

*Incantation for my Mother, the Universe (A Story for First Love)*

By Avalon Moore

I have always been a lucky person. A tea leaf reader named Pinky once told me that although I am naive and perhaps a little reckless, I am surrounded by angels, and they keep me safe. Later, a fortune teller in a public park in St. John, New Brunswick said that she could see fairies in the air all around me, following me.

I don't know about angels or fairies, but I know that whatever they are, my mother called them to me. When I was very little she began to make spells of protection, weaving them around me like threads of chainmail. The spells came in the shape of bedtime stories and anecdotes and memories, incantations sewn carefully into our day to day life.

My mother's stories were brewed out of the poison that she had been made to swallow. She extracted this poison and stirred her love carefully in so that for me, the evil could become an antidote. So that my body and spirit could be clad in armour made from the steel of the knives that had wounded her.

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If someone tells you that their first love wasn't their mother, they are either lying or forgetting.

Love begins for all of us in the dark, as we float tethered by a cord to the heartbeat of the universe. We love the universe that we have appeared within because we need it. Love and need begin all tangled up together; the knots that they make between them are what we spend the rest of our lives holding onto or untangling.

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Sometimes you can only tell the truth by guessing at it. I don't remember floating inside my mother's darkness; I don't remember how it felt for her to be the whole fabric of space and time. The part that I do remember comes years later, after the soft dark universe inside my mother released me out into the hard bright world.

To remember the way that our mothers sparkled like nebulae in our early days of being alive is to remember the full sweet ache of love before we've been made cautious by pain. She would give me smooth river stones with tiny hearts drawn on in permanent marker to hold in my pocket all day at school so that I could reach down any time I liked and feel that she existed, and that she loved me, even while we were apart.

Not everyone is so lucky: a mother can be any kind of universe. You can be born into any kind of tangle. A first love is not always a happy story. But here is a strange, true thing: it's dangerous to have a first love where nothing gets broken. It's like an egg never hatching.

If you're unlucky, your mother breaks your heart; if you're lucky, you break hers.

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My mother's stories were full of a bright burning darkness (the poison was dark, her love was bright).

She told me about the men who followed her along the wooded path on her walk home from school. She told me about the friends of her father who waited for chances to grab her breasts or unzip their pants in front of her when she was still just a child. She told me about the man who stalked her for months, following her on the bus ride home from work and calling her on the phone just to breathe into the receiver.

She told me, after almost every incantation, *I never told anyone*. She told me, *I was shy, I was embarrassed*. She told me, *I thought it was my fault*.

She looked at me and said, *I don't want anything like that to happen to you*. And the angels moved in closer; the threads of chainmail wove tighter. She said, *You can always tell me. No matter what it is*. And the wings of the fairies made a hum like a hive of bees ready to swarm.

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There was a man sitting on the curb waiting for the bus. I remember precisely what I was wearing, and the sun on the pavement. I was twelve years old. I remember the exact moment when I smiled automatically at a stranger for the last time without considering the possible consequences.

Casually, the man at the bus stop tossed me a poisoned handful of words. I remember the way my guts went cold and dropped down the elevator shaft inside my body before I had even fully understood what he had said, and it snapped through me: the knowledge that I had brought this moment upon myself. Everything in me vanished.

My cardboard legs brought me the last half-block home and I did not turn back to see if he was watching me cross my front lawn and disappear through the door.

My mother was in the kitchen. I sat down upon the wooden bench, my insides full of silence. The poison tasted like shame. But when it hit my bloodstream, my mother's antidote woke up inside my body and I began to shake.

My mother turned toward me and I spat the poison out of my mouth and onto the linoleum of the kitchen floor. When it ran up into my mother's ears, she lit on fire. The fairies were screaming a war cry. In an instant she became as large and bright as the sun, and she flew like a burning angel out the door in pursuit.

I sat still and numb, wrapped in the blanket of her fury, her rage in that moment the tenderest of gifts. The man was gone by the time that she got to the corner, but it didn't matter. The angels fluttered their wings gently around me. The threads of the chainmail grew stronger.

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When a big enough star collapses, it makes a black hole, and a black hole is always hungry.

I understand how a burning weight can become heavier and heavier inside of a person until it begins to buckle and fold in on itself and fall inward. When the weight of a star falls inward, sometimes the falling never ends. My mother is full of stars, and some of them have collapsed. Some knives open wounds that become hungry mouths. If you have been fed poison when you needed water, the thirst will go on and on. Did you know that there are black holes at the centre of most galaxies, slowly pulling in and swallowing stars and planets and light and time?

The spells that my mother cast over me are the stories of black holes forming.

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A first love where nothing breaks is a kind of slow, long stillbirth. I have always craved aliveness. I have always wanted to hatch.

It can be difficult to be born into a universe that needs you. When I was around the age where men at bus stops and in passing cars began to leer and honk their horns is when I first began to notice the pull of the black holes inside my mother. Before I understood what they were I could feel their gravity, the low hum of it coming off of her body, and I began to resist.

That is how it started: the slow, long breaking. The hatching of the egg.

I have always been a lucky person. My mother has never broken my heart, but I have had to break hers—countless, repetitive fractures, little by little. The cords of love and need twist and tangle and the work of pulling them apart can seem endless. I know the hunger of a black hole: it feels like an infinite softness. But the chainmail that my mother wove around me to keep me safe from men and their selfishness hardened me in more ways than one.

The antidote in my veins will not allow me to be swallowed. The angels always pull me back from the void. She gave me these gifts, and I am grateful. I don't know how to stop breaking my mother's heart.

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I daydream about feeding each of the men who hurt her, one at a time, into the black holes that they opened with the casual cruelty of their unrestrained need. I will come to them in the night as a burning angel in chainmail. The drone of the fairies' wings will rise to a deafening roar in their ears as I force them to look me in the eye. I will watch the twin lights of fear and understanding appear, as they come to know the infinite, burning weight of consequences that have been long delayed. And then, as the wound opens, as the black hole's jaws yawn wider, I will let them go and allow them to be devoured.

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I know that the universe forgives me for hatching. I know that she doesn't blame me for breaking her heart.

I daydream about gently pulling the cord of love free from the cord of need—of us both floating free and untangled, in all the light and all the darkness. I am a fragment of the universe that I was born into, witnessing itself. I dream of lending my mother my eyes.

I picture us each as our own centres of gravity, alone and complete, burning and bright. I see my mother, the universe, in shining chainmail, the wings of angels and fairies beating in the air all around her.

I watch, marvelling, as a cascade of worlds and stardust and comets spin, suspended in the endless miracle of her gravity.