

Occult Express

A short story by [Trevor Hopkins](#)

When I was told I would be looking for a magic shop, I had somehow expected to find mullioned windows and heavy stone arches outside, and a dark and fusty interior with a flagged stone floor supporting cabinets fronted with grimy glass containing unidentifiable objects of great antiquity. The modern store I was now standing in front of had large plate glass windows bordered with brightly-coloured plastic signage. Through the windows, I could see neat rows of shelves lit by fluorescent lighting, professionally stacked with packages and jars.

I knew the back streets of this English university city pretty well after all these years and I thought I could make my way to the address given to me without recourse to map or A-to-Z. Even so, I felt sure I would have noticed this shop before now, during one of those many aimless wanderings that students with more time than money seem to engage in.

At first, I was convinced that this was not the place I was seeking. I walked further down the street, then turned and came back the same way. My mind was in turmoil, imagining the pain of failure and embarrassment if I had to go back to my tutor and admit that I could not find the emporium he had recommended.

As I approached for the second time, the store seemed to be drawing me to it; I could hardly turn my eyes away. Amazingly, the occasional passers-by did not seem to be interested at all, walking past without glancing at the brightly-lit windows, almost as if they were passing a blank wall.

My resolve stiffened, and I stepped towards the entrance. The door slid open automatically as I approached. I looked around. A couple of checkouts stood to one side, emitting soft beeps as items were run under the laser barcode readers by the operators, who were then packing the purchases into plain white plastic carrier bags. On the other side, there was a stack of those wire shopping baskets you see everywhere. Automatically, I picked one up.

No one seemed to be paying me any attention at all. I headed for the nearest section of shelving for a closer look. These racks stocked fresh fruit and vegetables. The first item my eye fell upon was Mandragora roots, resembling rather wrinkled greenish beetroots, packed in a black plastic tray that might have held avocados in Sainsbury's and wrapped in clingfilm, the whole labelled carefully with price, barcode and best-before date.

I knew from my studies that *Mandragora officinarum* was a powerful herbal remedy, often indicated to increase fertility in women, and had several uses in the Wiccan crafts, although it was not on my shopping list for today. I had vaguely expected that magical plants would be obtained by furtive under-the-counter transactions in out-of-the-way parts of obscure country markets, not pre-washed, packaged and displayed in a style which would put Marks and Sparks to shame. My mind swirling, I finally focussed on the sign attached to the front of the shelving. 'Special offer,' it read, '50 pence off fresh Mandrake.'

The shop was a veritable treasure-trove and I struggled against my female instinct to buy far too much stuff. In the end, I mostly contented myself with browsing. In the books and publications section, I picked up an unabridged edition of the Book of Shadows – it seems unwarranted to hand-copy in this day and age – and a small notebook with a stout cardboard cover which I proposed to use for my personal insights as a Book of Mirrors.

The hardware section included a display of tools and equipment for all of the rituals I knew about, as well as items I could not imagine a use for. I spent an interminable time selecting my knives: an Athame – which is a large, heavy but blunt knife used in rituals to channel energy – and a Boline, which is a small and much sharper knife for cutting things in the physical world. These were both sealed in thick plastic and card packaging to avoid damage and to prevent anyone touching them with malicious intent.

I found boxed candles and a couple of small crystals, also on my list. I did not select other items I knew I would eventually need for rituals and spells later on – a cauldron and a wand, for example – I knew I would be coming back for more very soon. The only thing I bought which was not on my shopping list was a tiny silver pendant in the shape of a pentacle. The price indicated was very modest and I could already imagine it nestling between my breasts.

Making my way towards the checkouts, I passed the vegetable racks again. My Green environmental sensibility was faintly outraged

at the level of – surely quite unnecessary – wrapping, although I did notice that at least the packaging was separable, so that the trays and punnets could be easily recycled.

A pimply-faced young man was manning the checkouts, wearing a discreet badge announcing his name as ‘Tim’. He smiled warily at me. Out of nervousness, I suppose, I smiled widely back at him.

“Can I help you with the packing?” he asked, smiling more broadly and looking me in the eyes rather disconcertingly.

I let him help, although I would normally have refused. He seemed so eager to please, chattering on about each item as he packed my purchases into a carrier bag. As he ran the last item under the scanner and rang up the final total, he said, “So we’ll be seeing you again, then?”

“I expect so,” I responded airily, picking up my plastic carrier pointedly, “And next time I’ll bring a reusable bag.”

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I am learning to be a witch from the Internet – more precisely, I am seeking initiation into Wicca. Yes, I know there are all sorts of frauds and scams on the Web, but this is quite definitely the real thing. After a couple of false starts, and spending rather too much time in chatrooms and reading blogs, I finally identified a reputable correspondence course from the Cambridge Institute for Wiccan Studies.

Before I started, I researched CIWS carefully, and cross-referenced comments and recommendations from numerous sources – the web is good for that sort of thing too. Their prospectus seemed entirely consistent with mainstream Wiccan practices, and I was delighted to be accepted into a course leading to the first of the three degrees of initiation.

The first degree is required to become a witch and gain membership of a coven. Traditionally, I knew, the waiting period for initiation was a year and a day, and it was conventional for a course of study may be set during this period. It has been hard work, too, with long evenings sat in front of the computer, studying and reading extensively and working on essays and exercises at regular intervals.

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I realise I should introduce myself properly. My name is Sylvia. I have long thought I had some kind of gift or abilities beyond the norm,

ever since my old Grandmother sought me out as a tiny child not long before she died.

“You have the Sight,” she croaked, fixing me with her terrifying birdlike stare, “It’s in your hair, and in your soul.”

These were the very last words she ever spoke to me. I had only ever known Grandmother as a wizened old lady, and I know that he cannot always have been that way. It really was a truly frightening experience for a shy girl of perhaps seven years, especially when Granny died only weeks later.

The remark about my hair refers to the blonde streak in my otherwise black hair. This tuft of yellow is quite different in texture from the rest of my locks, being much finer and wavy, unlike the straight dark hair – almost black in most lights – which extends to the small of my back. Even if I dye it (and I have certainly tried this on several occasions after being taunted at school), it looks and feels quite different, and still stands out clearly.

During the day, I’m doing postgraduate studies in Psychology in the School of Medicine. Some people – particularly my father – seem to think I am a perpetual student, but I prefer to believe that study is a worthwhile end in itself. Besides, life is too short to stop learning things anytime soon.

I do still live like a student, I suppose, sharing a house in the city with two other women. We have been friends for years. We do not exactly live in each others pockets: we each have our own rooms and whole days can sometimes go by without seeing either of my housemates.

My housemate and landlord Trish is a confirmed vegan, as well as a passionate believer, and part-time activist, for animal rights. She completed a History of Art degree a few years ago. She has some part-time work assisting the curator at one of the minor museums in the city, and is still hoping to get into a postgraduate Fine Arts course.

Trish keeps a cat, a skinny little thing called Aramis, black with one white boot. Trish has been making a determined effort to feed the cat on a vegetarian diet, but Aramis disagrees, and surprisingly vocally for such a tiny animal. So, quite often the only meat in the house is cat food.

Shakra, the other resident, is a talented musician, now doing some part-time teaching at the Music College and erratically engaged for

occasional performances at an astonishing range of venues. She has a steady boyfriend, now doing voluntary work overseas, and does not get to see him very often. I understand that her rather traditional parents, who are of Indian subcontinent origins, would not approve of her lover, and wanted her to get married to a man they had picked out themselves.

Our house is a terrace in a quiet area, still close to the Colleges but in a gentrified area where house prices have been rising rapidly for several years. None of us could not afford to live there if it was not for a generous payment made to Trish some years ago. She bought the house outright, although it is unclear to me who the benefactor actually was. We pay her rent, of course, although I suspect that she enjoys the company so much that she would let us stay here even if we paid her nothing.

I know that some people believe us all to be lesbians. It's not true, of course. Trish does not seem to be interested in sex at all. She has hinted at some childhood trauma which I do not really want to go into now. Shakra has her steady boyfriend, and disappears for days on end when they can get together. On her return, she invariably looks tired but very satisfied.

Me? Well, I like men. Indeed, outside of the house most of my friends are men and I irregularly go with them to pubs and parties, even if I do not usually sleep with any of them. I just have not found the right man yet.

We women often sit together in the shared kitchen and chat over a cup of herbal tea, or share a communal meal. We talk about everything and anything: sex lives, relationships with our parents, siblings and friends, diets and ethical eating, green politics, philosophy and economics.

I do remember some sound advice I received many years ago, written on a card pinned to a notice board in another shared student house. It read: "No Politics, Philosophy or Religion before Midnight". Presumably, after midnight, one is too tired or drunk for it to really matter. But, Trish, Shakra and I are such good friends that we can ignore this sage advice without repercussions.

About the only thing I have not discussed with my friends is my extra-curricula online education. I have an aptitude, a gift if you like, for ancient languages. My family is Jewish, although I do not regard myself as a practicing Jew nowadays, but as a child I was taught to

read and write Hebrew. I also studied ancient languages at school, so I have a working knowledge of classical Greek and Latin.

My Internet education is principally carried out using email and instant messaging. I submit my essays and research summaries electronically, and they come back annotated with copious notes and thought-provoking comments. In my more conventional University life, I have had a number of tutors, and I can certainly tell the difference between one who is doing their job well, and one doing the bare minimum. Someone out there is putting a reasonable degree of effort into assessing my work, and I feel like I am getting value for money.

I have daily web chats with my tutor, who uses the handle "Praxis". We have never met in person, or even spoken. For some reason I cannot quite put my finger on, I think Praxis is a man. He has been directing me to online resources which I would never have found on my own, and certainly do not seem to appear in the indexes of the online search engines.

Many of my exercises involve the interpretation of passages in ancient texts. I had noticed a considerable variation in these texts. Some pages were obviously scanned copies of old books, often of such poor quality that it was hard to decipher exactly what was written. The exercises often turn out to be straightforward once the twin barriers of the poor reproduction of the script and the ancient language in which it was written are overcome. Certainly, my language skills have been honed considerably over the last few months.

Other more modern websites, usually written in English, or at least professionally translated, have been directing the development of second sight. The background reading was a little confusing, with a strong but unspoken assumption that the task was to bring out and refine an innate ability, without actually really describing exactly what that ability was.

There were also extensive questionnaires, some of which I recognise from my psychology training as being tests for personality. I toyed briefly with the idea of falsifying my answers, but in the end decided to answer them as openly and honestly as I could.

After many months of steady work, I received an unexpected email message from Praxis. I opened it on the screen and read the contents with growing pleasure.

Your recent progress has been more than satisfactory. It is now time for you to undertake some practical work.

I practically preened at this.

You must assemble the beginnings of the accoutrements of a practising Wiccan.

The email continued by laying out a shopping list, and giving the address and sketchy directions to the emporium where I should purchase these items. The note concluded:

Let me know as soon as possible when you have completed your shopping. Send me a message when you get back, so that we can make an immediate start.

I made myself ready and hurried out in search of the shop.

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When I returned, weighed down by the shopping, I carefully unpacked my purchases and placed them on my desk. Pausing only to store the plastic carrier in the kitchen for future re-use, I fired up the computer and used the web chat client to send a message to Praxis.

The response came back almost immediately.

Well done, you have passed the first part of the exercise.

I was confused.

What do you mean? I haven't done anything yet.

Again, the response was nearly instantaneous.

Yes you have. You found the shop, didn't you?

No problem. I just told you that.

Just finding the shop means that you have come a long way.

I still don't understand.

There was a pause before the answer came.

The shop cannot be found by just anybody. It is only visible to second sight and is effectively hidden from the mundane world.

So finding the shop and completing your purchases at the first attempt is a major achievement.

I was flustered, uncertain how to respond to such unexpected praise. Before I could put finger to keyboard, another message arrived.

Now it is time for you to meet members of the coven which you will join. To do this, we must meet in person. I will make arrangements, and I will be in touch with the details very soon. In the meantime, leave your equipment alone, and I will direct you in their proper handling when we meet.

I typed out some short affirmative reply, my fingers barely able to find the correct letters on the keyboard.

Following Praxis' instructions, I put all my purchases to one side. As I did so, the pendant slipped out, the brightly-polished silver standing out in the dimness of my room. I disentangled the pentacle from the remainder of the wrapping and found a silver chain necklace which I had been given as a child. When I put the chain around my neck, it seemed to nestle there perfectly, as if it had always been there.

There was a knock at the door of my room.

"Come in," I called absently, still inspecting my pendant in the mirror.

The door opened. Aramis scampered through almost immediately, followed by Trish and Shakra. For some reason, the cat seemed fascinated with my purchases. It jumped up on my desk and nosed around, then turned its head to Trish and mewed strangely.

Trish caught the flash of silver around my neck.

"New necklace?" she asked laconically.

"Yes. Do you like it?" I replied. Firming up my resolve for the second time that day, I continued, "I've got something to tell you."

Trish glanced at Shakra, then smiled at me warmly.

"Of course, but before you start, there's something that you should know, too."

"What's that?"

There was a pause, a beat, then Trish said, “I’m Praxis.”

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With Trish’s more direct assistance and help from Shakra, my Wiccan education and initiation has gone from strength to strength. A week later I returned to the magic shop, armed with another – somewhat longer – shopping list and a new-found sense of confidence.

The same young man was operating the tills and he clearly recognised me when I plonked the wire basket in front of him. He scanned the items efficiently, but made no attempt to put them into a carrier.

“See you next week,” I said cheerily, dropping the packages into the rucksack I had brought with me.

“I doubt it,” Tim responded gloomily, “We’re being taken over by Tesco.”

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