

Snickerdoodles

by Nancy Springer

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“Eat this, son,” Blake’s mother told him, handing him a snickerdoodle. “It will help you know what to do.”

That was different. She usually said, “It’ll make you feel better.” She held the cookie out toward him, and he noted without particularly noticing how its dimpled circular surface was incised with the simple six-lobed design some of the old people called a hex sign. This was not unduly strange. Enola Bloodsworth always decorated her cookies with hearts or tulips or some sort of design. And they did indeed make people feel better. This was a known fact in Diligence, PA, and would have enabled her to make a living off the things if she had cared to sell them. But she preferred, in her cat-walks-by-herself way, to control them, giving them only to whom she chose.

Her son had been the recipient of many such therapeutic cookies. But after what he had been telling her, about all the trouble he had been having in high school, Blake Bloodsworth had been hoping for something more from her than a pastry panacea. He shook his head.

“I’m not hungry. Jocks been slamming you against lockers all day, you wouldn’t be hungry either.”

“Eat it,” she insisted. “Since when do you have to be hungry to eat my cookies?”

“Yeah, and I’m getting fat. It’s bad enough being a geek without being a fat geek.”

He was in fact small and thin, as he had always been. She sat down at the ashwood kitchen table with him and gave him a hard look.

“Eat the cookie,” she ordered.

Tired of fighting, he took the sweet hex-marked circle from her and ingested it. Good, as always. God, why wouldn’t she sell them and make herself as rich as the things that came out of her oven? A peering middle-aged woman, ever housedressed, spending her days in the kitchen passionately baking, she did not eat much or have any visible source of income. She appeared to Blake to live on air, like one of those spidery tropical plants from Spencer’s Mail Order Gifts.

He wanted someday to make something of himself. He was a good student, especially in logical subjects such as math and science. Maybe he could be an

engineer or a scientist, get out of Diligence and out of poverty. His mother's take-it-as-it-comes attitude toward life irritated him. How could anyone so proud be so sloppy, so blurred at the edges, in the way she dressed, her thinking, her housekeeping . . . her kitchen, which might as well be her soul, disgusted him. Dutch-kid plaques on the walls, along with a heart-shaped wreath of plastic roses. More plastic roses perched atop the cupboards. He hated them, and he hated her kitchen even when it was clean, but (to add to his adolescent irritation) from where he sat he could see the mess her day's cookie-making had left in it: clouds of flour everywhere, Crisco and eggs sit-ting out on the counter along with her cookbook —

“Hey.” Blake's mood suddenly changed. Eyes glittering, he got up and went to look at the book as if he had never seen it before, though in fact he had been seeing it all his life. An old volume, handwritten and bound in black leather, it had belonged, so his mother told him, to his great-grandmother. Maternal great-grandmother, of course; he had no paternal relations. Not only was he a geek, but a fatherless geek as well.

“Hey,” Blake repeated. He was be-ginning to get an idea what to do about the jerks in school, one of the best ideas he had ever had; where had it come from? The recipe book looked plenty spooky enough for what he had in mind. On its black leather cover was em-bossed, of all things, the slant-eyed face of a cat. He flipped its pages. Between cobwebs of text (brown-inked in a fine, fine hand) he saw illustrations: stars, several weird kinds of crosses, hex de-signs of all sorts. Cookie decorations. But the buttheads didn't have to know that.

“Mom,” he demanded, “can I take this to school?”

“What for?” she asked in her dry way, seeming as always to know what he was doing, what he was thinking, but ask-ing the proper questions anyway, as if to uphold a formality. Holding up his end, he always lied.

“To show the teachers.”

“You expect them to read it? It's in German, you know.”

“Of course I know.” In fact he hadn't given the inscrutable text much thought. “So I show it to the German teacher.”

She smiled with that odd weary pride and tenderness only mothers seem able to achieve. And if she indeed saw through him as he suspected, her pride had to be not for what he had said but what he actually intended to do.

After supper Blake retreated to his attic, his dusty lair where his mother never came. Once he had turned ado-lescent she had seemed to understand instinctively his need for privacy and his own space, moving him up under the eaves and turning his former bed-room into her storage area.

She understood too much. It was as if she looked at him and read his mind.

Blake lay on his narrow studio couch of a bed and felt faintly uneasy despite his excited plans. It seemed odd to him that his mother had so readily given him permission to borrow the recipe book. She used it every day, or else kept it constantly by her like a lucky charm, and it had been written by her long-dead grandmother, for gosh sake. The grandmother she had been named after. Another Enola Bloodsworth. So it had to be precious to her.

His mother was up to something, Blake decided. And no telling what. Enola Bloodsworth's thoughts and plans were strictly her own. All of Diligence knew her, yet she had no close friends. In a town full of couples and families she stood like a blackthorn tree, in proud isolation. Backward, the name "Enola" spelled "Alone."

From what Blake had heard, his great-grandmother hadn't been married either. He wondered if that long-dead Enola had done as his mother had done, taking a man for purposes of in-semination then discarding him. His mother was quite frank about his father: the man had been no more than a make-do in her life, she scarcely remembered his face, his name was of no importance. She was just as frank about her reason for having seduced her unlikely lover: she had wanted a child badly. *Too bad she got me*, Blake thought. Probably she had been hoping for a girl to carry on the rather eccentric Bloodsworth breeding tradition.

Never mind, Mom. Plenty of the guys in school keep telling me I'm the next best thing.

It was tough being small in Diligence, a steel-mill town where even the nouses stood tall and square-shouldered like the cock-of-the-walk foot-ball-playing Irish and Slavic and Italian guys in their muscle shirts and gladiator footgear. Quite aside from the fact that the jocks sometimes used him as their medicine ball, Blake had a problem with girls. He liked them. There was a word that rhymed with hex, and it was often on his mind, but he hadn't had any. With all the hunks to choose from, girls laughed in his face when he approached.

His mother knew, of course, though he told her nothing. "Someday there is going to be a special girl for you, Blake," she had said to him one evening out of thin shadowy flour-clouded air. "You're small and dark, and that means you're smarter than the others. So let the gadabout girls choose the big dumb brutes for now. Someday there will be a beautiful girl who appreciates you the way I do."

And then she had pushed cookies at his face.

Damn her, she adored him as only a mother could. And he hated her devotion, because it only made him ache for a similar love from . . .

Lying on his chaste bed, Blake allowed himself daydreams: not of any girl he knew, because they all scorned him, but of an ideal lover he had never seen. Passionate. Exotic. Erotic. A few years older than he, maybe, taller than he, even, but only his lovemaking could satisfy her. Greek profile, with that wonderfully patrician straight or slightly bowed line from brow to nose. Masses of black hair, huge dark — no, green — no, *purple* eyes above fashion-model cheekbones. In his imagination he kissed those cheekbones and her full hot lips and her exquisite collarbone and so on down her lithe, throbbing body to her breasts. She had more than two. The ones that showed through her clothes were full and bobbing, like a cheerleader's breasts, but on the rib-cage just below them were two more, smaller ones with supersensitive nip-ples that excited her to do unspeakable acts, and in all the world only he, Blake Bloodsworth the Master Lover, knew of them —

Jesus, Blake mocked himself, adjust-ing the position of his hands. *Stop now and maybe you won't go blind.*

Trying to leave the fantasy woman behind on the bedsheets, he got up and went to his high, narrow window. It was dusk. An orange September moon was rising. Just outside the glass, so near that he could see their ugly little faces, bats were swooping down from the eaves, as they did every nightfall. Things that flew in the dark, like the succubus he could still feel writhing in his brain stem.

Far below, on the stones of the alley, sat a sleek black cat with its aristocratic head tilted back, looking up toward him.

"Hey, Geek," Jason Trovato cheer-fully greeted him the next morning outside the school. "How's your love life?"

"Talk to your dad lately?" someone else put in.

"Long distance?" another butthead, Dane Orwig, suggested. More had gathered, grinning. They never let him forget. As kids they had chased him down and rubbed his face in the dirt. Their tactics hadn't changed much since.

"I've had it, you guys," he told them, his voice coming up squeaky out of his narrow ribs. "Lay off. I'm not going to take your crap anymore."

He knew they loved it when he tried to act tough. As he had expected they would, they laughed and stepped closer. But this time instead of wincing he smiled. For once he felt strong in his secret way, because he had a plan.

"Look," he told them quietly, "I'll warn you once, because hex magic is nothing to mess with. I've got hex witch blood, and now I've been anointed. Any-time I want I can put a curse on you."

He did not himself believe any of this. His plan was to scare them, nothing

more. Most of them had been nurtured under an incense cloud of Catholic mysticism. The few Protestants among them had received their share of fiery Revelation under revival tents pitched in cow pastures. He hoped all of them would at least halfway believe him. Maybe they did. They were still laughing, true, but it sounded forced.

“Hey!” called a big freckled football hero named Patrick Sullivan. “How’d you manage that? Does the coven meet in your ma’s garage, or what?”

“Yeah, geek!” Jason Trovato sounded genuinely eager. “Tell us the details.”

“You stop calling me geek and you can come watch.”

“Sure, geek.”

“So they meet in your ma’s garage,” someone else put in conversationally, “and they have rites, like? What do they do, geek? Dance naked?”

No, dammit, their laughter was not forced. They were loving every minute of this.

“Human sacrifice,” Dane Orwig suggested.

“Hey, geekie-poo!” Patrick Sullivan pushed forward to physically accost Blake. “Burn any virgins lately?”

God burn them all, they knew quite well he was a virgin himself. Coldly furious, Blake threw off the hand clutching his arm. “Shut up. All of you. I mean it.”

Of course they would not shut up. At this point they should start throwing him around. But Blake truly did not feel afraid, and something hard and glinting and more than a little sinister had gathered in his black eyes, because Enola Bloodsworth’s black textbook rode in his jacket pocket. He pulled it out and held it up with its face toward them, like a hellfire preacher shaking the Bible. Slantwise the cat stared at them from its cover.

“I can give you acne like you wouldn’t believe, Sullivan,” Blake challenged. “Hell, why stop at acne? I can give you AIDS. How would you like that, if I gave you AIDS?”

Because he wished it were true (though he knew it was not true) his voice deepened, intense. He knew they would not hit him now, because of the power in his voice. As in fact they did not. They stood wide-eyed, their grins pasted on their faces, and he opened the black book so that they could see the pages, the spiderwebby handwriting gone brown with age, the weird horned moons and

pentacles and pyramids and hex circles and embracing snakes. They stepped back, then glanced at each other and seemed to find a second wind of truculence.

“How you gonna give him AIDS, geek?” Dane Orwig jeered. “Slit your wrists and drip on him?”

Blake told him, “For the last time. Don’t call me geek.”

“Greek, whatcha gonna do about it? Call up your faggot lover, the one with the red tail?”

“You’re so nice, Orwig, I’ll give you a choice.” Blake began to flip through the pages of his grimoire. “Root canal work,” he read, or pretended to read. “Sexual impotence. Drug-induced hal-lucinations. What do you say? Which would you prefer I cursed you with?”

Orwig stared at him.

Raising the black book, Blake smiled like a skull and began at random to read, phonetically intoning the weird foreign words. The recipes or whatever they were sounded wonderfully im-pressive when read aloud in a sonorous voice.

“Hey!” Dane Orwig flinched back. “You Goddamn geek, what the Hell are you trying to prove?”

Blake showed his teeth and read. Even if it was only the ingredients for snickerdoodles, still there was something potent in the feel of the gibberish coming up blood temp from his lungs, his gut, and rushing out of his mouth. He wished the hotshots would hit him, because he had a feeling they could not stop him even if they did.

But they did not. “We’re gonna be late,” somebody nervously suggested, and the group backed off and moved down the sidewalk, collectively saun-tering so as to save face.

It was victory, glorious heady victory, but Blake had his pride. He did not yell *yahoo!* Instead, eyes darkly sparkling, he stood still and finished reading his curse, for effect.

By what must have been either in-credible good luck or because of nerves, Dane went home sick at noon. And Blake’s enemies watched him sideward and let him alone pretty much all the rest of that day.

“I had phone calls from the school today,” his mother informed him over supper. “I understand you were draw-ing satanic symbols in your notebook during English class.”

Good old Mrs. Xander, founder and adviser of the Bible club. He knew he could count on her to spread the word. She was so paranoid, she believed the Procter & Gamble symbol was satanic.

“So what did you say?” Blake asked. It was impossible for him to tell what his mother was thinking. She had spoken in the same level way as ever.

“I told her it was good for children to draw satanic symbols.”

“Good going, *Mom!*”

“She is not pleased with me.”

“I bet she’s not.”

“And then I had a call from your principal,” Enola Bloodsworth said. “It seems you had been heard to claim you have hex witch blood.”

“And?”

“I told him it was quite true.”

Blake had lived long enough to feel some puzzled apprehension; things were going too well. Nevertheless, he smiled widely and asked her, “You mind if I take your book to school again tomorrow?”

“No, I don’t mind. Have some gingersnaps.”

He took several, to thank and please her. All of the dark spicy cookies were marked with hex signs: star hexes, swirl hexes, compass hexes. Come to think of it, this was odd, that she should have started decorating with hex signs. Blake had seen his mother spend hours inscribing the distelfink, the luck bird, by hand on the cookies she gave to acquaintances, but he had never known her to use these other hexes before.

He ate the things. They burned in his mouth and throat, as gingersnaps will. He noticed that his mother ate several too.

The black cat sat under his window again that night, and was still there in the morning, and though it welcomed no familiarities it walked to school with him, stalking at his side like a comrade to combat.

That day things stopped going well.

First thing, during homeroom period, Blake was called to the principal’s office, where the latter, Mr. Lipschitz, awaited him with compressed lips. Mr.

Lipschitz was a big man, an ex-Marine whose excess weight had not affected his confidence in himself. Even the jocks were a little afraid of him.

“Blake Bloodsworth. You stand there and tell me exactly what you have done to Dane Orwig.”

To his chagrin, Blake could do no better than to squeak, “Nothing!”

“Listen, you punk.” Mr. Lipschitz moved closer. “I’ve known the Orwig family for a long time.” The look Mr. Lipschitz was giving Blake quite clearly expressed the principal’s opinion of Blake’s lack of such a family. “They are solid people, not the sort to get upset about nothing. So when I get a phone call from them in the middle of the night and they say you did something to Dane, I believe them.”

“What am I supposed to have done? What’s the matter with him?”

“You tell me, Bloodsworth!”

Blake wondered briefly if he had actually done something to Dane besides worry him. No, that was nonsense. He did not believe in magic, as a future scientist he could not believe such rot, he had to be logical. One of two things must have happened: Dane had worried himself sick, or Dane was smarter than Blake had thought, smart enough to outfox him. Because the Orwigs were indeed not the sort to get excited, he decided on the latter. Dane had to be a better actor than anyone knew.

“Is he saying he has AIDS, or what?”

School administrators in steel towns are not often heavily committed to modern educational ethics. Therefore it was nothing new when Mr. Lipschitz barreled out from behind his desk and started to slap Blake around. Some of the hotshots were almost used to this. But not being built sturdily to stand up to this sort of treatment, Blake began to whimper.

“I didn’t do anything to him! It was just a joke!”

“Don’t sound like no joke to me, putting a curse on a person!” Mr. Lipschitz tended to forget his grammar when impassioned.

Blake yelped, “If you knew, why’d you ask?” and Mr. Lipschitz hit him again.

“Where’s the black book?” Mr. Lipschitz bellowed, mauling him. “Where is the devilish thing? Anything you bring onto school property I got a right to confiscate!”

Blake felt the dark stirrings of anger, and with it, some courage. No way was this rhinoceros going to get hold of his mother's book. Blake had stashed it above the suspended ceiling in the boys' restroom on his way to the office, and no amount of abuse was going to make him say where it was.

"You answer what I asked you, boy!"

Lipschitz smacked him on the ear. Blake said nothing, did not cry out, but with sudden angry strength pulled himself away from the man and glared at him with smoldering eyes. Lipschitz went pale and stepped back, staggering, fumbling at air with his hands. The big man seemed to be suffering some sort of shock. His fat heart bothering him, maybe, from overexertion. Blake could feel no sympathy for him.

"Evil eye," Lipschitz whispered. "Don't you evil-eye me, Bloodsworth. Get out of here. Stay out. Get away from me!"

Blake stared a moment longer, then left the office without getting his hall pass initialed. Now he was an outlaw, not a geek. Being an outlaw felt better, and he decided to keep going. He re-retrieved his mother's cookbook from its hiding place first thing, afraid that if Lipschitz searched he would find it. Then for the same reason he left the school building and walked home, shaky but defiant.

At the front entry, the black cat appeared out of the shrubbery and walked by his side.

Enola Bloodsworth seemed unsurprised to see Blake home from school in the middle of the day, laying her heirloom cookbook on her kitchen counter.

"I don't feel well," he told her.

She did not even blink at the lie. "You're suspended," she told him agreeably, "or possibly expelled. Your principal just called me."

The bastard was okay then. Damn. Blake had hoped Lipschitz would continue with his heart attack and be out of action awhile.

Enola added, "He says you're a dangerous young psychopath."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not. I told him in a very literal way to go to Hell."

Blake sat down at the ashwood table. "Mom," he admitted, "I don't understand you."

“Never mind.” She picked up the black book and sat down beside him with the air of a woman enjoying her-self. “Show me what you read to the Orwig boy.”

Because of the mystic sigils inked on most pages it was not hard to find the passage. Blake remembered: it was the one headed by three inverted crosses and a symbol that reminded him of drawings he had seen on men’s room walls. His mother read the section he pointed out in thoughtful silence. “In-teresting,” she remarked. “You seem to have given him syphilis.”

The air had suddenly turned rarefied. Blake’s mouth came open and pumped.

“Secondary stage,” his mother added. “Rash, lesions, swelling joints, that sort of thing. It may be years before he goes insane.”

“Bu—bu—but—”

“But what, Son? Isn’t hurting him what you wanted?”

It certainly was. “But I didn’t expect it to work,” Blake managed.

“Of course it worked. You told him yourself, you have hex-witch blood.”

Blake jettisoned all thoughts of ever being a scientist, because when he looked into her eyes suddenly it all made sense, he believed her utterly and felt at peace. Her eyes were golden yel-low, the exact color of her rich buttery snickerdoodles. In the black circles of the irises he seemed to see hex signs turning.

“They may cure him,” she said re-gretfully, “if they can figure out what’s wrong with him. They have penicillin these days.”

“They didn’t when you started?”

“They didn’t when the line started. But that’s all right, we get stronger generation by generation. Look what you have done without even knowing what you were doing.” She smiled at him with a mother’s pride and some-thing more, something approaching deification. “I should teach you to bake.”

The feeling of unreasoning peace left him, replaced by a catfooted fear. Of what? Of her? But how could she ever hurt him except by loving him too much?

“Mother,” he told her, “I do not want to spend my life baking cookies, and I do not want to spend my life alone.”

“Of course not, dear.”

Walking to the corner store, Blake trailed rumor like a villain’s cloak: he could

hex with a glance, he wandered the night as a black cat spying on people's dreams, he performed salacious acts with animals. In his garage he had set up a black altar under a black pentacle hex and an inverted cross. There he killed stray dogs and mutilated them and drank their blood. Strange howling noises were heard in the sky above his house at night. Some of the schoolchildren swore they had seen on him the beginnings of a poison-tipped tail. Blake Bloodsworth was a hex witch and a priest of Satan, and wasn't it a shame for that nice mother of his who baked such divine cookies, she must be heart-broken. The boy's unknown father must be the devil himself.

Within a few days every God-fearing woman in Diligence had called her minister. The men of God counseled caution and discretion and not believing everything one heard. Then as early as their busy schedules would allow they met (those of them who practiced ecumenism and were on speaking terms) over morning coffee at the Diligence Cafe in order to discuss paganism, Satanism and the possibilities of exorcism. None of them disputed these isms, but they could not agree on a rite. It was each preacher for himself.

Within a few days Enola Bloodsworth (who belonged to no church) had received phone calls from every priest and pastor in town. In a voice flavored with honeyed venom she told Blake, "I've lived here for forty years and I never knew they cared."

"So what did you tell them?"

"I invited them over for cookies."

Blake eyed her warily. "Mother, what are you up to?"

"Well, if they think you are a hex witch, it seems to me we ought not to disappoint them."

"Mother," he said, using asperity to mask his less manly feelings, "am I going to have to leave town?"

"Why, perhaps eventually, dear. Don't you want to?"

In fact, he did. If there was going to be a life for him, he knew, it was going to be outside Diligence. A life, and someone to love him and teach him the mysteries of the word that rhymed with hex. To some extent, then, she understood him. Cared what he wanted, even. His fear of her eased.

"Yes," he said in a different tone.

"Then stop worrying. Just let me arrange things, dear. We're going to have a nice time with these people. You'll see." Humming, she stood at the kitchen counter

and sifted flour white as voodoo capons and angel wings.

Her sanguine attitude was what puzzled Blake and made him feel so ambivalent about her. She should have showed some anxiety about the trouble he was in, if only because he was missing so much school, yet she seemed to feel none. Instead, she smiled at him across the kitchen table with those bright tawny eyes. Ever since he had hexed Dane Orwig she had been going through her flour-clouded days in some sort of unaccountable excitement, anticipation, exaltation, beatification.

But he had long since given up trying to understand her. It was enough that she was on his side. "What kind of cookies you baking today?" he asked idly.

"Pinwheels."

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Enola Bloodsworth did not own a car, but used her garage for storage. A lawnmower sat foremost, two rakes hung above it on nails, discarded furniture and a chipped plaster flamingo were pushed against the walls. Most of the floor space she kept clear so she could get to what she wanted. It was all quite innocuous, as the ministers could see when she took them in there that evening.

"Sit down," she invited. She had swept the place and set up lawn chairs, so the ambience was not unpleasant by Diligence standards. "We're going to have our refreshments here. It's too crowded in the house." No wonder, since she had invited all of them at once. She scuttled out, leaving them with Blake.

He stood with their glances crawling over him like black ants. Mr. Lipschitz had come too (despite the nervous prostration he blamed on Blake's having ill-wished him), and Mrs. Xander, and a few of the other teachers, as well as the mayor and the chief of borough police. There were not enough chairs for everyone. Blake stood near a cardtable holding a borrowed coffee urn in the cleared space near the back wall. The others crowded near the door, and he did not dare to look directly at any of them in case his mother really was trying to get things back to normal.

Was she? With that going-to-heaven glitter in her eye?

"Here we are!" She came back carrying a huge tray of pinwheels. "Please," Enola invited, offering the chocolate-and-vanilla cookies. "Please, everyone, have some coffee and something to eat."

No one could resist Enola Bloodsworth's cookies. Even the chronic dieters took at least one. Blake had about six himself. At least they were not hex circles. The thought caused him both relief and disappointment. Nothing extraordinary was

going to happen after all — A black cat appeared at the open garage door.

Dusk was darkening the sky, and a few stars had appeared, chips of broken glass left on a shadowy inverted floor. Enola Bloodsworth did not turn on the lights in the dim garage. Yet none of the guests had left. They took second helpings, seeming charmed by the occasion or by her courtesy.

The cat paused regally, surveying the scene, then with the dignity of a death angel walked in. Enola Bloodsworth looked down into its yellow eyes and smiled.

“Hello, Grandmother,” she said.

Blake looked at the pinwheel cookie in the palm of his hand, and it started to turn.

And he saw now. Of course. It was a hex sign after all, of the most potent kind, not just incised but ingrained, hex to the core, why had he not seen it so before? They all were. Swirl hexes, symbols of transformation.

He looked at the cat, at the soul-deep black slits in its golden eyes.

Grandmother?

Its eyes were hex signs that spun before him, yellow and black, then changing, all the many colors of magic circling, circling in kaleidoscope symmetry. Cat eyes had taken over his world, they were big as sky, older and more powerful than stars and stripes, and they saw through him, they imbued him with hex magic and the power of his own aspirations —

Was he in fact a hex witch? Or was he the victim of his mother’s lifelong plan?

He looked at her and saw instead the Grecian girl of his dreams.

All was changed. Where the coffee urn had squatted on its cardtable stood instead a black altar with a barn-hex top on which a black book lay open. Over it hung an inverted cross made of bleached bones and decorated in the most appalling bad taste, with blood-red plastic roses. The whole place was dotted with them, like a cheap Chinese restaurant: the furniture, the besoms that hung instead of rakes on the walls, the walls themselves, now rough-hewn stone instead of white plaster. A collar of the fake flowers bobbed on the neck of a white goat which stood bleating near the altar. Mr. Lipschitz wore one in his lapel and leered at Mrs. Xander, who had a wreath of the hideous things on her head. In fact all the guests were flower-bedecked and already in an orgiastic mood. They had gathered, after all, for a most special celebration of the black mass: a witches’ wedding.

The bride wore a black lace mantilla and a blood-red satin dress and carried a heart-shaped bouquet of red plastic roses in her right hand. Her left hand she held out to Blake. She looked at him. She smiled.

He knew he should have run. Yet, Christ, the invitation in that smile was . . .

She was the girl he had created in his daydreams, exactly, in every detail: those full lips, those high cheekbones, that nubile torso with — he blushed, thinking of those extra, secret breasts. Knowing someone had watched his dreams like a peep show. Yet wanting to be lucky enough to find out: were the supernumeraries there, included in the package? Was she really his dream lover in every detail?

Or in every detail but her huge dark eyes. . . . He had settled on purple, but her eyes were any color and all colors. They took him in and spun him around. They were hex eyes.

Am I changed? he wondered. *Have I grown taller?* *Will I come out of this a man?* Glancing down, he saw that he also was dressed all in slim-fitting red, in a scarlet tuxedo and black cummer-bund, with a plastic rose at his heart. All right, so his mother had wanted to decorate with the tawdry things. It was her party. He no longer minded.

The black cat leaped to the hex hub atop the altar, sat by the open book. Everything stopped whirling. Time stood still.

Will tomorrow come? If it does, will I be here or somewhere else?

The cat at the altar said in a soft, trenchant voice, “Blake Bloodsworth, approach your bride.”

He should run. He should run. Maybe Diligence and a world of commonplace troubles waited outside.

Yet she was so beautiful. And he knew she cared about him in her way. And he knew he loved her. He had al-ways loved and feared her, as long as he had been alive.

Her left hand still reached toward him. He took the necessary step, took her hand in his. It felt warm and lithe against his fingers, his palm.

The cat said, “Enola conceives and bears a son. The son marries and begets Enola. One becomes two so that two can become one again. Generation by generation I grow stronger, I who walk alone.”

One becomes two so that . . .

“Step to the altar, you who are two.”

Blake obeyed her command, but looked at his bride. Her smile told him that tonight he would lie with her and learn all her mysteries.

What it did not tell him, he had the brains to know: afterward, in the morning light, he would look into her eyes and see truth and maybe not like it. Though he would have preferred green or purple, already he foresaw what color her eyes would be, come daybreak: from under the masses of her black hair they would shine out at him, all too familiar. The hex-yellow color of snick-erdoodles.

But in the night he would not have to see. For as long as it lasted he would think only of the night.

There had to be a way to make night last forever. And he was small and dark and smart; maybe before dawn he could come up with it.