

Water, Green River, Daybreak

By Sarah Prineas

* * * *

Marfa Petrovna Kopelnikova's cat, white as a ghost and about as substantial, got up from her place on the windowsill and began grooming herself with long swipes of her tongue.

"Company coming, is it, Katzy?" Marfa went to the stove and put the kettle on. A moment later, she heard a knock at the door. The white cat and the old woman exchanged a look. Marfa shrugged and went to answer the door; Katzy returned to her ablutions.

Marfa had been expecting a visitor. Her landlord, Mr. Salvador, had warned her yesterday that he would be sending someone to meet her, a young man. She would look him over before Mr. Salvador rented him a room. The landlords and caretakers of the other crumbling apartment buildings on the ugliest block in Miami Beach thought Mr. Salvador was old-fashioned for having a witch on the premises. The others installed conduction rods and convection coils on their roofs to deal with the elemental bolts that struck the buildings during the storms of late summer and early fall. But Mr. Salvador's aunt practiced Santeria down in Little Havana; he knew a thing or two about magic. So he didn't begrudge Marfa the tiny apartment at the top of the building, just so long as she kept the magical influences flowing steadily and used her powers to protect the building during the storm season.

Marfa opened the door just as the prospective tenant was raising his hand to knock again. The young man was clearly expecting someone taller, but he quickly lowered his gaze to meet Marfa's bright blue eyes.

Marfa examined him: he was tall, thin, and tense, with untidy black hair and wary dark eyes. There was something else as well, the slightest coruscating aura of elemental magic, not quite enough to be visible, but not quite a trick of the eyes, either. Definitely not harmless, Marfa decided, but not an immediate danger.

"Come in, you," she said, standing aside. During the last storm, Marfa had placed a magical ward on the threshold to keep uninvited people out. The young man hesitated, and then flinched slightly as he stepped through the doorway, as if he'd felt a tingle from the ward. Marfa looked at him more carefully; he should have felt nothing.

"I'm Marfa Petrovna Kopelnikova," she said. "You talked to Mr. Salvador about the apartment, yes?" The boy nodded, looking around the room. Marfa watched his wandering gaze, noticing what he noticed. His eyes skipped over the worn furniture; lingered on the skeins of dried herbs hanging from the ceiling in the kitchenette; gave the cat two or three long seconds, which she returned; and returned to Marfa's lined face.

"You're Michael Damson, yes?" Marfa asked. He nodded. "Come and sit

down at the table, we'll have a talk, drink some tea." Obediently, he followed her further into the room, sat where he was directed. From the corner of her eye, as she readied the teapot and mixed the herbs for tea, Marfa watched Katzy, to see what her opinion of the young man would be. The cat was often more sensitive than her mistress. But Katzy had returned to her place on the windowsill, ignoring the stranger in her territory. A suspended judgment.

Marfa set two cups on the table. He hadn't spoken yet, she realized. "Not much to say for yourself, huh?" she prompted. The young man shrugged and gave a half-smile. "You want the apartment, you got to talk to me," she insisted. "Tell me about yourself; what do you do?"

He cleared his throat and refused to meet her eyes. "I'm a musician," he mumbled. Marfa asked him what instrument he played. "Guitar."

A loud thump from the bathroom interrupted Marfa before she could ask the next, obvious question: electric guitar with a loud amplifier? Or quiet classical guitar? A second thump followed close after the first.

"What was that?" The young man's glance darted toward the bathroom door.

"Ah, *domovoi*," Marfa answered.

Her visitor stared at her warily. "I guess you want me to ask you what a *domovoi* is."

"It's no secret, boy. *Domovoi* is a house spirit, protector. I got so many *domoviki* wanting to move in here I have to beat the walls with a broom to get them to leave." Marfa sipped her tea and watched him.

"Mr. Salvador said you were a witch." His face looked doubtful. "Can you do magic? Can you cure sickness?"

"Heh," she chuckled. "Most of the 'magic' cures involve salt and pepper, or a raw egg, or a pinch of tobacco, all mixed up with a cup of vodka. Now, that would make anyone feel better, eh?"

To Marfa's surprise, the young man grinned in response, and his face changed from unrevealing wariness to something much younger and happier. The smile clinched the matter for Marfa. He would do, this Michael Damson.

He played electric guitar, she found out later, but he practiced with the amplifier unplugged, to spare the neighbors. After he'd settled in to his new apartment, Marfa started inviting him up for tea once or twice a week. He was like a new penny, this one, and might be snatched up and spent by any warlock on the lookout for new talent. If Marfa Petrovna Kopelnikova had anything to do with it, Michael would learn to use whatever power he possessed for good purposes. She would keep an eye out for a decent warlock to train him; in the meantime, she would watch him herself.

* * * *

“Hey, *babushka*,” Michael said, stepping over the threshold.

“You look like a crow of ill-omen, you,” Marfa answered. “Come in and have tea.”

But he looked more like a heron, or some other tall, thin bird, with his long legs and hunched shoulders. Marfa handed him a cup of tea and pushed him down into a chair. Katzy watched from her place on the windowsill, her ears flicked forward as if listening to their conversation.

“What are we drinking?” he asked, and took an experimental sip. “Could use some honey.”

Marfa fetched him honey. “Just peppermint and hibiscus. How goes the search for work?”

“All right.” Katzy leaped onto the table and put her head under his hand for a caress. “I got a gig playing music for TV commercials.”

“A gig, huh? A gig means good money? You’ll earn enough to pay rent?”

He grinned. “Yeah, no problem. Lousy music, though.” At Marfa’s questioning look, he explained how the music was supposed to sell used cars, and not to be beautiful or moving in any way, except maybe to move the listener to reach for his wallet. Marfa finished her tea and rose to take her cup and saucer to the sink.

Michael joined her, taking the teacup from her hand and washing it himself. “So what are all these plants here?” he asked, with a nod toward the skeins of herbs hanging over their heads. He finished washing his own cup, set it on the draining board, and dried his hands.

Marfa pointed out the different herbs. “That one, on the end, with the long leaves, is spiderbund, good for the nerves.”

“And this?” He reached over his head to point out another skein. “Looks soft, like rabbit ears.”

“Felsom, for protection.” Marfa saw that his interest was genuine. Herbs were witch magic, female magic, but no harm could come of him knowing, she thought. “Take them all down, tall one, and I’ll show you.”

Michael repeated after her the names of the herbs and their uses like a litany. “Angelica for a merry heart, meadowsweet for bravery, purple loosestrife to control demons, barberry and mugwort picked from nine fields for fertility, belladonna for flying. Can you really fly?”

Marfa snorted in answer.

Most of all, Michael seemed to love to hear Marfa tell stories of the tiny village

in Russia where she had grown up. Like Miami Beach, it had been located at a nexus, and the winter storms there had been fierce, the magic distilled into icy crystals that sleeted down, burying the village for months under drifts of snow and frozen element. Not until spring and the big melt would the villagers creep out from their snug little homes to see what transformations the magic had wrought. Once, Marfa recalled, the lake had frozen solid, and when it had thawed in the spring the villagers had found it to be stocked full of tiny, silver fish.

“Like sardines, they were, and we ate them all the summer and jarred them in oil for the next winter, and for once nobody went hungry. The next spring, when the lake thawed, they were gone, as if they’d never been there at all.”

“I’ve never seen snow,” Michael noted, and sipped his tea. They’d been talking for hours and were on their third cup; only crumbs remained of the cookies Marfa had baked.

“Oh, snow. There’s snow, and then there’s snow,” Marfa said. Michael raised his eyebrows, his signal for her to go on talking. “Plain snow is just cold and light and a bother to shovel from the footpath. But elemental snow, that’s different. It flashes like electricity, and if you touch it without gloves, your hand tingles and you can flick sparks off your fingertips. At night it sparkles under the moonlight like a thousand candles. There are some people in the far north who live all the winter in houses built of elemental snow, and a stranger people you will never meet.”

“I bet there were some strange people in your village, too,” Michael teased.

* * * *

On another visit, Michael wanted to know about magic spells. “How do they work?” he asked.

“There are professors at universities who study magic; maybe they could tell you the how of it.” Marfa was sitting in her rocking chair, Katzy on her lap. Michael leaned against the wall next to the window.

“So how do *you* make it work?” he asked.

“All right, curious. You have the *zagovorui*, the rune spells. For protection, those are. And the *podbljudnaja*, for divination.”

“So you just say them, and they work?”

Marfa nodded. “The witch says the words and they focus the flow of magical element in and around her. My grandmother taught me, as hers taught her.”

Michael was silent for a moment, contemplating the board floor beneath his feet. “Who are you going to teach?”

Katzy leaped from Marfa’s lap, as if startled. “When the right girl comes along, I’ll know it,” Marfa answered.

“What if the right girl is a boy?” he asked quietly.

Marfa knew what he was asking. Gently, she tried to explain. “Witch magic is for girls. A boy with talent studies with a warlock. Different techniques, different spells, different purposes.” She bent to pick Katzy up again. “One day I’ll find a girl to train up as a witch.”

He didn’t answer. Not long after, he left.

* * * *

As spring turned to summer, they met often. As he listened to her talk about magic, the habitual wariness in Michael’s eyes was replaced by eager interest. Too bad he’s not a girl, Marfa found herself thinking, for he would make a fine witch.

Sometimes they would walk down to the beach. They walked slowly, through the rancid smell of garbage from the open dumpsters behind the hotels, past swarms of starving feral cats lurking in dark alleyways, distracted by the flocks of chattering parrots perched on the telephone wires, and ignoring the stares of the bored retirees on their balconies.

“I’m looking forward to the storms,” Michael said. They came to the wooden stairs leading up to the boardwalk, and he took Marfa’s arm to help her. “Where I come from, we don’t have any storms.”

“Where you come from, huh?” Despite their growing friendship, Michael had said very little about his past. “Where’s that?”

“Southern California.” That explained his unfamiliarity with magic, his seeming unawareness of the possibilities opened up by his own talents. He told her about the wrecked, dry landscape of strip malls and interstates. “In August and September we’d hear on the news about the magical storms out here. I always thought it sounded cool.”

“Cool?” Marfa snorted. “You get a lot more than ‘cool’ during elemental storms.” She told him about how you never knew what would wash up onto the beach during an elemental storm: enormous kraken, drifts of pearlescent seashells, debris from wrecked ships, gold doubloons. The winds raged, rain washed down in floods, elemental bolts struck over and over again, and the city emerged on the other side of the storm transformed, trees uprooted, streets rearranged. Animals from the zoo wandered stunned along the Art Deco avenues. Odd bumps and thumps emanated from beneath the boardwalk. Clouds of butterflies glinted like rainbows over Biscayne Bay.

Perhaps this was why so many refugees from the world had settled here, Marfa speculated. Miami Beach was a city of the displaced, of people washed up on this wide white shore by war, politics, intolerance, poverty. The Cubans, the Haitians, the Jews fleeing from the second World War, the gay men, the old survivors—they all had seen transformation, devastation, and when it happened

again during the great storms they knew that their lives would go on, afterward. Perhaps not as usual, but they would go on.

“And what brought you here, Michael?” Marfa asked, as they strolled along the boardwalk, watching the waves roll endlessly up onto the sand. He looked away and shrugged, asking her, instead, to tell him more about the *zagovorui* for bringing happiness.

* * * *

The next day, he knocked at her door in the middle of the morning. Marfa had not expected to see him again so soon. She had been scrubbing the floors, pausing now and then to flick soapy water at Katzy, who perched, fastidious, on her windowsill.

When she answered the door, she saw that something had changed.

“Hi, *babushka*,” he began as usual, but his shoulders were hunched, and his eyes had regained their old wariness. Silently, she opened the door wider, inviting him in.

“I don’t want to mess up your floor,” he said.

“Doesn’t matter. Come in, you.”

For a moment, she thought Michael would refuse, but then he shrugged and stepped across the threshold. Katzy sat in her place on the windowsill, glaring at him, but he ignored her. Marfa went to the kitchen, ladled soup into bowls.

“You’re too thin, like you got a tapeworm. Come and have some borscht.” She placed the bowls on the table and gestured for him to sit.

“It looks like blood!” he said, fascinated, and reached out a finger to touch the viscous red liquid.

“No, it’s beets.” She eyed him. “So, tell me what’s the matter.”

His eyes shifted away and he picked up the spoon.

“I met this guy, last night. At a bar. I had a gig with this band and we went out drinking, after, and this guy came up and started talking to me. He said he’d been watching me and he could see I had a talent for magic.”

Marfa nodded. It was true.

“So, anyway, he said he would teach me some things, if I wanted him to.”

“Some things,” Marfa repeated. “And what did you think of him, this ‘guy’?”

“I don’t know,” Michael answered. He crossed his arms over his chest, as if he were cold. A subdued thump came from the *domovoi* in the bathroom.

“He scared you,” Marfa observed.

“Yeah, a little. He seemed really powerful. In a different way from you.”

“What’s his name?”

“X,” he replied.

Marfa snorted. “X? What kind of *govn’uk* name is X?”

“It’s short for Alexander,” he said, and put down his spoon, the soup untasted. “He’s a warlock. He said he’ll teach me magic.” His gaze flicked to the skeins of herbs hanging from the ceiling. “Real magic.”

“Real magic,” she echoed. “And what is it that I practice, eh?”

“X says it’s old woman magic, not very powerful.”

“Mmm-hmmm. And what is it that he’s going to teach you?”

“He says magic should be used to change the world.”

“Give me an example.” She crossed her arms.

“All right,” Michael answered angrily. “I had a ... friend, in L.A. He got sick, and then he died. He was only twenty-three.”

“And this X says he can cure this sickness?”

Michael nodded.

Abruptly, Marfa stood. “Stay away from him.”

Michael looked up at her, startled. “What?”

“You heard me, boy.”

“Then you’ll teach me?” Hope bloomed in his eyes, but it quickly faded when he saw Marfa’s uncharacteristically stern face. “You won’t.” He frowned. “I just want to *do* something about all of the—” he gestured with his hands. “The wrong things that happen.” He stood up, slender musician’s hands braced against the table. “X doesn’t want me to talk to you anymore.”

Marfa stepped over to him and looked up into his dark, unhappy eyes. “Magic can’t be used to change the world, Michael; you should have learned that much from me.” She reached out and grasped his arms. “If this *govn’uk* X tells you otherwise, he’s lying.”

His troubled eyes grew angry, and he pulled away from her touch. “Yeah, but at least he’ll teach me. You won’t even do that.”

“I have my reasons,” Marfa said.

“I know. Witches teach girls, warlocks teach boys. What if I want to learn witch magic? Why can’t you just teach me?”

She shook her head. The mistake was made, and past fixing. Especially now that he’d taken up with this X fellow.

Michael’s anger turned to resignation. “It doesn’t seem like a very good reason to me. I’d better get going.”

“You’re going to this X?” Marfa asked.

He nodded.

“I warn you, Michael Damson, this is not a good man. You should stay away from him.”

Michael didn’t answer. He took a step toward the door. Marfa shifted to let him pass.

He stood with his hand on the doorknob, shifting uncomfortably. “Thanks for all the tea and cookies, though.”

“Huh,” Marfa said. With gimlet eyes, she watched him open the door. “Bring this friend of yours to visit some time,” she said. “I’ll make him some tea and cookies, too.”

Michael nodded, and fled.

“Tea and cookies,” Marfa muttered, dumping borscht into the sink. “Old woman magic. Huh.”

* * * *

Sooner than she expected, Michael brought his new friend to meet her.

She and Katzy had been listening to the radio, hearing the weather forecasters talking about the first big storm of the season, how it might be the storm of the century, the storm of a lifetime, and how it was heading straight toward Miami Beach. Twenty-four hours, and it would be upon them with all its transformative power. This wasn’t news to Marfa, who could feel the elemental forces building in the air, swirling around the city like a great, invisible river, but she listened to the news reports anyway. Suddenly, Katzy leapt from her lap and stalked to the door, her fur raised. A moment later came the knock.

Marfa answered the door, Katzy twining nervously around her ankles. The two men filled the doorway like shadows; they both wore black overcoats and heavy, studded boots. Without a word, Marfa stood aside for them to enter. Michael stepped inside, then hesitated, his nervous glance flicking between Marfa and X. His friend stood as if rooted in the hallway outside.

“Aren’t you going to invite me in?” X asked, his smile like a shark’s. He was

as tall as Michael, but heavier, older, with a round moon face, round spectacles, thinning blond hair, blank eyes. Instantly, Marfa was on her guard; something about him was—not right. Maybe asking Michael to bring him hadn't been such a good idea.

“Come on in, X,” Michael said. Freed by the invitation, the big man stepped across the threshold and into her apartment, smiling widely. As his studded boot touched the rug, the *domovoi* in the bathroom banged twice, shivering the walls.

“Mike told me about your plumbing problem, Mrs. Kopelnikova,” X said, gesturing toward the bathroom door, his expressionless eyes taking in the room in one sweeping glance. Marfa looked at Michael, but he seemed to be mesmerized by a hole in his sleeve and wouldn't meet her eyes.

“He also told me you practice witchcraft,” X went on. “It must keep you busy.”

Marfa ignored him and went to the table. She lifted the teapot. “Tea.” She pointed to a plate of cookies. “Cookies.” He wouldn't take one, she knew, for to accept her hospitality would be to declare truce between them.

Without being asked, X took a seat at the table. Michael hovered in the background.

Marfa sat in her rocking chair next to the window and folded her hands, ready to listen.

X began to speak, his oily voice mesmerizing. “Now, Mrs. Kopelnikova, as I've explained to Mike, here, your magic is what they call ‘traditional.’” Marfa heard the sneer in his voice as he pronounced the word. “You do a lot of stuff with herbs and spells, right?”

Marfa inclined her head.

X snorted. “Such a waste. You old witches think channeling the element is so great. But magic is there to be manipulated by those with the strength and the power. We practice the magic of blood and sinew; magic as we deploy it is unopposable. Our warlocks are the chosen few, and we will use our talents to change the city. Maybe someday we'll change the world!” He paused. “Go ahead and shake your head, witch, but wait'll you hear this. We've spent the last few months building a system of conduction rods around the city. When this storm hits, we'll harness the element and force it to do our bidding. We'll make the city into a paradise! No more refugees, no more damaged people, no more of those pathetic boat people from Haiti or Cuba. Only the strong and the whole will live here. It will be a brave new world with men such as us in it. Don't you think, Mrs. K.?”

Marfa shuddered and shook herself.

“What's the matter, witch?” X grinned. “We just want to make the world a

better place; what's so bad about that?"

Katzy leaped from Marfa's lap and arched her back, hissing at the men. "It is time for you to leave," Marfa said, standing and pointing toward the door.

Grinning, X rose from his seat and prepared to go. "Come on, Mike, we've got work to do." He strode from the room, his overcoat fluttering behind him like black wings.

Michael moved to follow X, but Marfa quickly crossed the room and grasped his arm. "This is brute force magic, these *styervo* practice; it has nothing to do with life or subtlety," she whispered. "If you learned anything at all from me, you can see this."

He hesitated, his dark eyes meeting hers for the first time. But X's voice from the hallway interrupted them. "Let's go, Mike. I'm not going to wait all day."

Pulling his sleeve from Marfa's grasp, Michael left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

"*Pizd'uk*," Marfa cursed. "I've seen this before, Katzy, this *govn'uk* magic, this Nazi magic." She stomped to the table and cleared the tea cups and plates, piling them in the sink. "What they want is to remake the world in their own ugly image."

She fetched a chair and yanked down skein after skein of herbs, selecting wormwood, felsom, and purple loosestrife for protection, mixing them up with her own spit and blood and clippings from her hair, whispering a *zagovorui* over and over again as she worked. Using the mixture, she barred all entrances to her apartment against her enemy. She would be ready, when the time came.

* * * *

The night came on and the storm gathered its power. Outside the window, the wind howled and the rain pelted down. Marfa imagined the beach, so placid and white all summer, lashed by the raving waves, great chunks of sand bitten and washed away, the Art Deco hotels cowering under the onslaught.

At last, using all of her strength and concentration, she opened herself to the storm, inviting the magical element to ground itself through her. Bolt after bolt struck the building. The walls shuddered and the roof above her creaked as if pried at by giant fingers of wind. Above the building, she imagined, those with talent might see an immense, wind-whipped vortex of magical element spiraling down, herself the focus of its energy. At the tip of the whirlwind, she sensed the magic sparking like electricity in her nerves and thrumming in her bones, and felt the thistledown hair on her head stand on end.

As the storm reached its height, they came, as she knew they would. She heard a rushing sound distinct from the storm like the wings of a thousand blackbirds, and then a pounding at the door. She flicked a finger and the door flew

open. On her shoulder, Katzy hissed and spat, her tail twitching madly. The hallway outside teemed with shadowy, black-clad figures. At their head stood X, his face pale and twisted with fury.

“Witch!” he shouted. “You dare to steal our magic?” He lifted a studded boot to step into the room, but the rune spells of protection crackled in the doorway and he was forced to leap back, singed.

Marfa smiled. All of their conduction rods, set to capture the energy of the storm, had been rendered useless when she had drawn the element down through herself. These warlocks would wreak no changes on the city tonight. She raised her voice to chant a *zagovorui* of diminishment, and her words rang out like a trumpet. The mass of shadowy bodies in the doorway drew back.

Then it heaved, and spat forth a single figure: Michael. He looked frightened and pale in the stormy light. A hand pushed him from behind, and he stumbled over the threshold, into Marfa’s apartment.

X returned to the doorway, his face gleaming with triumph. “Invite me in, Mike,” he ordered. The dark shadows drew up in ranks behind him. “Invite me in,” X repeated, his voice growing angry. “Invite us in, or we can’t come in!”

Marfa opened her arms, beckoning. Michael hesitated like a hunted rabbit, looking from X to Marfa and back again. Surely, she thought, he could see that X’s hateful magic had no place in it for a man like him.

He spoke, and she barely heard his voice above the roar of the storm. “Will you teach me, Marfa?”

Sparks leaped from the ends of Marfa’s hair as she nodded. At the same moment, a huge bolt struck the building, and Marfa absorbed it without flinching, knowing that to those watching she must be surrounded by a sparkling blue aura of elemental magic.

Michael’s eyes widened, and he seemed about to speak. Then, X filled the doorway, his round spectacles flashing. “Let me in, Mike!” he screamed.

“How can I refuse him?” Michael shouted.

Marfa smiled. He would learn, soon enough, that the kind of bastard magic practiced by warlocks like X was not best countered with strength. “Just close the door, Michael.”

For a moment, Michael seemed to doubt her. Then he turned his face away from X, and Marfa rejoiced to see the youthful smile she had come to know well forming on his lips as his eyes met hers. He reached out to close the door.

Howling in rage and pain, X thrust a hand through the crackling ward in the doorway and gripped Michael by the throat. Marfa leaped up from the rocking chair

with a shout of surprise—the wards on the doorway should have been impregnable. She scrabbled in her mind for the *zagovorui* of protection, and cursed herself as the rune spell eluded her. X had time to shake Michael once, twice, before Marfa, with a flick of her fingers, sent bolts of element scorching across the room, flinging the intruders down the stairs and slamming the door. Michael dropped to the floor like a bundle of rags.

Marfa released the storm from her control, allowing the vortex of magic to whirl away. As the light of the element faded from the room, she lit a candle and went to kneel beside Michael. She straightened his arms and legs and put a pillow under his head. In the flickering light, she held his hand and chafed his wrists. The storm raged outside the window, but she paid it no mind. The city would have to do battle with the storm as best it could; she needed her strength to save her apprentice.

* * * *

As the night wore on, Marfa kept watch over him, chanting the *zagovorui* of healing. “Water, green river, daybreak,” she began. “Sun by day, moon by night. May the mother wind cover you with her veil. May she blow away all your aches and pains, tears and sorrows. All will be well.”

At first, his body twitched and shook under her hands. She tried feeding him tea, but he only retched it back up again. “All will be well,” she insisted, until her voice grew hoarse. With the element still coursing through her body, the cure should have been effortless, but her ministrations had little effect. A core of darkness within him resisted her spells and herbs. At last, though, she felt the rune spell take hold. The words bathed and renewed him, releasing him from the warlock magic that held him.

As she continued to work on him, he lay unmoving but for his harsh breathing, shrouded in his black coat, his face pale. Katzy paced up and down the room nervously, finally coming to rest curled up against Michael’s side, lending him her strength. Marfa worked on. Gradually, as dawn approached and the winds of the storm died away, his breathing eased, and he slept.

* * * *

The room was gray and quiet with morning when Marfa climbed stiffly to her feet. She left her silent apartment and passed down the stairs and out the front door, knowing that she had to assess the storm damage before she could rest. Katzy could look after the patient, if he awoke.

The city felt preternaturally still, as if exhausted by the beating it had taken during the night. All along the street, the trees stood like bedraggled maidens, shaken and weeping, some of them prone, flattened by the ravaging wind. Leaves and branches, roof tiles and bits of garbage littered the streets. A sign reading *¿Por qué pagar más?* had gotten wrapped around the trunk of a palm tree on the corner of Fifth and Collins.

Marfa climbed the wooden stairway leading to the boardwalk and looked out over the wide white sands and the still, luminous water. She found herself thinking of her old home. The Russian village was long gone, had been swept away in the terrible war which so many years ago had stormed across Europe, destroying all before it. As a girl, along with her sisters and girl cousins, she had learned magic at her grandmother's knee. They were all gone now, lost in the diaspora of the war, herself the only survivor.

Slowly, she picked her way over the sand to the edge of the ocean. No wind blew, and the water lay still, a mirror reflecting the sky. In the distance, cargo ships headed back to port after riding out the storm at sea. They seemed to be floating up into the air on water the same still silver-gray color as the sky. A light, teasing wind began to blow, ruffling and darkening the waves, and the ships settled back down onto the water again and headed home, to safe harbor.

Copyright © 2001 Sarah Prineas

*

Sarah Prineas is a Ph.D. candidate in English and rhetoric and has just moved from Germany to Iowa City, which is not as flat as you might think. She is a vegetarian. She ... um ... has no pets. She thanks writers Scott Anderson and Daniel Goss for help revising this story. Another of her elemental magic stories, "From the Journals of Professor Copernicus Finch, M.S. Hex.D.," is currently available at [Ideomancer](#).