

Our Lady of Everything

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First published in Great Britain in 2019 by Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London
WC1X 9HD
www.serpentstail.com

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset in 10.75/13.5pt Freight Text by Nicky Barneby
Designed by Nicky Barneby @ Barneby Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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A CIP record for this book can be obtained from the British Library

ISBN: 978 1 78816 119 0
eISBN: 978 1 78283 476 2



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‘There is no purpose or grand cosmic scheme to life beyond what we choose to impose or believe. To some this is cynicism. For the Chaos Magician, it is a breath of dizzying freedom.’

– Phil Hine, *Condensed Chaos: An Introduction to Chaos Magic*

The Unequal Opportunities Rite: A Basic Banishing Ritual

LIKE EVERY BANISHING RITUAL, THE Unequal Opportunities Rite has two main aims, namely to clear the mind of mundane influences and to clear the surrounding atmosphere of other psychic debris, which, in this case, has built up through the continual misuse of categories as experienced via job applications, so-called academic research and various other schemes monitored by the government.

The Unequal Opportunities Rite entails the visualisation of coloured light within specific areas of the body. These areas correspond with the sections on the equal opportunities monitoring forms used by some institutions but not others, on account of the fact that most but not all institutions use very slightly different procedures. The Rite is designed to create psychic arcs, and thus to facilitate greater psychosomatic control over who and what the subject may, or may not, wish to be perceived as. It can be performed either by itself, or as a precursor to more elaborate magik.

RITE:

1. Stand with shoulders hunched and head lowered.
2. Inhale fully. Exhale slowly, and then mutter the words 'My ethnic origin is Asian, Black, White, Mixed, Other (Please Specify)' while visualising a red arc of light around the head.

3. Inhale fully. Exhale slowly, and then mutter the words 'My national identity is English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British, Other (Please Specify)' while visualising a yellow arc of light around the throat.
4. Inhale fully. Exhale slowly, and then mutter the words 'My gender is Male, Female, Other (Please Specify), Prefer not to Say' while visualising a pink arc of light around the heart and lungs.
5. Inhale fully. Exhale slowly, and then mutter the words 'My age range is 16-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65+' while visualising a green arc of light around the stomach.
6. Inhale fully. Exhale slowly, and then mutter the words 'My religion or belief is No Religion, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Other (Please Specify), Prefer not to Say' while visualising a purple arc of light around the genital/anal area.
7. Repeat steps six, five, four, three and two, working back from the genital/anal area towards the head.
8. Inhale fully. Exhale slowly, re-muttering each of the previous statements, while drawing an orange and then a blue arc with the left arm, each of which is also visualised strongly.
9. Make a quarter turn to the left and repeat step eight, and then continue to turn and draw the remaining coloured arcs with statements and visualisations until returning to the starting position.
10. Repeat steps two to seven inclusive, and then stand up straight, raise your head, point and shout out: 'Look! A rainbow!'

Margaret

MARGARET O'SHEA TEETERED ON THE edge of a large, elaborately patterned settee, designed according to a fantasy of luxury but constructed according to the reality of cheap materials. The settee, like the two, similarly *recherché* armchairs that accompanied it, either sucked the sitter into the spongy crack at the back, or else forced them to perch upon its periphery, while a selection of gilt-edged plates – part of a wall-mounted series – formed halos around their heads.

There was a calendar opposite, and on the middle of the mantelpiece beneath, a blue statuette of a woman. The bottom half of the calendar stated that it was August 2004, while the top half depicted roses. Whereas the ergonomics of the settee and the position of the plates transformed the living room's inhabitants into shipwrecked saints washed up in a drift of soft furnishings and then appealing to a ceramic heaven, the statuette and the calendar created a shrine, reminiscent of those from Margaret's childhood in a village just west of Belfast.

Refuge in grief, star of the sea,
Pray for the mourner, pray for me.

Margaret looked at the calendar and the statuette, and the words of a hymn flickered into her mind so that, for one brief

moment, she wondered if she was about to start singing. Only the noise from the clock, which kept on ticking, stopped her from doing so. Instead she pressed her lips together so that the words, like the tears, stayed in. Eleven ten, eleven eleven, eleven twelve – she heard the seconds and then the minutes jerk by. Eleven thirteen, eleven fourteen – and finally the telephone began to ring. Margaret made a grab for it, and then pressed it, desperately, against her ear, while the Holy Virgin (who was also the Holy Mother, who was also Our Lady of Sorrows, Grace, Light, Mercy, etc.) looked on – serene, or maybe just not moving.

‘Nana?’ said a man’s voice, or more specifically ‘na-narh’, the vowels both flattened and lengthened in the standard East Midlands way, ‘Nana it’s me, it’s Eoin.’

Margaret frowned, tapped the speaking end and then put the listening end back against her ear, but all she could hear was static. It was the same sound that her hearing aid made, which was the same reason that she didn’t always wear it.

‘Hello, Nottingham 9231426. This is Margaret O’Shea speaking.’

‘Nana it’s—’

‘Eoin? Is that you?’

‘Aye Nana. It’s me. It’s Eoin.’

‘Eoin? Can you hear me? It’s your Nana here . . .’

And so it continued, as Margaret in Nottingham (or England, or the depths of the sea) and Eoin in Basra (or Iraq, or the heat of the desert) listened to each other repeat their own names and the names of each other into the crackling telephone receiver, each affirming and confirming the well-worn legacy of their displacement. Suddenly, however, the crackling stopped, so that Eoin became loud and harsh, and almost interrogative.

‘And I mean to say, are you looking after yourself?’

Margaret made the breathy whistling sound that she used in place of laughter and then looked back at the statuette, and behind it the bottom half of the calendar, where eighteen crosses told her that Eoin had been away for eighteen days.

‘I’ve had a novena for you.’

‘Sorry Nana, what was that?’

‘I’ve said the rosary for you, every day, for nine days.’

‘But I’ve been away for—’

‘I’ve had two.’

Margaret had had two novenas, which meant that she had said the rosary every day for eighteen days, and she would have eighteen novenas, which meant that she would say the rosary every day for each of the remaining 162 that Eoin wasn’t here – although the thought that she was now praying for the life of an English soldier seemed more than a little crazy. Whenever she thought of English soldiers she thought of Bernadette Moran’s boy running through her house and then out the back with two men in khakis pounding after him, back in her old home, in Ireland; and then, just like the old days, she pressed her lips together so that what mustn’t get out stayed in . . .

‘I’ve asked Kathy to stop by,’ said Eoin.

‘Ah come on. She’ll have better things to do I’m sure.’

‘Than visiting you Nana? Now that I find hard to believe.’

Margaret whistled again and this time Eoin joined in with her, letting out the same low rumbling that, ever since he was a child, had signified anxiety as much as anything else. As long as the laughter lasted, she could remember the nervous little boy that he used to be, and in many ways still was, rather than the man with the squaddie’s thousand-yard stare in the passing out picture she’d immediately placed face-down in a drawer. She could remember how he had always gripped her hand on the journey to school, but then dropped it as soon as the gates came into view, trying to make it seem as if he were arriving there alone. Once, on their way home, they had found a fallen nest with a baby bird in it, and he had insisted that they take it back with them and look after it until it was well. She had filled a sherry glass with milk and showed him how to feed the bird from it, as well as how to make a cake for it out of leftover fat and seeds, all of which he had then done with slow, meticulous concentration. She could remember how much he had loved *The Really Wild Show*, and how he collected the stickers associated with it and told her that when he grew up he was going to be a vet and look after animals too –

and she had wished it were possible, but knew that it wasn't, because people like them were still people like them . . . The laughter stopped. Eoin paused, raised his voice and said, 'But how are you Nana? How's St Flannan's?'

'Well last week another Rwandan family started coming. And now also a woman from Malawi.'

'Malawi?'

'Yes. Her name is Blessings.' Margaret tapped the receiver, and then rubbed her knees, which ached. 'But what about the weather? Is it nice out there? Is it hot?'

'Aye Nana it is. Very. Although it can get cold at night.'

'Then you need sunscreen and a warm jacket. Have you got sunscreen and a warm jacket Eoin? Have you—'

'Aye Nana. I've got all those things and more. Even the dogs have coats.'

'You have dogs?'

Eoin laughed again.

'A few army dogs, yes.'

Margaret, who throughout their conversation had been slowly sucked back into the cushions, now wriggled forwards, and then, as soon as she reached the edges of the settee, planted both her feet, very firmly, on the ground. Over the past eighteen days she had tried, many times, to picture the country that Eoin had gone to because of a war, bits and pieces of which she had seen played back on the television, just as she had tried to picture Rwanda, the country that the new black families had come from, or even Malawi, the country that Blessings had left; and although lions and tigers had featured heavily in her imaginings, something as ordinary as a dog had never occurred to her. Now that it did, however, she was comforted – Eoin had always wanted a puppy.

'I'm sorry that I never let you have a puppy.'

But the crackling rose again, forcing Margaret to resume her tapping and Eoin his shouting until the sounds of their disconnect and their failure to overcome it too soon became exhausting.

'I'll say goodbye then Nana!' shouted Eoin.

'Oh? Well goodbye then. God bless.'

There was a click, and the crackling stopped. Slowly Margaret put down the receiver, and then, without any warning, threw the telephone onto the floor. And then she sat in what would have been silence except that the clock just wouldn't stop ticking.

Katarzyna

KATARZYNA KWIATKOWSKA PRESSED THE DOORBELL and waited. Then she pressed it again. And again. And then she started to wonder if the thing that caused Margaret's selective deafness was the same thing that sometimes made her lose her balance, and whether or not this, together with what she knew of her knees, meant that Margaret might have fallen now.

Katarzyna pressed the bell one last time, and as she did so it occurred to her that she couldn't hear anything coming out of it. She realised that it must have broken, and that Margaret, not wanting to be any bother, which was in itself a bother, would be suffering, quite literally, in silence – all of which left her with little other option than to bang loudly, and slightly irritably, on the door. Then she took off her baseball cap and bent down so that her mouth was level with the letterbox, pushed it open and shouted, 'Margaret are you there?'

'Margaret are you there!' came a high, sarcastic voice from behind her.

Katarzyna turned round and saw that the group of boys by the bus stop were laughing. She stuck two fingers up at them and then bent down again.

'It's Kathy—'

'It's Kathy!'

'And I've come to—'

‘And I’ve come to!’

‘Kathy is that you?’ came Margaret’s voice from inside the house.

‘Aye Margaret it’s me.’

‘Aye Margaret it’s me!’

Katarzyna picked up a pebble and threw it at one of the boys, who only just dodged it, and then turned back around and listened to the sound of Margaret’s shuffling as it made its way towards her. She could hear the key moving inside first the bottom lock and then the top one, and then the faint but clunky sound of a heavy bolt being drawn back, and finally Margaret herself appeared.

‘Now you’ll have a cup of tea won’t you Kathy? I’ve just put the kettle on.’

‘Sure, I mean yeah, yeah that’d be great.’

Katarzyna bent down again and kissed her, and then shut the door behind them both and followed Margaret inside. She perched on one of the armchairs while Margaret shuffled off into the kitchen, and stared at the calendar, the crosses on which made her think of prison. She had been with Eoin since her eighteenth birthday party at Black Orchid, a tacky nightclub which she had hated, but which all her friends, at that time, had loved. One of Eoin’s friends had asked one of her friends if Eoin could buy her a celebratory drink, while he lingered a few paces behind her at the bar – so handsome, but also nervous, as if he’d somehow borrowed his good looks from someone else. She had been charmed to think that he might feel as lost as she did in that screechy, sparkly place, and when he had finally asked for her number at the end of the night she had surprised herself not only by writing down a real one, but also by hoping, with quiet desperation, that he would actually call it. Afterwards, her friends had been horrified not only by the pub to which he’d taken her for a drink but also that she’d agreed to go, because it was the kind of pub that only old men drank in, and it smelled of sweat and beer – yet she had been so pleased to go to somewhere unpretentious, where they could hide as well as talk.

And then, gradually, they revealed themselves to each other. Like her, Eoin had left school early and like her he had always read in secret, although it was factual books about animals and plants, rather than novels, that he preferred. Like her, he had a shitty job but dreamed of other, better, things, and like her he didn't yet know what those things were. Over time, her so-called friends had stopped being her friends altogether, and her parents, like his Nana, had slipped into the background of their lives until it was just the two of them against the world . . . And yet, although she knew that she would never love anyone the same way she still loved Eoin now, she also knew that what they had been, had been of the moment, and thus she still struggled to picture anything, least of all herself, as far ahead as six months' time. She took a deep breath and, allowing these two contradictory things to churn inside her, raised her voice and shouted, 'If the doorbell's broken then I can get my dad to fix it!'

'Ah come on now, he's got better things to do I'm sure.'

Katarzyna craned her neck towards the kitchen door, and as she did so her gaze fell upon the telephone that appeared to have been wrenched from its socket.

'And the phone too if needs be!'

'You're too kind Kathy. Too kind. But I'm not on my last legs yet.'

'No, no of course not. I only meant that he's often down here with work.'

'Well perhaps. But only if he was passing.'

'Oh he's always passing, and always stopping too' – she smiled as Margaret shuffled back in with the tea things – 'especially if there's biscuits!'

Margaret whistled breathily and then held out a plate of custard creams, one of which Katarzyna dutifully placed on the side of her saucer.

'So Eoin tells me that you're living in Forest Fields now?' said Margaret.

'Yeah, yeah I have been for a few months.'

'But couldn't you afford somewhere nice?' And on the word

‘nice’ Margaret sighed. ‘Like West Bridgford say? I mean you went to a good school there didn’t you?’ And on ‘good’ she sighed again. ‘If only my own daughter, God rest her soul, had had her wits about her ...’

Katarzyna nodded at the carpet and then broke her custard cream in half, and then in half again. She knew that ‘nice’ meant away from the drugs and prostitutes that Forest Fields had always had a reputation for; and that ‘good’ meant Catholic, although the constant snobberies that she had been forced to endure for five years, by virtue of her baptismal certificate, at English Martyrs secondary school, had felt like anything but a ‘good’ experience to her. Likewise, she understood that Margaret’s unfinished sentence was because she only wanted to imply what she thought, namely that if Eoin’s mother had had her wits about her, then she’d have seen to it that he also went to English Martyrs, and got some GCSEs, meaning options, other than the army ... She put down her custard cream, smiled a nice, good smile and said, ‘Well I only work on classified ads. It doesn’t really pay that much and, you know, I want to save what I can for the wedding.’

‘But you’ll finish your course soon, at New College. And then you’ll be a proper journalist.’

‘Yes, maybe.’

‘No, definitely.’

Katarzyna tried to smile again but then discovered that she couldn’t. She knew that if she had really wanted to be a proper journalist, that if she too had had her wits about her, then she should have attempted to fulfil the ‘considerable potential’ that every single one of her teachers wrote about on every single one of her school reports. Her ability to absorb and then retain any piece of information, and then piece it together with others, under exam conditions, and with not inconsiderable flair, hadn’t gone unnoticed, just as her foreignness, and working-classness – which had generally been viewed as a one-and-the-same-type-of-chavviness – hadn’t either. The other girls went to English Martyrs because they lived in the area, and their parents, who were usually doctors, or lawyers, or teachers, knew that Catholic

schools got good results, unlike hers, who had made her go because God was always watching. None of the other girls had the local accent that she did, and all of them wore clothes on wear-your-own-clothes day that she could never afford. From the very beginning she had been an anomaly, and her cleverness, which she soon learned to hide, had only made it worse. By the time she had finished her GCSEs the opportunity to escape the snide remarks about her chavvy accent and her chavvy clothes had eclipsed any desire to go to university, and she had therefore opted to spend the past five years stagnating at the local paper, with all the other chavs who dressed like her and spoke like her and made her feel as if she were in a home she couldn't leave. But she knew too that to use a word like 'stagnating' would make it seem as though she were showing off in front of Margaret, whose life, just like her parents' lives, hadn't really provided much in the way of opportunity. And then she tried and failed to be grateful for the somewhat limited opportunities – in this case a made-up course at the new FE college that she had joined for no other reason than that it filled the empty hours suddenly gifted to her courtesy of the British Army – that her own life presented now.

'Well I don't know if I'll ever get that far. But I would like to move up from Swop Shop,' she said instead, while also trying to ignore the fact that the swirling green pattern on the carpet was beginning to make her feel sick.

'From Swop Shop?'

'It's the bit of the classifieds that I work on. The free ads section. People phone in with notices for things that they no longer want and then say what they'd like to swop them for.' And then, eager for a change of subject, she added, 'I got an email from Eoin yesterday.'

'Can he send them too then? Even in the desert?'

'Yes of course. And Basra's on the coast.'

'Hail Queen of Heaven, the Ocean Star.'

'I'm sorry Margaret, what was that?'

'Hail Queen of Heaven – you must have heard it surely?'

Katarzyna nodded at the seething carpet and the telephone,

sunk in a tangle of wires, while simultaneously trying to remember the words to a hymn that she knew she must have sung but which, despite her efforts, continued to elude her. What did come back to her, however, was a fact that she had absorbed and retained, namely that the ocean, unlike the sea, was not where the water met the land, but where the water met the water, all of which meant that the Queen of Heaven therefore must be very far away, both from where Eoin was in Basra, and where she and Margaret waited for him . . .

‘Well I’m glad to know that he’s beside the seaside, and he has a dog too, you know. Now isn’t that nice?’ continued Margaret.

‘A dog?’

‘Yes, with a coat for when it gets cold.’

‘But it’s pretty hot out there. Over fifty degrees some days.’

‘But Eoin is wearing sunscreen,’ said Margaret, very definitely, as if that were the end of the matter, while Katarzyna, not knowing quite how to respond to this statement, put an entire biscuit in her mouth.