

APPLE

By Matthew Simmons

Witch (or Crone, or weird sister, or whatever it is you and your kind call yourselves),

I tend to think of myself as the sort of person who respects an individual or group's right to self-identify, and I apologize for being dismissive there, but at the same time, I find myself being so very frustrated by the situation that leads me to write this letter that I'm having trouble being courteous. Or having the wherewithal to go back and edit out rudeness. Trust, then, that the curtness of that opening speaks to my anger, which is causing me to communicate in a way completely out of character.

I'm writing you with a serious complaint. I would like to complain about the effectiveness, or rather, the lack of effectiveness of the poisoned apple I purchased from you. Or rather, the apple worked, in a way, but it did not work the way you told me it would work. Not exactly. That's what I would like to complain about.

Let me first remind you of who it is I am. My name is D—. My girlfriend is L—. I purchased a poisoned apple from you six months ago, in order to feed it to L—, because I wanted her to sleep for a while. I wanted some time away from our fighting. I wanted some time away from all the arguing. I wanted some time away from feeling like everything I said was being analyzed for the inevitable flaws in my thinking. But, only *some* time. Only *some* time is what I wanted. That's what you told me I could have. *Some* time.

You will recall we met on the bus. I was on my way to work. You stepped on the bus and did not pay. You did not look up, just walked by the driver. You were disheveled and I took you for homeless. I read my book and did my best to disappear, to make the empty seat next to me disappear, but you found me anyway.

You smell like urine, witch. I'm sure you are aware of that. I'm sorry to bring it up. It's true. You smell like urine. You, in a blue, terrycloth robe. You have not washed your hair in a long time, possibly ever. You stumble and sort of buzz when you walk—as if a nest of wasps lives in your mouth. And you sat down next to me.

I considered just getting up and moving to the back of the bus. You smell *bad* and mutter under your breath, and I took you for crazy, too, and just wanted to get away from you. Just read my book and go to work, and ignore you is all I intended to do. But you spoke to me.

“She’s always on you, you think,” is what you said. I kept reading. You were talking—to yourself, I was sure. “You think she’ll always be like that. You think she is embarrassed by you.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“She’s smarter than you,” you said.

“Who are you talking to? Are you talking to me?” I said.

“I know what you want,” you said.

“Don’t talk to me,” I said. “I don’t want to talk to you.”

“I can help you,” you said. “I can give you something that will help. I can make L— sleep. Sleep as long as you want her to. I can help you.”

I went back to ignoring you. It seemed the best thing to do. To forget that you had just said her name.

Do you remember me, now? You went nattering on and on. I pulled the cord, but you said it wasn’t my stop. You knew it wasn’t my stop, and told me so. I tried to get up, but you blocked me. You touched my shoulder and my legs stopped working.

“I can. I can help you,” you said, and blew a rancid breath into my face. I reeled. I turned my head away. I gagged.

But I believed you.

“We’ll get off next,” you said, and I agreed.

We got off the bus together, and you led me to an alley. It was morning. It really was morning, but in the alley it was dusk. The asphalt was worn, broken up in places. I followed you, tripping on the uneven ground. The brick walls of the alley were covered with graffiti.

You moved so very gracefully. A cat met us near a tent made of a green plastic tarp. You grabbed an end, and pushed me in.

It smelled of garbage inside. You had half-empty Styrofoam containers, old blankets, and a cooking pot. Old coats. It smelled bitter inside. A milk crate on which you sat. A bone in the pot,

brown and blackening marrow at the cracked end. Two canteens hung from the tent's wooden structure. There was a photo, bubbled, and browned, melted and in it all I could make out was an eye. The rest of the portrait had burned away. The cat sat next to me on a blanket, and I was on my knees.

“This will cost you, but not that much,” you said. You dug through the containers and pulled out an apple. It was a shiny green apple. It was unspoiled, unbruised. New and fresh.

“You will feed this to L—,” you said. “You will feed even just a single bite to her, and she will fall into a deep, deep sleep. And then, you can have some time. She will still be yours. She will not leave. She will just sleep, and she won't wake up. You can care for her, then. Dress her how you want. She will not need to eat. She will not age. She will just sleep. *Sleep*,” you said, and you smiled.

You have rotten teeth.

“What if I want her to wake up?” I asked.

“The kiss of her true love will wake her up. Simple. Kiss her. And she will wake up. Keep the apple as long as you want. It will not spoil until you cut into it. Use it when you are ready.”

I purchased the apple. Again you blew in my face, and again I wobbled, and left. When I was back at the bus stop, on my way to work—your home was only halfway there—I went back to not believing you. I told myself I purchased the apple from you because it was a good deed. Charity. You were right. It was very affordable. I put the apple in my bag. I did not eat it myself, because I don't care for sour green apples. I left it in my bag.

L— and I are together and she puts up with me. This is all I ask. She puts up with my inability to remember making plans. She puts up with me even though I don't know what day of the week it is. She puts up with the fact that I will sometimes in a restaurant butter a roll, and then quickly but not slyly wipe the excess butter off my knife with my pinky and lick it. She scolds me for doing that if anyone else is around. She is, as you noted, embarrassed by me.

She puts up with me even though I am not very bright. Sometimes, something will occur to me and I will tell L— about it, and she will look at me with a look of genuine pity. And she will show me why I am wrong. She will remind me of the obvious thing I have forgotten that makes the thing

that just occurred to me completely wrong. Am I making sense? She knows why I'm wrong, and she tells me why, and I listen and see that she is correct. And I take that thing that has occurred to me, and I throw it out my brain's window, and it lands on the street as my brain and I drive off.

L—'s long red hair is as beautiful as it is possible for hair to be, I think.

L—'s eyes are as smart as a pair of eyes can appear to be.

That's why I need L— around. That's why I can't ask her to leave, and wouldn't let her if *she* wanted to leave. That's why putting her to sleep made so much sense.

Though, as I said, I didn't believe the apple would actually put her to sleep.

We were talking about something—oil prices, maybe, or where we would go if we won a free trip on a game show of some sort. I had thought they were going to go down after the war, or maybe that I'd like to see Africa. She told me either that oil production had hit its peak, or that Africa was in turmoil, and I knew she was right. And I knew I was wrong.

And I just felt bad. Friends were over, and they laughed. Where would I be without L—, they wondered. The Sudan with a gun to his head, she told them. Or away in Iraq, fighting "terrorism," she maybe told them, making quotes with her fingers.

Maybe we were discussing the fastest route home from downtown? I am poor with directions.

Our friends left. L— called her dad, and they talked about his patients. (He's a doctor.) L— told him about her classes. (She's a grad student, studying history.) I went to my bag and took out my book. And the apple fell out.

L— likes a snack before bed, so I cut up the apple and put it on a plate with a little lump of peanut butter. I told her I wasn't hungry.

She had a little bite of a slice of the apple. Then she had the rest. I read and she lay next to me and drifted off. I got up and put the plate in the kitchen. I read. She was snoring, just a little. I fell asleep.

It's like the world forgot about her. Her friends don't call. Her family doesn't call. The school hasn't called. It's like, except for the fact that she's there, in our bed, asleep, she just went away. She fell out of the big book of human history.

Her friends don't recognize me on the street. They walk right by me without acknowledging me. And some of them look right at me!

I woke up the next day, and she was asleep. She mumbled, but did not wake up when I shook her. I started to believe. To really *believe*.

When she is asleep, I love her more than any other time. Her face is rounded, a little puffier when she is asleep. It does not smile, but it does not frown.

She is, awake, full of energy, and sometimes it exhausts me to try to keep up. Asleep, her body sinks and rises. It does not vibrate so quickly. Her rhythms are predictable. She is, asleep, not so dangerous to me.

Months she was like that. Months she slept. Our room was dark and warm. For the first month, the air in our room was thick, and comfortable. I had a fan spinning in the corner. On rare occasions, she shifted. Mostly, she lay facing my side of the bed, the comforter up around her head, her face the only thing visible. I woke up every morning, and turned to her, and stared at her. Light leaked in through the corner of the window, a little spot missed by our heavy curtains. I didn't want to get up. I didn't want to leave her. I just wanted to sleep.

For a while I did. I spent a week just there with her. I called in sick. I stayed in bed with L—, for long, happy days without arguments. Without fights. Without proof of my essential ignorance of all things.

It was nice. I would sometimes roll over her, and pull back the covers to stare at the long, white curve of her back. I would trace a line from mole to freckle to nape of neck.

But soon it was clear I needed to leave her and get back to work.

Three months went well, but then I missed her. So, I kissed my L— to wake her up.

She won't wake up, Witch. She won't wake up. She won't wake up. She won't wake up.

I kiss her and kiss her, but she won't wake up.

Bedsore. My life has become filled with the concern over and caring for the bedsore that are opening on my L—. She has pressure ulcers on her back. I turn her over every night to give them a chance to heal. I go to work, and she rolls back into her favorite position, facing my side of the bed.

I wash her every couple of days.

She does not need to eat. You were right about that. I tried to feed her once, massaged her throat to get her to swallow, but she didn't. The applesauce just sat in her mouth until I cleaned it out.

She doesn't age, but her hair grows. Her fingernails grow. Her toenails grow. I clip them. But I have left her hair to grow as it wishes. I'd probably just mess it up if I tried to cut it.

I don't sleep anymore. I haven't slept in a month and a half.

I've started smoking again. I sit in a chair all night, and watch her sleep, and I smoke cigarettes. Can she get lung cancer from the secondhand smoke? She still breathes. Her chest expands and contracts under the comforter.

I kiss her and she doesn't wake up.

I get the twist, you know. I get the "kiss of her true love" thing that is going on. You have tricked me. It's not subtle, Witch. I get it.

Wake her up.

I have returned to your alley and have not found you. I take the bus around town, and do not find you. I know what you're doing. I know you are punishing me.

Wake her up.

And give me a refund. I know, *caveat emptor*. I'm familiar. But I think, legally speaking, I have a case.

I'll leave this letter in "your" alley. I'll wait for you to respond. I'll wait for satisfaction.

Wake her up, Witch. I will track you down. I will find you eventually. I will. Count on it.

Wake her up.

D—