

# We Seditious Herbalists

## Chapter 1

I left turmeric and lemonbalm and hawthorn tincture for celeriac, rutabaga, macouns and galas and honeycrisps, six kinds of local kale. It wasn't my choice, but also not exactly not my choice.

Alphonse is stocking radicchio. He works the left and I work the right.

I am stocking cilantro. When a customer asks which is cilantro and which is parsley I don't tell them, I show them. I say: *See the leaves, this is cilantro.* I say: *See the leaves, this is parsley.* If I am feeling like I have something extra that night (I work nights), I will say: *And this is flat parsley, do you see?* And: *This is curly parsley, do you see?* To me, curly parsley looks like something they used to put on the corner of a plate of meatloaf at a diner, not something you'd eat. But I am not paid to offer those kinds of painful memories.

Alphonse is on the chopping block. About to get fired, I've heard. He is four years away from retirement and changes his shoes—both pairs orthopedic, black--halfway through each shift. We don't have lockers so we store our coats and personal gloves above our plastic cubbies, or we stuff them into crevices and gaps between boxes of garbage bags and mesh sacks of yellow and sweet onions. We wear ice-proof work gloves and keep our hats on because it's cold. Not so cold out on the floor where we just were, but cold in the stock room, where we are now.

"I've been here long enough to remember this was Brussels," I say.

Alphonse ponders the empty chute of shelf I'm standing before.

"That was Brussels for twenty-three years," he says, with sad reverence.

We haven't had Brussels sprouts all year and we don't get our hopes up, as people used to say, they are going to return. Even management doesn't have the heart to ask us to store

something else there in its place. On brighter days, the palpable absence feels like a respectful memorial; on darker days, like a missing slab at a morgue.

“We still have apples,” he says. “So many apples.”

“Organics and locals,” I say. “Heirlooms ad hybrids.”

Alphonse knows I grieve my recent departure from Wellness, and that my grief is inflected with anger, a deep cast-iron heat; but he gives me my distance, doesn't poke at my coals.

I haul a couple cases of broccoli, bland stuff from barren California, onto my cart, make my way back out to the floor. Deftly maneuvering the blue cart stacked with fruits and vegetables through the various aisles of various departments and not hitting a single person is maybe my favorite thing about the job.

And so when I nearly hit Ewa turning a corner with a price-sticker gun in one hand and an amber bottle of skullcap in the other (my brain registered the skullcap later at home, when I was herb-journaling before bed), it feels like a sadness. Like a dripping sadness, not a pouring sadness, and it seems she feels similarly by the look in her eyes.

“Goodness,” she says. “I can do better than that!”

“We're equally responsible,” I say. “I can—”

“No, no, I mean I can do better than this. Than this skullcap.”

“Are you depressed?” I say. “Worn a bit thin? Too porous at your edges?”

“For a customer, Michael.” She rolls the one eye I can see in profile, walks away.

I love her. I almost told her, the day she fired me. My heart breaks like a wave, an ordinary wave on an ordinary beach, each time I am near her.

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She is not the Giacometti of paint, she says, nor the Varda of stillness. She is Suzanne.

“Yes, my child,” I say, “you are correct, I stand corrected, this is true. You are you.”

I like to name-drop artists less to help Suzanne situate her evolving aesthetic than, vainly—I can tell she can tell—to remind myself I was once an art history professor in a previous life.

She stands at the easel and takes off her beret and wipes her brow. That my seven-year-old daughter works up a sweat painting is a wonderwheel of emotions careening inside me.

“Look kinda like milky oats,” I say. I’m thinking too of Brancusi’s *Bird in Space*, how the series of birds looks like sleek torpedoes, metallic thistles, and wondering if he was tempted to stop at the first fourteen, a sonnet of futurist birds without wings, without feathers.

Suzanne holds two brushes in one hand, a tepid cup of linden tea in the other. She’s trying to encourage my herbal study, though I haven’t the heart yet to confess to her that I lost my job in Wellness and am back in Produce, back where I started.

Started again, another life inside another life, here in Vermont.

“Did you really name me after a Leonard Cohen song?” she says.

“Your mother and I both,” I say.

“So *recherché*,” she says. Then, looking me in the eye: “Mom never plays Leonard Cohen at her house.”

“I kiss you, Suzanne,” I say. I look down at the ballpoint-penned haiku in my lap, still awaiting its final line. All I’ve got so far is: *Milky oats harbor / forever chemical pulse*. I need something about a lighthouse, maybe a ship.

The wintry town below us, here in our little apartment on the hill, glitters in slices of sunlight like an absentmindedly shaken snowglobe.

Silas is a Dark Ecologist, a relationship anarchist, and a distiller of handcrafted aquavits.

And he's also the Assistant Manager of Wellness.

Oh: and he's sleeping with Ewa.

"Miss us yet?" he says, as I push my cart past the elderberry syrups and astragalus extracts.

"Every day," I say. "But especially when I have a cold, an ache, a sore, or a pang. It's then I want to come pitch a tent in Wellness and have you build me a fire."

Silas can't seem to decipher my tone, and I suppose I'm both serious and what people used to call snarky. I think he's too young to remember that word, so I say: "I'm being serious. You're quite the guru. And Ewa too, of course."

He winces. "We should not be carrying this anymore." He hands me a bottle of black cohosh supplements.

I scan the label. *Traditionally used by Native Americans ... not intended for use by pregnant ... vegetable magnesium stearate ... Puritan's Pride.*

"Been harvested to near extinction," says Silas.

"I remember reading that," I say. I read more of the bottle. "This company is based in Ronkonkoma."

"Algonquian," says Silas. "The name of that town. Also let me say, as we stand on Abenaki land, that the name *cohosh* in their Native tongue means *rough*."

"Ewa takes this?" I say, then realize my mistake.

"I know you visited her cabin last week," he says. "She told me. No need to hide it. And look, I have seven lovers in Vermont, and one in upstate New York. I'm non-hierarchical in

everything I do. Whatever happened between you and Ewa—happened between you and Ewa. I offer my blessings—if that feels like a consensual transactional energy.”

“Sure,” I say.

He begins fidgeting with the cap on the cohosh. “Damn it,” he says.

“Why are you trying to open it?” I say.

He looks at me. “I give it to her for her moon time.”

I think of Ewa’s own expression, *on the rag*. And I ache to hold her.

A customer interrupts us with a question about the co-operative’s hours, and Silas gives them a smiling, sourpuss reply. I want him to heal, just as much as any of us. I really do.

## **Chapter 2**

On lunch break I unpeel the plastic safety wrap from my newly purchased tincture bottle and squeeze ten drops into my paper cup of filtered water. *Motherwort*. Not to be confused with the other *-wort*, *mugwort*, motherwort is good for those who move through life with quivering kidneys and gastrointestinal tracts out-of-whack and who make rash choices, those whose hearts palpitate and somersault.

How did I lose my job in Wellness? Why did Ewa break off our connection like a blighted chestnut branch? How long can I hold out in Produce, a job I like okay but isn’t the best for the mind and body of a single dad with arthritis in both hips and about to turn fifty next spring?

Marina sits across from me.

“This okay?” she says. “You look deep in thought, or dream.”

“Yes,” I say. “That’s considerate to ask. I used to dream the same dream over and over. It stopped after the divorce—is that weird? Do you have recurring dreams? Nightmares?”

“Let’s back up the bus,” she says. “That’s a lot of questions. First—no, not weird. I actually *started* having recurring dreams after my divorce. So I guess I’m answering two of your questions with one stone.”

“Is that something they say in Guyana?”

“No,” she says. “Just fucking with the idiom. I like to do that to white people in Vermont. Since I like you, I’ll just admit that. But the dreams—tell me yours first, since you brought up that nether realm.”

“I’m standing on a beach,” I say, “watching a woman in a one-piece teach a child how to fly a kite. But the kite keeps nose-diving into the sand. They try again and again, nosedive nosedive nosedive. And the dream ends, or gets fuzzy and evaporates, I guess, when I walk toward them to help and the kite string trips me and I realize it’s coiled around my ankles, my calves, crawling up my body like ivy. When I look up, they’re laughing, the seagulls are laughing, everyone is laughing. But I’m alone on the beach.”

“Wow,” says Marina. “That sounds really sweet in its way. I mean, a little eerie at the end, sure. You call that a nightmare?”

“Did I say nightmare?”

“You did. You said dream, and then you said nightmare.”

“I see. Yes, a nightmare. It is sweet maybe, kind of sitcommy clumsy dad sweetness, but just the relentless repetition of it jarred me every time I woke. Woke in a sweat. And this is before I had Suzanne.”

“But you and Kathe were married, yeah?”

“Yes, but the dream pre-dated her.”

“Yeah, no idea. But look—kites and beaches and kiddos and mamas, not too bad as far as nightmares go. Mine is an immense buzzing wall of sci-fi machinery that hisses and spits insults at me, then starts opening various compartments and drawers of itself to show me what’s inside.”

It seems she wants me to ask what’s inside.

“You’re afraid to ask, yeah?” she says. “I’ll tell you: dead bugs, dead flowers, and little bottles of perfume and tarnished trinkets. And buttons, like someone’s lifelong button collection, divvied out by the handful.”

“I’ll have to tell Suzanne about this.”

“My lord! Why in the world?”

“She’s getting more and more into textiles, haberdashery; mixed-up stuff arranged in egg cartons and Amazon cardboard. I think it’s time I take her to see some of Joseph Cornell’s shadow boxes.”

“Okay mister, that’s the last time I share my dreams with you.”

“Teasing,” I say. I wink at Marina, and she winks back. We’ve found a low-grade flirty rapport that means almost nothing and works for us both, Michael in Produce and Marina in Deli, and it feels like a good patch of traction in a world that slipped away from most of us long ago.

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“Suckers are found in the ballast tanks of ships in the Baltic,” says Alphonse, continuing his lesson on comb jellies as he re-holsters a box cutter onto his thigh. He’s excited to do a little non-routine receiving tonight with a late shipment of lettuces.

“Invasive,” he says, “like your holy basil in that thermos, is what I’m saying.”

I reflexively sip my tulsi tea.

“Not saying to drink less of your tea, mind you. Farmers around here know how to control their crops, how to regulate and rotate and whatnot. Just something for you to chew on as you connect the dots between flora and fauna and our seemingly infinite sun and soil and seas.”

“Appreciate it, Alphonse,” I say. Alphonse has seen me trying different teas on break, herb-journaling and mumbling to my little notebook I ostensibly carry to remember what needs replenishing on the floor, but that I secretly fill with data on calendula and burdock root, questions around the efficacy of tinctures versus concoctions, salves versus balms, the almost impossible to detect changes in Ewa’s wardrobe since she let me go.

I hand Alphonse the big sticker gun, the one that marks boxes instead of individual fruits and vegetables.

“Your turn,” he says. “To share something. Don’t want to listen to myself blather all night, we’ve got six hours to go and holes to fill with bounty.”

“Air and heat and moisture and light,” I say. “The main predators of herbs.”

“The world, basically,” says Alphonse.

“I suppose.”

“Not trying to be glib, comrade. Never glib. Just wanna look the fucker in the face, you know?”

“The face of the world?”

“That face,” he says. “That one and only face, and its innumerable faces.” Then he laughs, at himself, and I laugh with him. Alphonse: that trustworthy, rusty rudder of our ship.

“Chocolate-covered apricots on the cull!” It’s Memento Maurie, the second-shift Produce Manager.



Alphonse goes back to stickering a few cases of broccoli, leaves me to face Memento alone. I don't mind. He fought in a war and has a bionic leg and hosts a metal show on the local AM radio channel during most people's breakfasts, and he shamelessly air-bass-guitars and growls and thrashes his bald, skull-tattooed head whenever a late shipment of produce shows up, or when he finds a choice cut of meat or delicacy on the cull-cart, as he's just done.

"Dried fruit gives me gas," I say.

Memento stops his air-guitaring mid-riff, holds the pose. He farts. "Not like in the movies, huh?" he says. "In the movies, double doors have that extra action on them, that recoil, opening a little again, closing a little again, till finally they flutter shut, the gunslinger's dust kicking up in the saloon."

"How long were you in the Kingdom?" I say.

"Outside the Kingdom," says Memento. "Never got inside, to be honest. I set up the barracks and we volleyed fire for nine days, as you know, The Nine-Day War, as they like to call it up there and I'm sure how it's now written in their kids' textbooks—if they even go to school, those dirty hippie secessionists—but you know, I never stepped foot on their sod."

I imagine Memento and his comrades trying to save the Union, or what was left of it even then—just forty-seven states—and after days of fighting being forced to the negotiating screen, E-signing a document ceding the Northeast Kingdom and leaving Vermont a smaller, greener, bitterer fruit.

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In the dim halogen glow of Ewa's second-floor meditation and massage studio, sitting lotus-style before a legless coffee table sheathed in silk the hue of apricots, she had read my tarot cards. Not a first for me, since Kathe had dabbled a bit in it toward the early days of the

marriage, but this was the first with a Probiotic theme. My main card was the Six of Wands: Radish Kimchi.

“This is a good card,” I said. “Promising, yeah?”

“More like celebrating a recent victory,” she said. “Like coming into your personal triumph.”

I don’t remember what I said next, but I remember she could see my deflated confusion.

“Yes,” she said. “What we have already made is a kind of promise too.”

I loved the way she spoke to me that evening, each phrase a strange assortment of words that tickled something deep inside with a familiarity I had not yet known. And her presence beside me, her frankincensed warmth and bare shoulders and feet, ankles hennaed with loopy amber designs, assured me that my senses were still alive, my own body still a body.

“How many cards have you made so far?” I asked. “I love the artistry. Your linework is in exquisite contrast to the dreaminess of the watercolors.”

“Oh my,” she said. “I’m not a blusher but thank you. Well, I have about forty cards, over half the deck. I’m working by intuition, not by order or category. But I have noticed recently that I have made hardly any Pentacles.”

I had asked her why she thought that was. I don’t remember her answer, but this part of the night really tugs at me still. I do remember she got up brusquely, put the kettle back on.

“With an answer a sadness comes,” she said, turning back toward me. “I think the Log Lady once said that.”

“*Twin Peaks*,” I said. “My father loved that show.” I pictured my father in his fedora and mustache, his cuffed jeans and laptop and matcha in a paper cup, hurrying by me. He had once

told me that having a mustache had meant four different things in his lifetime, that its meaning shifted about once every eighteen years. He said things like that. I missed him.

“I’m an old crone,” she said, “as you’ve probably figured out. Like to really use up my tea bags.” She was beside me now, adding more hot water to my cup. My silken pouch of nettle rose slowly, bobbed on the surface like a miniature buoy.

“But you’ve got Silas,” I said.

“I invited you here for tarot and tea,” she said. “Sacred things.”

“Isn’t love sacred?”

“Did I say I love Silas?”

“No,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“No need to be. We’re fuckbuddies, sure. I like having and releasing him sexually once a week, sometimes two. He’s a good student of desire. But I don’t love him.” She paused. “Are you going to ask me about Pentacles? Why I haven’t made that many? Are you curious about me, my depths?”

“Yes,” I said. I felt myself gulp, worried it was audible.

She slid back beside me, our shoulders touching, moved the cards around on the table with two open hands, like she was massaging a back, or bread. She turned over three cards: *flicksh, flicksh, flicksh*. The soft scratch was like a snare drum warming up in a padded cell. She hummed contentedly, and I felt dizzied, EMDR’d, nearly delirious.

“See,” she said. “No pentacles.”

I looked down at the drawn cards: Four of Wands, Knight of Cups, and The Fool: Kefir, Red Miso, and Kosher Pickle, respectively. It appeared that the jester in the last card was playing the harmonica.

“I usually don’t do readings in front of others,” Ewa said. “I’m just aligning with this spread. Give me a sec, would you?”

“Sure,” I said.

“I mean, give me a little space?”

“Oh,” I had said, and decided to take a walk.

It felt strange to be outside her cabin suddenly, to look out toward the land she had given me a brief tour of upon my arrival, while she now aligned with her handmade tarot. Not strange in a terrible way, but not strange in an effervescent way either. I allowed myself to be inside the in-betweenness, to stay in transit.

Passing by some mossy alders, some mushroom-sprouted logs, I worried that I wouldn’t know when I should come back inside. I worried that our moment to first-kiss had come and gone. I worried that the tea pouch was releasing microplastics into my body, and Ewa’s. I worried that the pickle card was anti-Semitic, and how to broach the subject with care and tact.

As I was coming back around toward the cabin, under the shade of an elder whose berries I tried to step around because I knew Ewa harvested them for syrup, she called out to me.

“Michael,” she yelled from her cabin door. She appeared nude.

As I got closer I saw she was wearing the coffee-table drapery.

“Are you wearing—?” I began to ask as I got within a few yards of the door.

She took an inhaler out of the pocket of what I could now see was a chemise, an apricot-hued chemise with storks or maybe egrets flying all over her body.

She huffed on the inhaler, said, as she exhaled, “Please go.”

“Whoa. Ewa—”

“I’d put your shoes on the landing, but they are already on your feet. But it’s important I tell you I would do that. I would bring you your shoes. Also, we just don’t see you as a good fit in Wellness. I’m sorry.”

“We?” I said.

“I pulled about you. I should have given you a warning. I thought I was pulling for myself, but the deck spoke to me about you.”

I sensed she was hiding something. But she was telling me to leave, and I would go.

I waved goodbye as she closed her door.

On the drive home, on the long curvy roads of Vermont, I kept hearing that “we,” and suspecting that it hinted at something else, something she couldn’t bear to name.

### **Chapter 3**

“I know about wellness,” says Suzanne.

“Sweet pea, it takes a lifetime, and some of us take only a couple lil baby steps toward a holistic—”

“I mean your job,” she says. She’s painting duck egg shells a deep indigo blue, arranging them around the circumference of her empty dinner plate.

“Oh,” I say, “that Wellness. Sigh.”

“I support you,” she says. “I know Produce is not your first choice. I saw you stocking celery the other day through the co-op window after school. I mean, it was bound to happen, right. Do you feel relief that I know? That you don’t have to hide it?”

I stir a dollop of mascarpone into the risotto. “Wait, after school?” I say. “What day? Where was your mother?”

“In the car,” she says. “She wanted some mustard greens.”

“Still making those pretentious pestos?” I say. Then: “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, Dad. But to be fair, she grew up in North Carolina, where they have many choices of lush greens. And you know, pesto just means *paste*.”

“It does?”

“It does. In Italy, you can make lots of different pastes, often with greens and not just basil.”

“Suzanne, my child. You amaze me.”

She goes silent. In her own world.

“I cherish my solitude,” says Suzanne. “It’s true. But playgrounds and paint-ball, tiddly-winks and kick-the-can and sugar-on-snow. All the things young people do, all that sticky icky gum-in-your-hair socialization. I’m seven years old, Dad,” she says.

“Tiddly-winks?”

“I was reading a book on settler-colonial children’s games. But, please, don’t say that’s amazing. Say: *We can go*. We can go to one of those places where kids jump into pools of plastic balls and eat fried cheese tubes in greasy waxed boxes, where the lights are howling and the vinyl banquettes are throbbing. And, no, I see the look on your face, Dad. Not for some kind of anthropological research. Because,” she pauses, “I’m seven.”

The pink streak we put in her hair last week is fading. Her big brown eyes are flecked with green, like mine.

“Corn dogs and Donkey Kong and cheese curds smothered in gravy?” I say.

“Nickelodeons. Nintendo. Pokémon.”

“Hula hoops, malted milks?”

“Scraped knees, spitballs, and sand in the eyes.”

She holds up an egg to the light. I realize by the heft of it in her hand, the angle of her wrist, that it’s full, an eggshell full of albumen and yolk. I had been thinking of Fabergé, in particular the Lapis Lazuli egg, the tiny crown and ruby hidden inside it, somewhere at the Cleveland Museum of Art. The hollowed-out, debauched glory of such a thing in the world.

“For your mom?” I dare.

“It’s almost Easter,” she says. “Mom celebrates, as you know.”

“But why duck eggs?”

“It’s what you brought home from the cull.”

It’s true. A rare cull find, of which I had planned to prepare with tomato confit and homemade taglietele. I release the recipe, kiss it goodbye in my mind. *Poof*.

“I didn’t think you’d mind,” she says, adding gold hashmarks to each egg with a gold pen, “sacrificing a little food for a little art.” She hands me a finished egg. “This one’s already dry,” she says.

I cradle my daughter’s creation in my palm. Then I put it in the potted cactus, which bloomed its biannual flower last month, during a snowstorm outside the window. I almost say aloud how juxtaposition died with some sociohistorical event or other, something pithy and witty and false. Instead I admire the egg, and the hardy cactus, and Suzanne; and I put some flame to the cast iron and get out the chicken eggs.