forest clearings surrounded by knotted rope. This was relevant to my interests. My attention was engaged.

My favourite librarian appeared in my eyeline. Hannah was my favourite because she was unafraid of stereotypes, shouting silence in her big cardigan and frumpy skirt.

“That’s an interesting story you’re reading,” she said.

“It’s very interesting.”

She sat down opposite me. In the fluorescent light she looked absolutely average. Dry skin was an issue for her. She unwound her scarf to show me something like a tattoo on her neck in a neat sans serif font. It said, **SOFIE WILL JOIN THE CHURCH OF WITCH JESUS**. I had found something similar on my chest that morning. It stung under my fingers in the shower, then scabbed over when I had read it.

Sofie will join the Church of Witch Jesus. I did.

Shortly after that I met Micky, who was nice enough to begin with. I had been praying the night before for a nicer place to live and then there he was. His big hands wore a very big watch. It had so many unnecessary dials, it was a James Bond watch. He had thin lips, blue eyes, occasional affairs. I loved him enough to say yes whenever he asked me something, but not enough that I minded when he was asking other women and they said yes instead. He loved that I was tidy, my hair the colour of dishwater that he lied and said was golden. Our first date we went to Pizza Express and I kept his dirty napkin as a memento, as a talisman, and I told everyone the next day at the Church of Witch Jesus.

“Do you want me to look up his star chart? Where was he born?” said Mila in her freckly way. She had baked for us because, as a person, it was all she had to offer. Everything smelled of nutmeg.

“Horoscopes are bullshit, Mila.” I said. I was smiling because I had been shown the future far more practically.

That morning I had walked to the river in a long cotton skirt, no underwear, primeval. I stood in the autumn water, held a rope in my hands in eldritch knots and cleared my throat to speak to Witch Jesus. Is he the one? Will he give me a child? Does he have a big cock? I crouched low in the water, let it creep cold up my thighs, rolled my eyes back and listened for an answer. I squatted until my thighs burned. I kept my eyes closed. All there is to do when you don't get a reply is keep chanting, but it's a bit humiliating. Oh Witch Jesus, you know I can't make any decisions without you. Please Witch Jesus, tell me what to do.

When I thought nothing was coming, a great eclipse covered the sun. All the light in the world bled out, and the sky was as dark as sackcloth made of hair. I felt very cold. The atmosphere was leaking out of my lungs, and just before I lost consciousness, I heard a voice close against my breast-bone say “Yes.”

Time restarted and people began to breathe again. All over the world people wondered why they’d walked into rooms, restarted the paragraph they’d been reading. I had learned something, and they had all forgotten.

So yes, I knew what was going to happen and I didn’t need to consult Mystic fucking Meg to do it.

“He’s the one, isn’t he?” said Hannah.

“He is.” I smiled with my lips closed tight. I stroked my stomach where something would be living soon.

“A wedding!” said Mila and I thought shut up, but I also thought yes. “A wedding!”

“Let’s give thanks first before we plan anything.” Thank you, Witch Jesus, for everything you’ve done and everything you’re going to do.

At the wedding we ate sea creatures and various types of bread, which I encouraged the guests to rip apart with their bare hands. Micky was tall and blue in a suit I had chosen. He looked like an ex-rugby player who worked for an important financial institution and that’s exactly what he was. He drank too much, became flushed and told boring stories, but luckily no one looked at him. Every time they nearly looked at him, their eyes were pulled away somewhere else, they became interested in other things and stared at them instead. When he went up to someone to speak to them they heard a ringing noise in their ears, wondered if they had tinnitus after all, wandered away to the bathroom.

At the disco he lumbered over to Mila, told her she looked very pretty in the mirrorball light. He put his big hands on her waist and started to move them in sloppy circles, round and down. I watched from another room and thought, why are you worse than I hoped. He didn’t understand what her face meant, why she looked like she felt sorry for him. Then, suddenly, he didn’t know where she’d gone, or why he was in a bathroom, or why his hands were bleeding.

I bandaged him up and asked him what he remembered about the wedding, which was very little. I told him what a great speech he’d given, and what a lovely wedding it had been.

Our house was large and yellow, above the Surrey Hills, under the big sky. I felt very privileged to live in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The light pollution from the airport was an issue to begin with. It messed with the sleep cycles of small animals and certain birds’ migratory patterns. I dealt with it. I dimmed their lights and brightened the moon. It took the same amount of concentration as editing a picture for instagram, and it made the birds happy.

“What bird is that, Sofie?” said Micky one evening. He washed up and I sipped my coffee. Often, Micky got confused about whose turn it was to do the washing up. He scrabbled around for the memory of whether it was his day or not, and he needed me to remind him.

“I think it was a nightingale, my love.”

“I thought nightingales were extinct around here?” He furrowed his heavy brow, fumbled a plate, I straightened his hands. I liked watching him stand in the kitchen like a big bear somewhere he didn’t understand. He was so muscular. I wanted to spread his arms out wide and ride him like an eagle. Sometimes he was very stupid.

“I think they’re coming back, my love. There have been some successful environmental projects near here.” I held my coffee close and looked out my elegant picture window at the gathering night. I didn’t tell him the environmental projects had mostly been me, tramping about in my hiking boots, moving things around. I liked to sit in my window seat and listen to the birds. I said thank you for my power over each and every bird, every drop of their blood.

Witch Jesus, child of God who saved us all by rising from the dead. Witch Jesus, who sours the milk and flies by night.

Micky’s first proper affair was with a woman in the marketing team. I woke up one morning and found a small tattoo under my armpit telling me so. I reclined in my elegant bed and thought about what it meant to me. Not much. I was already pregnant. Somewhere in east London, at that moment, a woman in the marketing team had a sudden urge to get an STI test and commit to using condoms, so that was fine.

Pregnancy heightened some senses, dulled others. I was always hungry for strong, rich things. I had prophetic dreams. My feet hurt. Micky watched his programmes, went to work, went to other women’s flats, and I pressed my hands into his clothes in the hamper to make him sorry.

The nursery was white and lemon yellow, like I had seen in an interior design magazine I subscribed to. I painted it myself, in stained overalls. For the highest bits, Micky had to pick me up and I giggled as I let him.

“I’ll be too heavy for this one day, my love.”

“Then I better pick you up even more now.” So he did pick me up, and carried me all the way to the bedroom. I said thank you, Witch Jesus, for making him so soft and sorry. Thank you for all the clothes he buys me and my new car.

Hannah came over and I told her everything after we’d put away the kettle and the bones. She became very angry, so I took her cup away from her in case she broke it.

“Are you going to turn him into a frog?” She said.

“Don’t be vulgar, Hannah. You know that’s a very serious thing to do.”

“You’re going to let some guy who works for a bank get away with this?”

I sighed and thought to myself that I needed to make some grownup friends. I struggled to make church friends understand that I liked this life. I had no desire to pack it in and live in an unheated shack, because I liked my very expensive slippers which had been ordered for me from Australia. I slept well, I smelled of Tom Ford, and I didn’t do my own laundry. I wore only maternity clothes now, six weeks into my pregnancy, because I could afford them and because I wanted to wring every bit of fulfilment out of it. I only touched soft things, apart from during prayer.

“I’m handling this.” I tapped my teaspoon against the side of my cup, to remind her how nice they both were. “He’s an idiot but it’s not worse than that.”

“I suppose.” Hannah looked awfully severe in her glasses.

“Drink up, it’s nearly noon.”

“Oh yes, of course.” The tea was about to take effect so we only had a minute to shimmy out of our clothes.

When the sun was at its highest, we danced over the hills with the wind whistling loud in our ears. We were naked apart from the knotted rope around my neck, around my hands, around my waist. I held Hannah because she was, poor thing, almost blind without her glasses. Her pulse drummed at me wildly, wildly, and I could have eaten her up. We gathered a cloud and pulled the rain out of it to drink, scratched our faces because blood and nails were beautiful. I screamed about needing the power to interfere with stars. When the hunger was too much, I reached down and found a vein of spiders sleeping like iron ore in the earth. It was a nocturnal species that had never seen light before. I opened their insides in the daylight.

“That was nice,” said Hannah. “Where’s my cardigan?” I was far too happy and full to care. I stroked my wonderful stomach and smiled.

I prayed to know my child’s name. I held burning rope around my neck, so close my skin blistered, and Witch Jesus rained blood from the starless sky. It was sticky on my skin, made me smell of metal. The air became thick and salty. I knew the perfect name, and I gave thanks.

When Micky was late home, I had made dinner right on time, and I kept it warm for him in the oven until it dried out and shrivelled. I became every woman in every film about cheating men. The meat he was wasting came from creatures whose necks I had wrung.

Those nights he kept me waiting, Micky dreamed he was drowning in black mud. The air in his mind was thick and salty. He clawed at his neck to try and breathe and when he woke up he didn’t remember but he felt unsafe. I made him tea and said my love, my love, it’s just a dream. My mouth was a little thinner than he remembered, my skin a little more marked.

I went up to the shower and scrubbed myself slowly, lazy circles with an all-natural loofah. I looked for a message from Witch Jesus. They were hard to find now. My body was marked by worship and the scars of old messages. I worked slowly, because I might as well check myself for cancer while I was at it, then I found it on the sole of my foot. It was a warning and a date. I said thank you.

Our little girl was beautiful. She was the only thing I loved more than being pregnant, more than my beautiful house and the birds outside. She was so loud, in the little onesie I made her patterned with holly and elm. I told Micky I was taking her outside so she’d calm down but I was lying. I wanted her to help her be louder. She screamed when she was happiest, full of milk and meeting all the birds with the big moon to look at. There was no storm in the world she couldn’t drown out, my little hurricane.

“Oh look at her!” said Mila, like an idiot. “Look at her little eyes, look at her little fingeries!” No one in history has called fingers fingeries, because it is a stupid thing to do. I smiled and said nothing.

“Where’s Micky?” said Hannah.

“He’s out.” I sounded like someone’s mother, sad and cheery.

“Seems like he’s out all the time now,” said Hannah. Stir, stir, stir, tap.

“Yes. Well.” Sometimes Micky was the man I had envisioned at the beginning, crouching in the water, and sometimes he wasn’t anymore. I knew how to punish him, but I didn’t have the power to make him warm or make him join in with our life enough that it felt real. The rope that I wound over and over in my hands didn’t twist that way. I didn’t know the knots.

More and more, I knew he hated me, my house and my baby. He didn’t like the bouquets I hung in the hallways, the fresh-caught local game we ate for dinner, the day trips I planned for our little girl. We went out into the forest to learn new things about spiders, moths, exciting fungi and all the things you could do with them. He lost weight and had bad dreams. When he woke up in the night he sent pathetic texts to the woman from marketing, said he missed her, said he was frightened.

I knew exactly what he wanted and I hated him for it. He liked tuna sandwiches, superhero movies, and novelty beers. I liked holding on to him. We were at an impasse.

So now he sleeps alone in our bed, and I sleep during the day. At night I take the BMW to the river, stand waist deep in starry water and tear at my face, my hair, my thighs.

“How long are you going to live like this?” Hannah asks me when I pass her cardigan back to her. I remember the promise Witch Jesus made me.

So a few weeks later I go out and I know that the end is coming. The air pressure tells me, and the change in the angle of the ground, which leads downwards.

“I won’t be long my love,” I say, and it has the quality of a prophecy coming through. They aren’t my words, they belong to Witch Jesus.

“Hmm,” says my husband. He’s not looking at me and he hasn’t showered. He doesn’t eat what I give him anymore. He’s frightened, he told his mum in a rambling email. My cooking gives him stomach aches and makes him see things.

He could, of course, leave. He could get therapy to learn to sleep again, but I won’t let him, because I have promises to keep. We are married in more ceremonies than he understood at the time, and if I break the promises I’ve made I will be entirely unwound and poured away into the space between atoms.

Through the window of my house I watch my normal husband and strange child. She is playing with the dolls I made her, feeding them to each other slowly, back and forth. I can’t hear from this side of the window but I know he says he has to leave. He looks down at her. He is a man standing in front of a great bear, making himself look as big as possible so she won’t kill him. If he looked around he’d see me praying, he’d see the sky that pulses with new colours, the wind

gathered ready at his kitchen door. He's telling her goodbye. He's standing up to leave and take my life with him. He doesn't know the air pressure is rising.

All the windows break. The hurricane enters with me. I pin him to the wall and as I black out the sky he sees the eclipse spread across my face to take my eyes. He screams when I bite, resists the rope but I am strong. He chants while I chant, but he just says 'please don't, please don't' and I don't know what gods listen to that.

I break his skin and make a wound, then I hunch over and speak into it. I spit out the blood and press my body into his, my mouth into his open neck, to speak through the blood to his bones. I tell them to change shape. Then I hold him and watch him bend, break himself and reform, smaller and darker, smaller and darker. I hold him because the house has vanished, the ground has vanished, we are alone in infinite liquid space. I am the only thing in the universe, I have dissolved everything else into chaos. His screams change, my chanting never does. His blood drools across my face, my hair, my thighs.

Witch Jesus cares for me, so well.

I knit physics back up and put the sun back in the sky. All the souls that melted into chaos find bodies again. I wet a cotton towel and sponge the child first, then me. My scars ache and I think to myself that everything is okay now. I've done everything I was asked.

A nightingale with a wild, confused look flaps at the kitchen window to be let out.

"Mummy, there's a bird!"

"Oh really? How exciting, let's go and look."

"I think it's hurt itself mummy, look." She's right. The bird has a cut on its neck. That must be why it looks so frightened. "You can fix it, can't you?"

"Of course I can, my love. Remember we must always help animals when we can. This is a very rare bird, we have to make sure it gets back to the forest."

I say a quick prayer and we giggle together at how easy it is, how wonderful to make a creature all better by working a miracle. We open the window, my hand over her hand.

"Why isn't it flying away mummy?"

"Sometimes birds get confused when they hurt themselves. If we shoo it out it will remember where it lives." So we do, we shoo it away, and I follow it with my eyes all the way out to the forest.

Now all that business is over, and I am happy and tame again. I give thanks and massage oil into my scars and my stretch marks. The smell of cinnamon and fulfilment fills the house and the trees lose their leaves. We decorate for winter with paper lanterns and the bones of small animals we found by the road. I take long baths. I burn luxurious candles. I eat spiders. I think I have accomplished every woman's dream, I've come so far.

In the car park outside nursery we meet a single dad called Leon. He has a wide smile, a broad back, neat fingernails, a Mercedes. He asks about my perfume and I say what wonderful taste

you have, it's Tom Ford. We have to lean in close to talk in the cold, so close I can taste his warm breath. It makes me feel giddy.

I drop the child at Auntie Hannah's, step out of my shoes and walk down to the river. Witch Jesus, Witch Jesus, is he the one?