

LIGHTS OUT! MARIANNE'S Story



It didn't start out as a bad day, for most.

It was a beautiful, sunny day, with a high of 98 degrees expected, and a high possibility of thunderstorms later in the evening. Some people LOVE the heat, and break out their shorts and sleeveless shirts, and if they can find a way to lay out in it, or go to the beach or a pool where they can bask in the glorious heat...they do. Others, like Marianne, sigh a heavy sigh, and thank Mr. Carrier for inventing the air conditioner, and be grateful that they have one, while fervently wishing for fall, and sweaters. Different strokes for different folks.

The day itself had different plans. Maybe it was the heat, as it was already 90 degrees by 10:30 am. Maybe it was the full moon. Nurses and paramedics readily attest to the 'lunacy' that tends to happen under a full moon. No matter the cause, due to a series of unforeseen events in far-flung places, the day was conspiring to change.

A crew was doing maintenance on an electrical substation in Medina, Ohio, trying to fix a power outage. Higher than average temperatures over the previous four days lead to a transformer failure. A horrible accident happened as they were attempting to repair the damage and get the power back online; it took the life of the man working there, and caused a surge that took out a larger section of their electrical grid. Unfortunately, in Akron, to the northeast of Medina, a lineman was working on high tension lines at the same time, and like the man in Medina, died immediately as a cascade of power surged through the lines he was working on.

While the power crews in Ohio were dealing with their perfectly beautiful day gone bad, the hot weather had also caused electrical usage to be ramped up all over the Northeast, and had crews scrambling everywhere. In East Glenville, New York, just north of Schenectady, a wayward squirrel fell out of a tree and got instantly french-fried on a transformer, which knocked out power to several thousand homes and businesses. The squirrel's 'really bad day' expanded to include a lot of hot, sweaty, unhappy

humans.

The final part of the problem that would put the cherry on top of the unholy electrical cocktail brewing in the Northeast set itself up weeks before. In Holyoke, MA, in a control room that oversees the electrical grid for a large chunk of the Northeast, there were several lines of programming in a series of orders that were incorrect that determined the behavior of backup systems coming online in the case of an outage. Bad code is never a good thing, but it was about to prove critical.

The problems in Messina and Akron managed to take down most of Ohio's power grid, and moved outwards as high electrical usage made the whole system there unstable, then caused a cascade in parts of Pennsylvania between Erie and Pittsburgh, including some areas of New York that lay along the Pennsylvania line. This put more stress on a system that already had high usage due to the heat and other outages. Shortly after the squirrel in East Glenville met his untimely end, the cascade that stretched from Ohio to PA and parts of New York met the cascade that rippled out from East Glenville, to the south. Suddenly, around 1:30 in the afternoon, that control room in Holyoke found itself hopelessly overloaded and resoundingly crashed. The backup systems didn't come online as expected, and the backups to the backups failed. As a result, a good chunk of the entire Northeast found itself without electric, from Ohio,

north to Toronto, across upstate New York, to lower parts of Maine, most of Pennsylvania and down as far as parts of northern and western Maryland. What started out as a promising beautiful - but hot - day went quickly awry.



Meanwhile, Marianne sat at her desk, frustrated. She worked as a writer at a medium-size marketing firm, and most of the writing she did was press releases, and posts on behalf of her firm's clients for social media. Today, however, her boss had her writing up company policy. It was boring, and fell under the category of "other duties as assigned." There were any other number of writers. Why was she the 'lucky' one? Even as Marianne mentally grumbled, the lights flickered. Several moments later, they flickered again, strongly enough to turn off the air handler, and put her computer and everyone else's on battery backups. That got everyone's attention. Within moments, the office was plunged into darkness. The emergency lighting flicked on as the building's backup generators kicked in. Unfortunately, turning on the emergency lights was all the generator was capable of doing - the building's elevators were also out. After about an hour of sweating in dim light, Marianne's boss told them all to power down their computers, and head home.

Normally, being sent home would be welcome, but the power was out city-wide, meaning the subway stations were down, too, along with elevators, escalators, street lights and signals - all kinds of things that you don't realize how much you depend on them until you don't have them. Today, she was forced to walk all the way home. It was just as well the subway wasn't running. In July, the wait on the platform in the stifling heat was horrible anyway. Sometimes, she preferred to walk, if only to clear her head, and enjoy people watching...but the less time she had to spend outside in the heat during summer, the better she liked summer. She heard a passer-by comment that the outage went all the way to Niagara Falls. Marianne had heard horror stories of looting during the Great Blackout of 1977 from her mom and grandmother. She didn't see any this time, luckily. Most people she ran into seemed to take it in stride. The last power outage occurred a little over a year ago, and it only lasted a few hours. Her apartment was going to be miserable, but at least she had a balcony. A hot breeze was better than no breeze at all.

As she made her way home, she made a couple of calls. At first, her cell phone worked; she called her mom to check in; her Mom and Dad were fine, and now, Mom knew she was on her way home, and okay, too. Life was all good in Barger-land. Next, she called Helena. Helena was okay, but disappointed at the timing of the power outage. Helena was supposed to be going to the doctor's to get her cast off this

afternoon, and then Marianne was planning to go to Helena's this evening, to help her get the first bath she'd had since breaking her leg in a shower fall. That wasn't in the cards today, unfortunately for Helena.

Helena sighed, long and drawn-out. "I was SO looking forward to getting this damn cast off today, and having a real bath...." Marianne tried to make her aunt feel better. At least she was cleared to get the cast off. Appointments could and would be rescheduled. "But it's hot, and this cast smells bad enough already." Both women laughed. Helena told her that she closed Treasure Trove, as did Val with Cuppa Love. "Do you want me to come over and stay with you? Or do you want to come stay with me?" Marianne asked.

"No, honey. Go home, be safe. I'm here, and I'll be fine," Helena reassured her. Just as they were saying their goodbyes, the phone died. Apparently, they were overloaded because everybody was doing the same thing; checking in with loved ones. Marianne heard people commenting about the phones being out as she finished her walk home. Normally, she enjoyed the walk - when it was cooler and she wasn't sweating her ass off. She was glad when she neared her building.

Once home, her apartment was stifling, which she expected. She opened all her

windows, and the door to her tiny balcony. It might be tiny, but at least she had one. Luckily for Marianne, her cat Sweetness didn't try to lay in the windows and kick out the screens, like his predecessor Muffin used to. She changed into a pair of shorts and a tank top, both skimpier than normal and went to the kitchen. She made a simple peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and with a drink in hand, went out on the balcony to watch the people below, and catch whatever breeze she could. There was no internet, nothing to watch, except the sounds of cars in gridlock, horns blaring, blending with the voices of frustrated people wafting up from below. She had an app on her phone that allowed her to listen to radio. That's how she found out about the severity of the blackout.

Everyone assumed the power would be back on shortly, or at worst in a few hours.

You know what they say about assumptions, right? For some people - the lucky ones - power came back on in somewhere between nine to fourteen hours. For the folks in Manhattan and most of New York and Jersey, it took a full day to a day and a half to get power restored to everyone. The city remained calm, with only sporadic outbreaks of violence or looting.

It gave Marianne time to reflect. Her life had taken some odd turns. She changed jobs and was closer to work. She ended up with a cat, as well as an unusual group of friends outside of her regular choice of companions, including the elderly lady that owned the shop; She loved Helena. Helena was unfailingly kind, until she couldn't be; she had an unusual view of the world, with an equally unusual perspective, which she shared with all who cared to look. Finding out that her friend was also her aunt only made them closer, and their friendship sweeter, particularly as Helena seemed to have no other family to speak of. She usually remained fairly tight-lipped about her personal life before the shop came along.

No matter how Marianne examined her day-to-day life, it had changed radically...and for the better. Was it weirder? For sure. You can't be friends with the folks at Treasure Trove, and not have your life change in **some** way. She wasn't a witch. Marianne was sure she'd have figured out by now if she was.

Though Marianne had to admit, since becoming friends with Helena, Gwen, Chrissie and Val, not to mention the others who regularly passed through Treasure Trove, it wasn't only her day-to-day life that had changed. On a personal level, she changed, too - her beliefs had grown and expanded beyond what she was raised to believe. Marianne had a couple of crystals that were beautiful - which she bought there.

She had a mermaid statue that she bought because of the colors, and the wistful look on the mermaid's face. She even had incense, which she lit after particularly long days at work. She found it soothing. There are some who would have looked at her life, the company she kept, and the objects lying around her house, and made an argument that Marianne was already half a witch, even if she didn't realize it. If you asked her, she'd tell you she wasn't a witch by any stretch. She had heard stories, for sure. There was a statue that kept getting bought and returned that only made Helena laugh. And more incredibly still, there was a book that Helena was tasked with safekeeping that, if you can believe it, escaped - on its' own - from out of her care several months back. She was part of an impromptu circle the day Helena discovered it missing. It was weird as all hell, and it was the first time she'd ever taken part in such a thing. For whatever reason, everyone in the store that day had either been long-scheduled to be there, or somehow ended up there out of the blue. Helena always said that there was no such thing as coincidence; if that day didn't describe that, she didn't know what could. The weirdest thing happened as they stood, hand-in-hand, and prayed that the book would be found, and no one would be hurt. Never before had she seen a candle whose flame jumped a foot in the air as someone mentioned a goddess. But jump, it certainly did.

Marianne was used to the 'woo-woo' and the sense of the unusual that came with Treasure Trove. She wasn't sure what to believe about it. It didn't frighten her.

The people she encountered were mostly normal folks, who had a different belief system, and interesting stories to tell, and truth be told, she loved them. The only **truly** strange thing that happened to Marianne personally was right after the very first time she went into Treasure Trove. She was watching two cats play in a doorway - Helena's cat, Mischief, and a red and white one, who ended up following her home that night. She dreamed of a strange lady with the head of a cat and the body of a woman - and then the next day, all hell broke loose as she could suddenly hear the thoughts of all the people around her - as well as the cat who followed her home. Hearing the thoughts rambling through other people's heads was **not** pleasant. And she learned a very vivid lesson about not only the kinds of things people think because they assume their thoughts are private, but also about the energy that comes with the private thoughts. They shoot like laser-targeted arrows to the people involved. Hearing the cat was weird at first, but ultimately comforting. His thoughts were the only ones that were completely honest and straightforward, with no guile, or mixed with other competing emotions. The cat turned out to be a stray that needed a home: it was how she adopted her chonky boy, Sweetness. Later that next evening, she dreamed again of the same lady, who was pleased that Marianne adopted Sweetness. That, too was weird - but it was a one-off; she never dreamed of the lady again, and never again heard anyone's thoughts - not even the cat, which she wouldn't have minded. That day when she got home from even a partial day at work, hearing her co-workers' random mean

thoughts..it felt like her soul had been flayed from her body. Sweetness' simple thoughts purely of love were a balm to it. Did those experiences have an effect on her? Sure. She realized that what everyone thinks matters. It made her softer inside, and it made her think twice about how others might be perceived, and she changed her actions. She tried to be aware of what she thought, and whenever she held Sweetness close, she always directed her thoughts of love and happiness at him, hoping that he felt the love in the same way she had that horrible day. It was likely why some people instinctively preferred their pets to people.

She never told Helena or any of the others about the cat-headed lady. She wasn't sure back then what to make of that day or if she might have been losing her mind. As it only ever happened the once, she put it out of her mind. After working occasionally at Treasure Trove while Gwen recuperated, she realized the person she'd seen in her dream was the Egyptian goddess Bast: she was actually a goddess that people used to worship, not something her brain made up. Who knew? It was weird, but Marianne had chalked it up to being a dream. At no point did she ever think she encountered a... a...what? A REAL goddess? LOL, as *IF*. It felt weird simply because she was the person it happened to, despite the fact she heard way weirder on the regular. Certainly, if she told them about her perceived encounter with Bast, none of them would be surprised. When you have books that escape, and a statue that keeps being sold and returned, it's

fair to say they'd have to keep open minds. At some point, she realized that among the many statues of various gods and goddesses the shop carried, they actually had one of Bast. Marianne bought one, to remind herself of the dream she had, and how / when she got Sweetness. Even if she didn't believe she encountered a Goddess, she thought fondly of the dream, if only because of her sweet chonk of a cat, and how she ended up with the furry little bugger.

As it grew dark that evening in Manhattan, with no lights, no power, no phones, and no TV, Marianne sat on her balcony, drinking wine, eating a bag of popcorn and sweating into the cushions on her chair as she slowly melted into a puddle from the heat. She watched lightning play across the sky, and throw light and shadows over everything. It was heat lightning, and it put on a hell of a show in the sky. It was mesmerizing, and - strange as it might sound - she could feel it, every time lightning struck close by. She could feel the hairs raise on her arms and the back of her neck. Gradually, it pushed off, but a little while later, a second storm rolled through. By the second storm, she felt a little odd because she could almost tell when the lightning would strike, and where. The rain poured copiously during the second storm, but not enough to cool the evening down. It only got more humid. Instead of moving off the balcony, Marianne stayed put, rain and all. The rain mostly didn't blow onto the balcony, but she was getting sprayed lightly by mist blown by wind. It felt like a

blessing, maybe even a baptism. Marianne didn't try to dry off the rain that reached her. She watched the power and strength of nature as the storm made its way across the artificial canyons of the city and the thunder reverberated around her, and even through her. She could *feel* the storm: in her spine, and the top of her head, her neck and in her arms all the way down to her fingertips. Marianne was so tingly, she felt like she was sparkling. She chalked it up to three glasses of wine, and fervently hoped she wouldn't get struck by lightning while sitting on her balcony. That would make a hell of a headline. "Drunk woman gets struck by lightning while watching thunderstorm during blackout."

The second storm finally ended, and the clouds blew off and the moon rose, huge and bright. Marianne could see stars carpeting the night sky. Usually there was so much light pollution that all but the brightest stars were hard to see. Finally, the moon rose, huge and bright. She realized she could feel that, too, although it was a subtler energy. It felt more like a feathery kiss. She sat there on her balcony for the longest time, soaking it up, and communing with the moon - something she'd never actually done before. The city before her may still be suffering mayhem, but Marianne - here, and now - felt more peace than she'd ever felt before. It was glorious, even if she was melting into a puddle of sweat. How did she never notice any of that before?

Marianne took the candle that was sitting on her balcony with her inside, which was still uncomfortably warm from the heat of the day. Sleep was long coming; eventually being tired overtook how miserable she was in the heat.

Her dreams were choppy and felt scrambled. At one point, her dream took her back out on the balcony, standing by the railing, and the moon seemed to grow impossibly large against the skyline. She gasped as it grew larger. Even as it grew, and grew, she could feel its power dancing under her skin, and up her spine. Power was radiating off the moon, like glittery little sparklies that she could feel but not see, passing around and through her like a caress. Marianne remembered thinking that she never wanted the feeling to end.

Marianne woke earlier than she wanted to, as Sweetness was standing on her chest, his terra-cotta nose to hers. As she tried to get to sleep the night before and her mind twisted and turned in circles, she hoped that the power would be back on when she woke up, but no such luck. Even as she kept feeling like it would have to come back on any minute now, still, it didn't. Regardless of whether or not there was power, Sweetness had his **own** internal clock and felt the need to remind his mom that it was food o'clock, and he required immediate feeding unless she wanted him to fall through his own butthole and hang himself for hunger.

Later that day, as she sat in a skimpy shirt and shorts on her balcony, there was considerably less traffic, and traffic noise the next day; people were staying home. Mostly what she could hear was fire and police sirens as they responded to emergencies. Except for the fact that it was stiflingly hot, it almost felt like a holiday.

Later that night, she went to bed...she would've said sleep, but actually sleeping in the heat took some doing. Eventually, she fell asleep to more wonky dreams. She found herself back in the storeroom at Treasure Trove that day when she was part of a circle for the escaped book. It felt different to her than it did the day she was there. She was trying to nail down what the difference was. As Helena spoke, she could feel an ebb and flow of something as she spoke. When the flame leapt a foot in the air, that felt totally different, too. That day when it originally happened, she jumped because she was startled as the flame jumped. As she revisited the day in her dream, she still was startled by the flame... but not **because** it jumped; rather, it was the low thrumming power that pervaded the scene, and then amped up exponentially even as the flame rose. It felt like a promise. An exclamation mark, meant as a statement of intent to those assembled. It changed how she remembered the scene at a fundamental level. Even as she stood among her friends in the dim lighting of the staff room gathered around the table, a drum began to rhythmically thump in time with the beating of her own heart,

and the candle flame on the table transformed into a bonfire in a clearing in the woods, the moon full overhead. She stood there, feeling all the feels - the moon...the woods...the bonfire...the drums. A large black cat with an ornate golden collar walked into the clearing, and stopped near the bonfire, and began watching her intently. As Marianne looked, she knew...just... knew.

“Bast?” Marianne asked, hesitantly.

And in a space of a blink, there was Bast standing in front of her by the bonfire; the head of a cat on a human female body. It should’ve felt strange, but she’d met her before. There was a statue of her on her bookshelf in the living room. The only thing that was different is that Marianne recognized the energy now. She knew looking at the cat that it was...more than a cat. Last time she didn’t believe what she saw. This time, the seeing was accompanied by major feels.

“Hello.” Bast smiled, at her, and it was fang-y. It made her want to giggle, but that would be horribly impolite.

Marianne smiled back at Bast. “I remember you. When I saw you before - that wasn’t really a dream. It was real, wasn’t it?”

Bast nodded. "It was."

"Why me?"

"Why not you? You were in Treasure Trove, and interacted with Mischief; you picked up something he knocked over, if you remember. There are no coincidences. For you, that moment was pivotal in your future, almost like walking through a doorway. You chose every bit of it, whether you realize it or not - from being in the shop at all, how you responded to Mischief, all the way to how you responded to Sweetness. You might've passed it all by. You could've been mean to Mischief or even blind to his presence. You could've ignored Sweetness, either while he played with Mischief, or even more when he showed up uninvited at your door. But you didn't."

Marianne nodded.

Bast smiled again. "I feel there's a question you're burning to ask, but you're also afraid to. Ask, child. It's okay to ask."

It came out all in a rush. "What is happening to me? Things feel different. Last

night on my balcony felt surreal, and the way things felt in my dreams are even more so. Was I drunk and hallucinated feeling the storm, the lightning and the moon? And...the gathering that Helena had in her back room... I dreamed about that, and the dream felt more real than when I was actually there."

Bast purred. "The most important questions to ask aren't 'Is it real?' or 'Was it a dream?' The most important questions are, 'How does it make you feel? Did you like it? Did it empower you? Did it make you feel stronger? Safer? Wiser? What did it do for you? Here is my question to you: Do you *want* it to be real?"

Bast circled slowly around Marianne, as she continued to talk. "Think about this, child. What if the ability to sense everything was part of you all along, and it took everything that's happened to you between the last time we met and last night for you to sense...to realize...that you could? People get so bogged down with their lives that they go from day to day, reaction to reaction, and don't pay attention to the subtleties. They're having a hard enough time processing what's in their faces, demanding attention."

And in a twinkle, Bast was back to being a beautiful, black cat, at Marianne's feet, and turned to leave the clearing, which was starting to get smoky and hazy, fading from

her sight. The last thing she heard as she drifted back off to sleep was, "It was real, if you want it to be real. You can ignore it, or you choose to let it in, and see where it takes you. This, too, is a doorway to walk through that has the potential to change the rest of your life from this day forward."



The first thing Marianne noticed waking up the next day was that she wasn't a puddle, sticking to her sheets. Sometime during the night, the electric came on and stayed on this time - and her apartment was blissfully cool. As she lay there, tangled up in a sea of lavender sheets, she could only stop and reflect on the exchange with Bast in her dream. She remembered everything about it, even the part about "It was real if you want it to be real."

What did she want? Did the people she surrounded herself with from the shop feel like this all the time, every day? Marianne never stopped to ask any of them what it was like to be a witch. She'd never truthfully given it that much thought, though she had to admit she liked the way it made her feel. It made her feel stronger...more centered. "Let it in and see where it takes you," Bast had said. Where exactly would it take her? Would it make her a witch, too? Luckily for her, she happened to know a

lovely witch that she was certain would love to have a conversation about it.

Marianne got up, and headed off to Treasure Trove to see Helena. She sat down on the short stool that Helena kept under the counter for occasions such as these. "I had something really weird happening the last couple of nights, and I need your take on it."

"What happened?"

Marianne went through her tale in a rush, leaving nothing out - not even the parts where she felt like she should self-edit. "I knew...just KNEW!...where the lightning was going to strike! Each and every time!" Her hands waved about, and she looked a little like an orchestra conductor. "I could feel it when it struck, going up my spine, and flowing in me, and through me!" Marianne took a breath. "And the moon! When it came out, I could still feel that energy, too! It felt like a kiss on my forehead. Oh! And remember the circle you had for the book??" She recounted the dream she had about the circle she had been a part of, and that now, in her dream, it felt different and explained how it was different...and that in her dream, the candle flame changed to a bonfire that was a circle with Bast. "It wasn't the first time I'd seen her, but I just thought the first time was a weird dream. Nope. It was real. And I asked Bast if everything I felt was real or not, and if I was a witch, and she told me it was all true, if I

wanted it to be, and to let it in and see where it takes me.” She stopped. “And that’s where I’m at. I don’t know what to do. What should I do?”

Helena chuckled.

“You’re *laughing* at me?!” Marianne’s elbows had been on the countertop by the time she’d stopped talking, and now she dumped her whole head into her arms and banged it a couple of times. Even as she laughingly began whining “Why me?,” Mischief jumped up on the counter, and head-butted her. When she looked up into his green eyes, he meowed at her, and sat down.

“I’m not laughing *at* you or what you told me, honey. Not really. It had more to do with your...*flair*?...in telling it.”

Marianne arched an eyebrow at her aunt, and then giggled. “Still, though... What should I do?”

“That’s entirely up to you.” Be a witch, don’t be a witch. Everyone here will love you just the same - for the person you are.”

“Would it change things?”

“Depends on what things you mean. Sprout horns or wings? Nope. Church roof fall in on you if you walk into one? Nope, and as an FYI, the holy water won’t hiss if you touch it, and neither will Bibles, crosses or communion wafers. Will it make you suddenly rich? Nope. Keep you from having to go to work? Nope.”

Every time Helena said “nope”, she nodded her head NO slowly for emphasis.

“What it’s likely to change are your reactions to things. Who you are. How you feel about the world around you. How you feel about some of the people you already know or those you just meet, for better or worse; they’ll show you who they really are. Do yourself a favor. Listen, and act accordingly. Sometimes you’ll feel like you can change things, and you should. Sometimes you’ll want to change things, and even if you can, you can’t (or shouldn’t) because the mistake you see a person about to make, they NEED to make to learn from. What it changes, ultimately, is your heart, and how you treat others, your place in the world, and how you fit in to the bigger picture.”

Marianne laughed. “It blows my mind that I missed all of that, that I never felt it before. I mean, it’s not like that was my first time in a thunderstorm.... Bast said that I

ultimately chose everything, but why wouldn't I have chosen it before?"

Helena thought for a moment, tapping her finger on the glass counter. "Okay, here's a way of looking at it. What happens when you turn on a flashlight in a bright room? Would you notice it was turned on at *all* if it wasn't aimed directly at you?"

"Probably not." Marianne replied.

"In a dark room, if you turn on that same flashlight, you can't miss the light. It's there, and it's likely illuminating everything in the room to a certain degree. With all the electric out, the storm became like that flashlight for you, revealing everything around you in ways you ordinarily wouldn't notice. That's all..."

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