



Which Way

THE ROAD WAS PRETTY DAMN ROUGH, AND THE RENTAL car clunked several times as I hit bottom on rocks and potholes. I thought I might blow out a tire at any minute, so I drove slowly, gripping the shaking steering wheel with both hands, crawling along at a snail's pace, veering to the right, then to the left, trying to avoid the worst areas. I didn't meet any oncoming traffic at all — I guess I was the only one foolish enough to be driving on this road-from-hell. Nor did I see any camouflaged brigades marching down the road, or witches flying over on broomsticks. Not even a UFO landing site.

A tense mile or two down the washboard road, a stack of old tires appeared to my left, on the berm. Someone had driven a steel fence stake down through the center of them, apparently to keep the tires from falling over. The words "Witch Way" were scrawled on the side of the stack in white spray paint. That must be what started the rumor about witches. It looked like some lost kid just didn't know how to spell.

Lucy's map showed a trail heading north off Lonepine Road, 6.8 miles from the last intersection, at a "big tree." The side trail was described as a "quarter-mile long dirt track" on the map. At the end of the trail, Lucy had drawn a star with the words "my cottage" beside it. She had indicated that her house wouldn't be visible from the car, and had described it as a "plain, white, one-story house," probably the kind I had seen scattered along the way — typical

minimal housing allocated by the federal government to the native Americans on the reservation. What Lucy was doing on an Indian reservation beat the hell out of me.

I carefully monitored my dashboard odometer and slowed the car to a stop when the numbers rolled around to 6.8. There was no big tree, as expected, and no dirt track, just more of the same — potholes, rocks, scrub, and dust under an intense sun that was turning the car into a bake oven. I double-checked the map to make sure I had read the numbers correctly, then I stepped out of the car onto the dusty roadway to look around, shielding my eyes from the sun and squinting into the distance. Not a goddam thing. I was either on the wrong road or Lucy was deranged as hell. What a crock, I thought. Only an idiot would come this far on the strength of a stupid letter and find nothing in the middle of nowhere. If I ever felt like a fool, I certainly did at that moment. Nevertheless, I had nothing to lose by continuing further. I would make one last attempt before turning back.

Another quarter mile down the road, I finally spotted a giant pine tree off to the right. A hand-painted sign that bluntly stated, “Keep Out!” was tacked to its trunk. A dirt trail passed beside the tree, showing two well-worn tire tracks leading back into the brush and up a slight grade toward the distant mountains. I coaxed the car up the narrow lane, bushes scraping against the sides, until I could go no further. Shutting off the engine and stepping into the blazing sunlight, I stretched to get my blood flowing. I leaned against the car and looked around. No house in sight. With the map, letter, and keys in my pocket, I started up the trail on foot.

The sharp peal of a hawk shattered the silence as I clambered up the rutted trail. The dry, stony terrain reminded me of the southern Rockies where I lived when I was a kid. I loved hiking in those mountains then, and even though I was only twelve years old at the time, I would take off on long hikes alone, climbing up into the mountains and exploring the marvels of the desert. I saw

many a lizard, horny toad, prairie dog, snake, and desert rat during my forays into the wild, not to mention cacti, which I learned very quickly to avoid. Here in Montana, I poked the thorny bushes with a stick as I passed, searching, as I did during my youth, for snakes and lizards scurrying beneath them.

The sight of a red hex sign out of the corner of my eye jolted me out of my reverie. The sign was fastened to the gable end of a small, white, stucco house, out of reach, but plainly visible over the tops of the tall bushes. Reminiscent of Pennsylvania Dutch hex signs once popular on the old eastern barns, this one was nailed to a board and a red circle was painted around it. My grandmother, the one whose funeral I had attended years ago, had Pennsylvania Dutch ancestry. She used to keep hex signs like this one hanging around her old wooden farmhouse. She said they were for luck — they would keep the evil spirits away.

As I sneaked up on the small dwelling, I noticed immediately that the place was oddly silent; no dogs barked, no cats scampered into hiding upon my approach, no birds scolded my arrival. I tested the front door. It was locked, and the house key Lucy had sent me didn't fit. I peeked in the windows, but couldn't see anything because of the drawn curtains. I skirted around behind the cottage and banged on the back aluminum screen door. I knocked harder and shouted, "*Anyone here!?*" but no one answered. The screen door creaked when I pulled it open. I slipped the brass key into the lock and, to my relief, it easily turned. Well here goes, I thought, as I pushed open the door. A blast of stale air momentarily took my breath away.

All the curtains and blinds were drawn and the interior looked dismal and foreboding. I stood just inside the open door for a while, motionless, listening for any noise at all. Nothing. I felt a light switch on the wall and flipped it on. Still nothing. The electricity must be turned off, I thought. I left the door open behind me and took a few more steps inside. Enough light entered through the doorway that I could see well enough. The place was tidy, although there

were dead house plants on the window sills. I took a few more steps and stopped again, frozen in a state of heightened awareness. “*Anyone here?!*” I yelled loudly again. If anyone was there, they surely would have heard me. But no one replied.

The realization that I was probably alone in this house enabled me to relax, and, as my eyes adjusted, I began to poke around. I noticed a lot of Native American artifacts placed neatly throughout the interior. On the wooden fireplace mantle were several kachina spirit dolls, a turtle-shell rattle leaned against a wall on the living room floor, and a couple of hoop drums hung on another wall. An impressive collection of quartz crystals of all sizes and shapes adorned a southern windowsill, including one large, clear chunk of quartz that was carved into a perfect sphere — a crystal ball. Brightly colored glass and wooden beads hung over the doorways. A wolf skin lay draped over an easy chair in the living room, and several partially burnt candles were strategically placed on tables about the house.

Even though I had read Lucy’s letter dozens of times, I pulled it from my pocket and read it again to review her instructions.

“In the study (the room with all the books, located in the south west corner of the house), look under the desk.”

The floorboards in the hall squeaked under my feet, deafening in the utter silence of this tomb of a house. For all I knew, the place was haunted. I came to the end of the dark hallway and entered a dim room lined with oak bookshelves. The purple velveteen drapes covering the windows were heavy with the smell of books and age. I pushed them back, inviting the sunlight in.

I immediately spotted a wooden desk in the center of the room, obviously the desk I was looking for. It was littered with papers, receipts, and cancelled checks, as if it were still in use. An address book sat amongst the clutter curiously open to “J.” When I spotted my name in it, I picked up the little black book, quickly leafed through it, and slipped it into my shirt pocket for safekeeping.

One other curious, dark book lay on the desk top: “Materia Medica” by Maisch, dated 1895. A dried leaf marked a page on “Cinchona — Peruvian Bark.” I thumbed through the pages, which described herbs used for medical purposes, then quickly set it back down. I was not in the mood for distractions, wanting to focus on my mission, get it done, and get the hell out of there.

“You will find a red rug on the floor. Move the desk and roll the rug back. There is a trap door here in the floor boards. You will find a metal lockbox there. In it will be instructions. Follow them impeccably.”

I pulled the chair out from under the desk to expose the red carpet underneath. Pulling the desk away from the wall wasn’t difficult, and the carpet rolled back easily enough, exposing a small trap door in the floor. The floor boards had been cut out and then set back in to make a secret hiding place, but they were fastened tightly with several screws. Luckily, my Swiss Army knife had a screwdriver on it and, with some effort, I got the screws out and pried the hatch up. Underneath lay a shallow depression crudely boxed into the floor joists, a carpentry job that an inexperienced person might have done. Inside was a gray tin box, the container Lucy had promised. I lifted it out, surprised at its lightness. It felt empty.

Fishing around in my pocket for the key, I pulled out the house key first, and finally found the lockbox key. I cleared a spot on top of the desk and set the lockbox down. Sliding a chair up, I sat down at the desk and stared at the box, key in hand. I felt very strange at that moment, far from home, in a foreboding, dark house, sneaking around and prying up floorboards to follow the fanciful wishes of a woman I had never known. I paused for a long moment, full of doubt, then that damned ten grand check went dancing through my head and I knew I had to carry this thing through. I couldn’t return Lucy’s money very easily, since she was dead. And although I hadn’t voluntarily entered into any deal with her, I *had* deposited her check and now felt indebted to keep my end of our “agreement.”

The key slipped into the lock, twisted, and the top of the box opened. Resting inside was a single, white, business-sized envelope. Nothing was written on it. I removed the envelope, which felt practically empty, and set it on the desk. Then I shook the box upside down, sure there must be another secret compartment where something important lay. The box just rattled, revealing nothing. I couldn't believe there was nothing else in that box! The envelope, which had not been sealed, contained a business card, a check, and a handwritten note dated April 25, 1999. The note stated:

“Dear Joseph,

“I fear for my life as I write this. If you are reading this now, you have made it this far. Good for you. Here is further incentive for you: I spent nearly thirty years teaching at the University of Montana. My retirement fund has accumulated a sum of about a half million dollars. If you complete my mission for me, it is yours to keep. I have instructed my lawyers, in my will, to hold my estate in escrow for no longer than one year. Within that time, if you have located your personal ‘Balance Point,’ you may claim the estate.”

I could hardly believe it: a half million dollars! The letter, signed by my aunt, went on to briefly explain that she had included a \$20,000 check made out to me to cover any expenses I should incur in the execution of her “mission.” That was the check in the tin box. Yet, she didn't elaborate on what her mission was. Like her first letter, this one was just as cryptic, and even more maddeningly frustrating. I had no idea what she meant by locating a Balance Point — it sounded like new age blather. She mentioned that she had been a university professor — maybe the Balance Point had something to do with that. Or maybe her “mission” had something to do with her tenure at the university.

I sighed and rested my head in my hands, setting the

letter back down on the desk. Well isn't this something, I thought, laughing out loud. A fat check, like in a treasure hunt, but again with strings attached. Lucy's first note from her lawyers had promised me further instructions in a hidden lockbox, but instead she left me with another obscure and confusing note and a stupid business card. *Business card!* I grabbed the card off the desk and read it with intense interest. Maybe there would be a thread of information here that I could actually *use*. "Better Baby Birthing Clinic, Youngstown, Ohio" was printed in an elegant script. Two women's names, Sandy Riding and Cynthia Bernard, and a phone number were displayed below a logo of a stork holding a baby dangling by a diaper. I turned the card over and recognized Lucy's handwriting. On the back of the card she had written "Sisters of the Sacred Circle," and *nothing* else.

I held the card up to the window light looking for a secret message, or secret ink. I considered constructing anagrams from the words "Sisters of the Sacred Circle," thinking that maybe Lucy was a fanatic for riddles and was trying to make things especially difficult for me. I read and reread both the letter and the card trying to find any clue that I may have overlooked, any hidden communication, any veiled meaning. The more I probed, the more shadowy it all became. Shadowy and dim, like the house I was sitting in. The whole thing was becoming an unintelligible enigma, and I was beginning to get a pounding headache.

I had come fifteen hundred miles to locate instructions hidden in a dead woman's floor, and found nothing but a ridiculous letter and a card for a birthing clinic. There were apparently no instructions here at all. I felt like a fool — again. The twenty thousand dollar check was a pleasant surprise, I admitted, although I had no intention of ever cashing it. This entire affair was just too bizarre, and I had bad feelings about it. I didn't want to get sucked in any deeper than I already was.

As far as I was concerned, there was only one thing I wanted to do at that moment, and that was to go home. I

went through the house, carefully putting everything back exactly as I had found it, then hurriedly stepped out the back door into the fresh air and sunlight, locking the door behind me. With the lockbox in hand, I hurried down the rocky, sun-soaked trail toward the rental car. I had been at Lucy's cottage exactly one hour, and that was enough for me.

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