



THE WIDOWS OF EASTWICK

'This isn't writing.
It is magic'
*International Herald
Tribune*



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The Widows of Eastwick
by
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i. *The Coven Reconstituted*

THOSE OF US acquainted with their sordid and scandalous story were not surprised to hear, by way of rumors from the various localities where the sorceresses had settled after fleeing our pleasant town of Eastwick, Rhode Island, that the husbands whom the three Godforsaken women had by their dark arts concocted for themselves did not prove durable. Wicked methods make weak products. Satan counterfeits Creation, yes, but with inferior goods.

Alexandra, the oldest in age, the broadest in body, and the nearest in character to normal, generous-spirited humanity, was the first to become a widow. Her instinct, as with so many a wife suddenly liberated into solitude, was to travel—as if the world at large, by way of flimsy boarding cards and tedious airport delays and the faint but undeniable risk of flight in a time of rising fuel costs, airline bankruptcy, suicidal terrorists, and accumulating metal fatigue, could be compelled to yield the fruitful aggravation of having a mate. Jim Farlander, the husband she had conjured for herself

from a hollowed pumpkin, a cowboy hat, and a pinch of Western soil scraped from inside the back fender of a pickup truck with Colorado plates that she had seen parked, looking eerily out of place, on Oak Street in the early 1970s, had, as their marriage settled and hardened, proved difficult to budge from his ceramics studio and little-frequented pottery shop on a side street in Taos, New Mexico.

Jim's idea of a trip had been the hour's drive south to Santa Fe; his idea of a holiday was spending a day in one of the Indian reservations—Navajo, Zuni, Apache, Acoma, Isleta Pueblo—spying out what the Native American potters were offering in the reservation souvenir shops, and hoping to pick up cheap in some dusty Indian Bureau commissary an authentic old black-and-white geometric Pueblo jar or a red-on-buff Hohokam storage jar, with its spiral-and-maze pattern, which he could peddle for a small fortune to a newly endowed museum in one of the burgeoning resort cities of the Southwest. Jim liked where he was, and Alexandra liked that in him, since she as his wife was part of where he was. She liked his lean build (a flat stomach to the day he died, and never performed a sit-up in his life) and the saddle smell of his sweat and the scent of clay that clung, like a sepia aura, to his strong and knowing hands. They had met, on the natural plane, when she, for some time divorced, had taken a course at the Rhode Island School of Design, where he had been enlisted as a fill-in instructor. The four stepchildren—Marcy, Ben, Linda, Eric—that she saddled him with couldn't have asked for a calmer, more soothingly taciturn father-substitute. He was easier for her children—half out of the nest in any case, Marcy being all of eighteen—to relate to than their own father, Oswald Spofford, a small manufacturer of kitchen fixtures from Norwich, Connecticut. Poor Ozzie had become so earnestly

involved in Little League baseball and company bowling that no one, not even his children, could take him seriously.

People had taken Jim Farlander seriously, women and children especially, giving him back his own poised silence. His level gray eyes had the glint of a gun from within the shade of his wide-brimmed hat, its crown darkened where his thumb and fingers pinched it. When he was at the pottery wheel he tied a faded blue bandana around his head to keep his long hair—gray but still streaked with its original sun-bleached auburn and gathered behind into an eight-inch ponytail—out of the clay, wet and spinning on the foot-powered wheel. A fall in his teens from a horse had left him with a limp, and the wheel, which he refused to electrify, limped with him, while out of the spinning his masculine hands shaped blobs upward into graceful vessels with slender waists and swelling bottoms.

It was in bed she first felt his death coming. His erections began to wilt just as she might have come if he had held on; instead, in his body upon hers, there was a palpable loosening in the knit of his sinews. There had been a challenging nicety in the taut way Jim dressed himself—pointy vanilla-colored boots, butt-hugging jeans with rivet-bordered pockets, and crisp checked shirts double-buttoned at the cuff. Once a dandy of his type, he began to wear the same shirt two and even three days in a row. His jaw showed shadows of white whisker underneath, from careless shaving or troubled eyesight. When the ominous blood counts began to arrive from the hospital, and the shadows in the X-rays were visible to even her untrained eyes, he greeted the news with stoic lassitude; Alexandra had to fight to get him out of his crusty work clothes into something decent. They had joined the legion of elderly couples who fill hospital waiting rooms, as quiet with nervousness as parents and children before a

recital. She felt the other couples idly pawing at them with their eyes, trying to guess which of the two was the sick one, the doomed one; she didn't want it to be obvious. She wanted to present Jim as a mother presents a child going to school for the first time: as a credit to her. They had lived, these thirty-plus years since she had lived in Eastwick, by their own rules, up in Taos; there the free spirits of the Lawrences and Mabel Dodge Luhan still cast a sheltering cachet over the remnant tribe of artistic wannabes, a hard-drinking, New Age-superstitious, artsy-craftsy crowd who aimed their artifacts, in their shop-window displays, more and more plaintively at scrimping, low-brow tourists rather than the well-heeled local collectors of Southwestern art. Alexandra for a time had revived her manufacture of little ceramic "bubbies"—faceless, footless little female figures, pleasant to hold in the hand and roughly painted in clothes worn as close to the skin as tattoos—but Jim, jealous and dictatorial in his art as true artists are, had been less than gracious about sharing his kiln. In any case, the miniature women, their vulval cleft boldly dented into the clay with a toothpick or nail file held sideways, belonged to an uncomfortable prior period of her life, when she had practiced, with two other Rhode Island divorcées, a half-baked suburban variety of witchcraft.

Jim's illness drove her and Jim down from safe, arty Taos into the wider society, the valleys of the ailing, a vast herd moving like stampeded bison toward the killing cliff. The socialization forced upon her—interviews with doctors, most of them unsettlingly young; encounters with nurses, demanding merciful attentions the hospitalized patient was too manly and depressed to ask for himself; commiseration with others in her condition, soon-to-be widows and widowers she would have shunned on the street but now,

in these antiseptic hallways, embraced with shared tears—prepared her for travel in the company of strangers.

She could not believe it—how totally Jim was gone, his morning absence as vivid as a rooster's wake-up crow, his evening non-appearance a refusal bound, she felt, to be cancelled, any moment, by the scuffling sound of his boots limping across the entry hall or the squeak, two rooms away, of his potter's wheel. Three months after his death, she signed up for a ten-day tour of the Canadian Rockies. Her old, married, cosseted self, a bohemian snob proud of her careless, mannish clothes and high-desert privacy, would have sneered at the feigned camaraderie of an organized group tour. She foresaw the daily duty to rise and gorge on cafeteria-style hotel breakfasts en route to the day's marvel, and the resisted but irresistible naps in the swaying bus in clammy proximity to an alien body, usually that of another plucky widow, overweight and remorselessly talkative. Then there would be the sleepless hours, amid worrisome small noises and mysterious tiny red lights, in a king-size bed built for a couple. Hotel pillows were always too stuffed, too full, and lifted her head too high, so she would wake, groggily dumfounded to have slept at all, with a stiff neck. The pillow next to hers would be undented. It would dawn on her that she would never be one of a couple again.

But, born in Colorado, she thought it an amusing idea to follow the Rockies north into another country, where a dramatic landscape did not flatter the rapacious vanity of the United States. And Canada, she discovered, did have its good points: airports not bribed to install television sets pouring forth an inescapable babble, and voices whose familiar North American accent was braced by a few leftover Scots vowels, and a gray imperial gravity of public architecture. This national identity had been created by the sensible

spirit of business enterprise, linking the provinces like great beads on an iron railroad line, rather than by any evangelical preachment of a Manifest Destiny—manifest only to its Anglo perpetrators—that had hurled the agglutinated United States westwards and then outwards, across all the oceans, where its boy soldiers lost limbs and died. The daily death-tolls from Iraq were worth escaping.

On the other hand, Canadian hotel restaurants seemed to think Frank Sinatra and Nat “King” Cole were the latest thing in background music, and the giant cruise ships docked in Vancouver were headed off to dreary cold Alaska. Canada, its tundra and icefields and miles of forest pressing its population down tight against the forty-ninth parallel, had in self-defense embraced Green-ness, trying to make a pet of it, mining for tourist dollars the nostalgia and righteousness inherent in its cause. Bring Back Nature—who could object to that? But for Alexandra, totem poles and moose had a basic boringness. She felt, up here, trapped in an attic full of stuffed animals. Nature had been her ally in witchcraft, but still she distrusted it, as a conscienceless killer, spendthrift and blind.

After a day in Vancouver, and another in determinedly quaint Victoria, the tour—forty travellers, none of them young and eight of them Australian—boarded a sleeper train and were dragged northwards through the dark. They woke amid mountains dazzling with the yellow of turning aspens. The tour had reserved a viewing car for their party, and Alexandra, hesitantly entering, after a heavy breakfast fetched by lurching waiters in the dining car, was greeted with hesitant smiles from the already seated couples. She took one of the few seats left and was conscious of the vacancy at her side, as if of a monstrous wen throwing her face out of symmetry.

But, then, she could never have talked Jim into coming on such an adventure. He hated foreign countries, even the Virgin Islands, where, a few times early in their marriage, she had persuaded him to take her, as a break from the long Taos winter and the ski-season traffic jams along Route 522. They had arrived in St. Thomas, as it turned out, in the late afternoon, and were caught, in their rented Volkswagen Beetle, in the evening rush hour, Jim trying to drive for the first time in his life on the wrong side of the road. More unfortunately still, they were surrounded by black drivers who took a racist pleasure in tailgating them and in rebuking every sign of automotive uncertainty with prolonged, indignant honking. Though eventually they found the resort, at the end of a poorly marked road, Jim got sunburned the first day, having scorned her repeated offer of sunscreen, and then got deadly sick on some conch salad. Whenever, ever after, he felt bested in an exchange of accusations, he would remind her, in detail, of that week that almost—twenty-five years before he really died—killed him.

Now, in Canada, there was not a road or car in sight, just the tracks and tunnels ahead as the train bored upward through mountains splashed with quaking golden leaves. “There’s Mount Robson!” a woman behind Alexandra excitedly told her husband.

An Australian across the aisle, in an attempt at friendliness, said to Alexandra, “Mount Robson ahead,” as if she were deaf as well as alone.

From behind this speaker, another voice—not Australian, less peppy, with a tinge of the American South—explained to her, everybody around her suddenly solicitous, as if of a defective in their midst, “The tallest peak in the Canadian Rockies.”

“Really? Already?” Alexandra asked, knowing she sounded

stupid and covering herself with "I mean, shouldn't they have saved it for later in the tour?"

Nobody laughed, perhaps not hearing, or understanding, her little joke. The train was taking a long curve, and the gleaming mountain-tip sank from view behind the aspens; the peak had been oddly regular, like a pyramid in a set of child's blocks, but white. "How high is it?" she asked aloud, determined to combat her sense of non-existence.

Again, she had struck a silencing note. "Nearly four thousand meters," an Australian voice volunteered.

She had trouble translating out of the metric system, and, borrowing a bit of her late husband's xenophobia, refused to try. The slightly Southern voice understood, and explained, "Nearly thirteen thousand feet, ma'am."

"My goodness!" Alexandra said, beginning to enjoy her own inanity. She turned her head to look at her informant. He was lanky, like Jim, and lean-faced, with deep creases and a mustache just long enough to droop. His costume, too—faded tight blue jeans and a long-sleeved red-checked shirt—reminded her of Jim. "*Thank* you," she said, with more warmth than she had strictly intended. Perhaps this man with his air of dignified sorrow was a widower. Or was waiting for some slow-moving wife to join him here in the viewing car.

"Mount Robson isn't on the tour," the wife behind Alexandra was saying in her ear, in a penetrating, slightly vexed voice. "It's in a separate national park from Jasper."

"I really haven't done my homework," Alexandra apologized, backwards, experiencing a flash of hatred—the old impatient, witchy, bug-zapping kind of hate she thought she had long outgrown. Why should this woman, common and shrewish from the sound of her voice, have a live husband, when she, Alexandra, did not, sitting here exposed on all sides to these well-meant interventions from strangers?

“That’s my style, too,” a male Australian reassured her. “Learn as you go. It’s my wife reads the books ahead.”

“And sees to the tickets and passports, you lazy sod,” the wife said, in the humorous tone of a practiced complaint.

The train, smoother-running than American trains, on Canadian National Railway tracks welded and upheld by the government, continued to nose skyward. Mount Robson again appeared above the trees, its whiteness marked now by black striations—by snow-striped patches, faceted as if the peak had been carved to a point like a flint weapon. The hard cobalt of a picture-postcard sky pressed on these concave contours until the peak disappeared again behind the waves of yellow leaves. “It says here,” the Australian wife loudly announced, holding a guidebook, “it was first climbed in 1913, by an Austrian bloke named Kain. K-A-I-N. It says the Canadian mountain men didn’t like it when foreigners were the first to climb their mountains to the top. Got their ruddy noses out of joint.”

Alexandra sighed and closed her lids, excusing herself from hearing any more. She wanted to relieve them all of having to pay her any further attention. Being a big woman, tall and somewhat broad, her full head of chestnut-brown hair still only half white, had given her a presence when she was younger but now that she was old and mateless made her conspicuous, an embarrassment to herself. *Kain, Cain*, she thought. The first man to do a truly wicked deed, worse even than eating the apple of knowledge. Slew his brother, Abel. Thirty years ago Alexandra had slain a sister witch: she and Sukie Rougemont and Jane Smart had killed little Jenny Gabriel, though the death certificate blamed metastasized malignancy of the ovaries. The curse of it was always there, inside Alexandra, even when she didn’t close her eyes, a sour gnawing. As negligible as a worm in the earth during the

daylight hours, at night in her dreams the curse grew large and threatened to eat her alive. Again and again her dreams returned her to that hectic period, when Darryl Van Horne had taken as wife not one of the three of them but a younger woman, fair and ivory-skinned, with innocent, ice-blue eyes—too damned innocent, the older witches had felt. Had Jenny been less innocent, had she been as corrupt as they were, they would have accepted her besting them as part of a game among equals, marrying a man who after all hadn't cared for women, it turned out, and was not even rich, as they had been led to believe. They had imagined him, conjured him out of their own needs.

In her dreams Alexandra often searched, in a thicket of brambles—swampy tufty earth yielding and treacherous beneath her cold feet—for something deadly, a tinfoil egg of death, whose discovery would reverse Jenny's death. She had never found it, though sometimes she dreamed of discovering a golf ball stained half-brown by Nature's chemicals, and sometimes a tiny skeleton, that of a human infant, dead of starvation and the cold. She woke then with a start, recalled to her children, remembering how casually she had treated them, neglected them, though all four were still alive, living far away, in four different states, with children of their own and middle-aged complaints. They were beyond any help or harm from her, far from whatever imperfect nurture she could extend to them. Her sins kept her awake. Jim used to be there, warm and long-limbed beside her, his tobacco-roughened breath rasping in the dark, his musty male smell tinting the square space of the bedroom, where moonlight blanched the rectangular window shades. The homey reality of him would anchor her senses after the fluid nonsensical terror of her dream, her younger self battered by guilt as if by water pouring into a sealed ship cabin, the circumstances

of that time jumbled but unmistakable, her frantic wish to *undo* denied, her soul forever suspended, like a staring fetus in formaldehyde, in guilt.

As her pupils dilated to take in the patches of light in the room, she would realize that those circumstances had been long shed. Jenny Gabriel was dead—a little skeleton, as in the dream—and the man gently snoring beside her was her man, her husband, who in his abstracted fashion loved her, with what love he had left over from his precious pots and vases, their soft-lipped mouths and pliant waists. No man can love like a woman can, they don't have the internal organs for it. Rescued from Eastwick, she had resolved to be a good wife, better than she had ever been for poor Ozzie. When Jim in those first years of their marriage, not broken to it yet, would come back from Eagle Nest or Tres Piedras radiating the smell of liquor and showing a cockiness in the face of her questions that betrayed an encounter with another woman, she suppressed her feelings, having had prior experience of what a poison possessive jealousy can be. And his evenings away from her slowly grew fewer in number; he knew she had made the effort, difficult for her, of forgiving, and grudgingly granted her in turn more respect and tamer behavior.

Now the dreams of Eastwick still recurred, but Jim's leathery long body was not there when they ended, and reality was a hotel room where an elderly woman had hung up her old-fashioned XL underwear to dry on the bathroom cord. Red lights like little dragon eyes blinked at her from the corners, meaning she didn't know what. Fire protection, she guessed. Or a run-down battery. Or an unexplained emergency. She felt shapeless in her nightie, a pale cloud in the mirror. Her body in its gown gave off that sweetish stale smell, like cooking cauliflower or the underside of oilcloth,

which she remembered from standing close to her grandmother with a child's sensitive nose. *Ruddy noses out of joint*, that Australian bitch had said.

As the tour moved south, by bus, from Jasper to Calgary, through a series of huge old resort hotels thrown up by Canadian ambition and painstaking Scots craftsmen, Alexandra kept her eye on the lanky mustached man with the Southern accent. The group's sole loners, they could not help winding up walking side by side to scenic vistas and thunderous gorges, and sharing a table at some meals, though always in the company of others. A short Asian couple, he a Taiwanese and she a Malay, both of them eagerly conversational but hard to understand, were easy to join at a table—easier than the other Americans, who sensed something occult and off-putting about Alexandra and whose smugly mundane mind-set and demotic lingo did rouse, as they suspected, her snobbish distaste, and easier than the eight Australians, handsome and prosperous and bump-tiously happy to have escaped, if only for some weeks, Down Under. Once the Australians had eaten and drunk their way through the Rockies, they were going on to devour Texas, its steak and rodeos, and then to New England, its lobsters and leaves. “But,” Alexandra pointed out to one couple—a bloke and his sheila, gendered aspects of a single rugged Australian identity—“the prime leaf season may be by.”

“A bit or two's bound to be left,” the male said cheerfully. “We'll extrapolate.”

“Our guidebook,” the wife said, “says it lasts to the middle of November. It's the lovely village greens with their white Puritan churches we're dying to see.”

“A lot of them have burned down, over the years,” Alexan-

dra told the couple, with a vehemence that surprised her, too, “and they get replaced by hideous cut-rate glass-and-steel bubbles, or by pre-fab A-frames. Or are not rebuilt at all. New England isn’t as religious as the rest of the country.”

The two faces glazed over, trying to picture these disappointments, and penitently Alexandra assured them, as they turned their backs, “You’ll have a *wonderful* time. Be sure to try fried clams.”

The Asian couple, too, impressed her with their appetites. Little and trim as they were, they heaped up sausages, pancakes, and unnamable Oriental delicacies (Canada catered to Asia, its Pacific near-neighbor) from the breakfast buffet on their plates, their smiling lips bright with oily intake. They ran through roll after roll of film, and never missed an optional mountain hike or an arranged opportunity to shop. At Jasper, bravely embarking to walk by herself around the little lake the hotel faced, Alexandra took a turning that led her onto a golf course, groomed for play but without a player on it. It was eerie; but then she saw the Asian couple, small in the tapering green distance, coming merrily toward her, crying a mysterious word that sounded like “Rost! Rost!”

As they drew close, the Malay woman, who had the better English, explained: “We made same mistake. Very tricky turn back there. We met worker. He told us, not very poritely, this private golf course. He said go back to dirt road to go around rake.”

“You rost, too!” her husband summed up, his grin triumphant.

Alexandra found herself, unaccountably, blushing, feeling herself stupidly torpid as she loomed above this bustling, undiscourageable pair. Together the three of them strolled back up the deserted fairway, past a green still pale with the

morning's dew, and deep sand bunkers without a footprint, and a fresh-mowed tee whose markers were water-smoothed stones taken from the lake shore and painted different colors for different abilities. Banished from this artificial paradise, they came back to the unmarked dirt road; Alexandra turned right, and the couple hurried to the left, to return to the lodge in time to take a bus to a tram to some celebrated outlook miles away. Alone again, she reflected upon the appetite for life, and wondered if her own relative lack of it, and the stab of nausea she now and then felt in the midst of the ordinary, were symptoms of disease. She had always dreaded cancer, and had given her cells more than seventy years in which to scramble their code and percolate through her veins with a deranged passion to multiply.

The road became a path in woods—white spruce, Douglas fir, paper birch, quivering aspen, a froth of nameless undergrowth, and, in a passage of sunlight, a thick stand of lodgepole pines, straight and slender and some of them, suffocated by their own shade, fallen into the lake, littering the edge where small waves cast nets of refracted sunlight across a shallow bottom of rounded stones. Huffing plump girl joggers and a couple on the tour, gnarled Québécois even more elderly than she, passed her coming the other way, counterclockwise. For stretches she was quite alone. If you meet a grizzly bear, their group had been advised by their tour guide, hold utterly still; if it's a brown bear—smaller, without a hump—fight like hell. Alexandra listened for wildlife and heard nothing, not even a bird. But the lake shimmered companionably, reflecting as in a lightly corrugated mirror the aspens' trembling gold. Beyond the trees across the lake, the Rockies bared themselves; they were a pleasing dove-gray, a giant geological sample of Canadian understatement.

The mountains were made of limestone, laid down by unthinkably many small aquatic creatures armored in delicate shells. Their tour guide, Heidi, an ebullient former airline stewardess, had explained that a billion and a half years ago this part of the globe was just off the western shore of what is now North America, on the sloping edge of the continental plate. Sediments transported by vanished Mesozoic rivers accumulated and were compressed, and a change of direction in plate drift about two hundred million years ago crumpled and folded the great sheets of solidified sediment, thrust them upward, and piled them into the tilted layers and sharp peaks, honed and whittled by wind and abrasive glaciers, of the apparently motionless mountains around her. It was all—the continental drift reversing direction, the folding of rocks like ribbon pasta in the earth's warm ovens—as challenging to belief as the most fantastic dogmas of religion, but accepted by everybody sane in the modern world. The weight of evidence accumulated all the time, like all those protective shells contributed by tiny creatures as keen to live, as self-important and ultimately insignificant as she. Alexandra's relation to Nature had always puzzled her; she leaned on Nature, she learned from it, she *was* it, and yet there was something in her, something *else*, that feared and hated it.

At an exceptionally lonely section of the road, another presence, large, strode toward her. As quickly as her heart skipped, her mind hoped it was a grizzly and not a brown bear, and all she had to do was remain still. She was too old and feeble to fight like hell. The presence metamorphosed into a tall, erect-striding man, the melancholy-mustached semi-Southerner, wearing a blue-checked long-sleeved shirt. His name was Willard McHugh, and he came from the

Nashville area: he had told her this much about himself. But now, intent on keeping his pace, he merely nodded, in a formally friendly way, and kept striding.

She, too, had not been tempted to stop. They were too much out in Nature, it would have felt indecent. He was shy, and so was she. Nature had burned them, somehow. Heidi had explained how lodgepole pines need fire, to crack open their resin-sealed cones. It was horrifying, really, how complacently Nature accommodates violence; Nature loves it and needs it to such an extent that the wardens of Canada's national parks, in the absence, these last seventy years, of enough natural forest fires, had taken to setting them, to initiate regeneration and encourage biodiversity. Diversity—why do we all assume it's so good, when it is uniformity that makes us comfortable?

Thinking of such basic things, and of how uncannily fate had presented her on this trip with Jim's physical doppelgänger, Alexandra missed the short cut back to the lodge through a parking lot. She worked up such a sweat of annoyance and panic, walking the long way around the serpentine shore, with its picnic tables and trash barrels unctuously urging her not to pollute—to be kind to Nature instead—that she had to take her second shower of the morning just to make herself presentable for lunch.