

Begin Reading

Before these statements left my desk and followed the fate I eventually chose for them, I considered using them as the basis for a traditional, painstakingly researched biography, recounting a true story. And so I read various biographies, thinking this would help me, only to realize that the biographer's view of his subject inevitably influences the results of his research. Since it wasn't my intention to impose my own opinions on the reader, but to set down the story of "the Witch of Portobello" as seen by its main protagonists, I soon abandoned the idea of writing a straight biography and decided that the best approach would be simply to transcribe what people had told me.

No one lights a lamp in order to hide it behind the door: the purpose of light is to create more light, to open people's eyes, to reveal the marvels around.

No one sacrifices the most important thing she possesses: love.

No one places her dreams in the hands of those who might destroy them.

No one, that is, but Athena.

A long time after Athena's death, her former teacher asked me to go with her to the town of Prestonpans in Scotland. There, taking advantage of certain ancient feudal powers that were due to be abolished the following month, the town had granted official pardons to eighty-one people—and their cats—who were executed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for practicing witchcraft.

According to the official spokeswoman for the Barons Courts of Prestoungrange & Dolphinstoun: "Most of those persons condemned...were convicted on the basis of spectral evidence—that is to say, prosecuting witnesses declared that they felt the presence of evil spirits or heard spirit voices."

There's no point now in going into all the excesses committed by the Inquisition, with its torture chambers and its bonfires lit by hatred and vengeance; however, on our way to Prestonpans, Edda said several times that there was something about that gesture which she found unacceptable: the town and the Fourteenth Baron of Prestoungrange & Dolphinstoun were "granting pardons" to people who had been brutally executed.

"Here we are in the twenty-first century, and yet the descendants of the real criminals, those who killed the innocent victims, still feel they have the right to grant pardons. Do you know what I mean, Heron?"

I did. A new witch hunt is starting to gain ground. This time the weapon isn't the red-hot iron, but irony and repression. Anyone who happens to discover a gift and dares to speak of their abilities is usually regarded with distrust. Generally speaking, their husband, wife, father, or child, or whoever, instead of feeling proud, forbids all mention of the matter, fearful of exposing their family to ridicule.

Before I met Athena, I thought all such gifts were a dishonest way of exploiting people's despair. My trip to Transylvania to make a documentary on vampires was also a way of proving how easily people are deceived. Certain superstitions, however absurd they may seem, remain in the human imagination and are often used by unscrupulous people. When I visited Dracula's castle, which has been reconstructed merely to give tourists the feeling that they're in a special place, I was approached by a government official who implied that I would receive a "significant" (to use his word) gift when the film was shown on the BBC. In the mind of that official, I was helping to propagate the myth and thus deserved a generous reward. One of the guides said that the number of

visitors increased each year, and that any mention of the place would prove positive, even a program saying that the castle was a fake, that Vlad Dracula was a historical figure who had nothing to do with the myth, and that it was all merely a product of the wild imaginings of one Irishman [*Editor's note: Bram Stoker*], who had never even visited the region.

I knew then that, however rigorous I was with the facts, I was unwittingly collaborating with the lie; even if the idea behind my script was to de-mythologize the place, people would believe what they wanted to believe; the guide was right, I would simply be helping to generate more publicity. I immediately abandoned the project, even though I'd already spent quite a lot of money on the trip and on my research.

And yet my journey to Transylvania was to have a huge impact on my life, for I met Athena there when she was trying to track down her mother. Destiny—mysterious, implacable Destiny—brought us face-to-face in the insignificant foyer of a still more insignificant hotel. I was witness to her first conversation with Deidre—or Edda, as she likes to be called. I watched, as if I were a spectator of my own life, as my heart struggled vainly not to allow itself to be seduced by a woman who didn't belong to my world. I applauded when reason lost the battle, and all I could do was surrender and accept that I was in love.

That love led me to see things I'd never imagined could exist—rituals, materializations, trances. Believing that I was blinded by love, I doubted everything, but doubt, far from paralyzing me, pushed me in the direction of oceans whose very existence I couldn't admit. It was this same energy which, in difficult times, helped me to confront the cynicism of journalist colleagues and to write about Athena and her work. And since that love remains alive, the energy remains, even though Athena is dead, even though all I want now is to forget what I saw and learned. I could only navigate that world while hand in hand with Athena.

These were her gardens, her rivers, her mountains. Now that she's gone, I need everything to return as quickly as possible to how it used to be. I'm going to concentrate more on traffic problems, Britain's foreign policy, on how we administer taxes. I want to go back to thinking that the world of magic is merely a clever trick, that people are superstitious, that anything science cannot explain has no right to exist.

When the meetings in Portobello started to get out of control, we had endless arguments about how she was behaving, although I'm glad now that she didn't listen to me. If there is any possible consolation in the tragedy of losing someone we love very much, it's the necessary hope that perhaps it was for the best.

I wake and fall asleep with that certainty; it's best that Athena left when she did rather than descend into the infernos of this world. She would never have regained her peace of mind after the events that earned her the nickname "the Witch of Portobello." The rest of her life would have been a bitter clash between her personal dreams and collective reality. Knowing her as I did, she would have battled on to the end, wasting her energy and her joy on trying to prove something that no one, absolutely no one, was prepared to believe.

Who knows, perhaps she sought death the way a shipwrecked victim seeks an island. She must

have stood late at night in many a Tube station, waiting for muggers who never came. She must have walked through the most dangerous parts of London in search of a murderer who never appeared or perhaps tried to provoke the anger of the physically strong, who refused to get angry.

Until, finally, she managed to get herself brutally murdered. But, then, how many of us will be saved the pain of seeing the most important things in our lives disappearing from one moment to the next? I don't just mean people, but our ideas and dreams too: we might survive a day, a week, a few years, but we're all condemned to lose. Our body remains alive, yet sooner or later our soul will receive the mortal blow. The perfect crime—for we don't know who murdered our joy, what their motives were, or where the guilty parties are to be found.

Are they aware of what they've done, those nameless guilty parties? I doubt it, because they too—the depressed, the arrogant, the impotent, and the powerful—are the victims of the reality they created.

They don't understand and would be incapable of understanding Athena's world. Yes, that's the best way to think of it—Athena's world. I'm finally coming to accept that I was only a temporary inhabitant, there as a favor, like someone who finds himself in a beautiful mansion, eating exquisite food, aware that this is only a party, that the mansion belongs to someone else, that the food was bought by someone else, and that the time will come when the lights will go out, the owners will go to bed, the servants will return to their quarters, the door will close, and we'll be out in the street again, waiting for a taxi or a bus to restore us to the mediocrity of our everyday lives.

I'm going back, or, rather, part of me is going back to that world where only what we can see, touch, and explain makes sense. I want to get back to the world of speeding tickets, people arguing with bank cashiers, eternal complaints about the weather, to horror films, and Formula 1 racing. This is the universe I'll have to live with for the rest of my days. I'll get married, have children, and the past will become a distant memory, which will, in the end, make me ask myself: How could I have been so blind? How could I have been so ingenuous?

I also know that, at night, another part of me will remain wandering in space, in contact with things as real as the pack of cigarettes and the glass of gin before me now. My soul will dance with Athena's soul; I'll be with her while I sleep; I'll wake up sweating and go into the kitchen for a glass of water. I'll understand that in order to combat ghosts you must use weapons that form no part of reality. Then, following the advice of my grandmother, I'll place an open pair of scissors on my bedside table to snip off the end of the dream.

The next day, I'll look at the scissors with a touch of regret, but I must adapt to living in the world again or risk going mad.

“No one can manipulate anyone else. In any relationship, both parties know what they’re doing, even if one of them complains later on that they were used.”

That’s what Athena used to say, but she herself behaved quite differently, because she used and manipulated me with no consideration for my feelings. And given that we’re talking about magic here, this makes the accusation an even more serious one; after all, she was my teacher, charged with passing on the sacred mysteries, with awakening the unknown force we all possess. When we venture into that unfamiliar sea, we trust blindly in those who guide us, believing that they know more than we do.

Well, I can guarantee that they don’t. Not Athena, not Edda, nor any of the people I came to know through them. She told me she was learning through teaching, and although, at first, I refused to believe this, later I came to think that perhaps it was true. I realized it was one of her many ways of getting us to drop our guard and surrender to her charm.

People who are on a spiritual quest don’t think, they simply want results. They want to feel powerful and superior to the anonymous masses. They want to be special. Athena played with other people’s feelings in a quite terrifying way.

I understand that she once felt a profound admiration for St. Thérèse of Lisieux. I have no interest in the Catholic faith, but from what I’ve heard, Thérèse experienced a kind of mystical and physical union with God. Athena mentioned once that she would like to share a similar fate. Well, in that case, she should have joined a convent and devoted her life to prayer or to the service of the poor. That would have been much more useful to the world and far less dangerous than using music and rituals to induce in people a kind of intoxicated state that brought them into contact with both the best and the worst of themselves.

I sought her out when I was looking for some meaning to my life, although I didn’t say as much at our first meeting. I should have realized from the start that Athena wasn’t very interested in that; she wanted to live, dance, make love, travel, to gather people around her in order to demonstrate how wise she was, to show off her gifts, to provoke the neighbors, to make the most of all that is profane in us—although she always tried to give a spiritual gloss to that search.

Whenever we met, whether it was to perform some magical ceremony or just have a drink, I was conscious of her power. It was so strong I could almost touch it. Initially, I was fascinated and wanted to be like her. But one day, in a bar, she started talking about the “Third Rite,” which has to do with sexuality. She did this in the presence of my boyfriend. Her excuse was that she was teaching me something. Her real objective, in my opinion, was to seduce the man I loved.

And, of course, she succeeded.

It isn’t good to speak ill of people who have passed from this life onto the astral plane. However, Athena won’t have to account to me, but to all those forces that she turned to her own

benefit, rather than channeling them for the good of humanity and for her own spiritual enlightenment.

The worst thing is that if it hadn't been for her compulsive exhibitionism, everything we began together could have worked out really well. Had she behaved more discreetly, we would now be fulfilling the mission with which we were entrusted. But she couldn't control herself; she thought she was the mistress of the truth, capable of overcoming all barriers merely by using her powers of seduction.

And the result? I was left alone. And I can't leave the work half-finished—I'll have to continue to the end, even though sometimes I feel very weak and often dispirited.

I'm not surprised that her life ended as it did: she was always flirting with danger. They say that extroverts are unhappier than introverts and have to compensate for this by constantly proving to themselves how happy and contented and at ease with life they are. In her case, at least, this is absolutely true.

Athena was conscious of her own charisma, and she made all those who loved her suffer.

Including me.

If a man we don't know phones us up today and talks a little, makes no suggestions, says nothing special, but nevertheless pays us the kind of attention we rarely receive, we're quite capable of going to bed with him that same night, feeling relatively in love. That's what we women are like, and there's nothing wrong with that—it's the nature of the female to open herself to love easily.

It was this same love that opened me up to my first encounter with the Mother when I was nineteen. Athena was the same age the first time she went into a trance while dancing. But that's the only thing we had in common—the age of our initiation.

In every other aspect, we were totally and profoundly different, especially in the way we dealt with other people. As her teacher, I always did my best to help her in her inner search. As her friend—although I'm not sure my feelings of friendship were reciprocated—I tried to alert her to the fact that the world wasn't ready for the kind of transformations she wanted to provoke. I remember spending a few sleepless nights before deciding to allow her to act with total freedom and follow the demands of her heart.

Her greatest problem was that she was a woman of the twenty-second century living in the twenty-first, and making no secret of the fact either. Did she pay a price? She certainly did. But she would have paid a still higher price if she had repressed her true exuberant self. She would have been bitter and frustrated, always concerned about “what other people might think,” always saying “I'll just sort these things out, then I'll devote myself to my dream,” always complaining that “the conditions are never quite right.”

Everyone's looking for the perfect teacher, but although their teachings might be divine, teachers are all too human, and that's something people find hard to accept. Don't confuse the teacher with the lesson, the ritual with the ecstasy, the transmitter of the symbol with the symbol itself. The Tradition is linked to our encounter with the forces of life and not with the people who bring this about. But we are weak: we ask the Mother to send us guides, and all she sends are signs to the road we need to follow.

Pity those who seek for shepherds, instead of longing for freedom! An encounter with the superior energy is open to anyone but remains far from those who shift responsibility onto others. Our time on this earth is sacred, and we should celebrate every moment.

The importance of this has been completely forgotten: even religious holidays have been transformed into opportunities to go to the beach or the park or skiing. There are no more rituals. Ordinary actions can no longer be transformed into manifestations of the sacred. We cook and complain that it's a waste of time, when we should be pouring our love into making that food. We work and believe it's a divine curse, when we should be using our skills to bring pleasure and to spread the energy of the Mother.

Athena brought to the surface the immensely rich world we all carry in our souls, without realizing that people aren't yet ready to accept their own powers.

We women, when we're searching for a meaning to our lives or for the path of knowledge, always identify with one of four classic archetypes.

The Virgin (and I'm not speaking here of a sexual virgin) is the one whose search springs from her complete independence, and everything she learns is the fruit of her ability to face challenges alone.

The Martyr finds her way to self-knowledge through pain, surrender, and suffering.

The Saint finds her true reason for living in unconditional love and in her ability to give without asking anything in return.

Finally, the Witch justifies her existence by going in search of complete and limitless pleasure.

Normally a woman has to choose from one of these traditional feminine archetypes, but Athena was all four at once.

Obviously we can justify her behavior, alleging that all those who enter a state of trance or ecstasy lose contact with reality. That's not true: the physical world and the spiritual world are the same thing. We can see the Divine in each speck of dust, but that doesn't stop us from wiping it away with a wet sponge. The Divine doesn't disappear; it's transformed into the clean surface.

Athena should have been more careful. When I reflect upon the life and death of my pupil, it seems to me that I had better change the way I behave too.

Athena? What an interesting name! Let's see...her Maximum number is nine. Optimistic, sociable, likely to be noticed in a crowd. People might go to her in search of understanding, compassion, generosity, and for precisely that reason, she should be careful, because that tendency to popularity could go to her head and she'll end up losing more than she gains. She should also watch her tongue, because she tends to speak more than common sense dictates.

As for her Minimum number eleven, I sense that she longs for some leadership position. She has an interest in mystical subjects and through these tries to bring harmony to those around her.

However, this is in direct conflict with the number nine, which is the sum of the day, month, and year of her birth reduced to a single figure: she'll always be subject to envy, sadness, introversion, and impulsive decisions. She must be careful not to let herself be affected by negative vibrations: excessive ambition, intolerance, abuse of power, extravagance.

Because of that conflict, I suggest she take up some career that doesn't involve emotional contact with people, like computing or engineering.

Oh, she's dead? I'm sorry. So what *did* she do?

What did Athena do? She did a little of everything, but if I had to summarize her life, I'd say: she was a priestess who understood the forces of nature. Or, rather, she was someone who, by the simple fact of having little to lose or to hope for in life, took greater risks than other people and ended up being transformed into the forces she thought she mastered.

She was a supermarket checkout girl, a bank employee, a property dealer, and in each of these positions she always revealed the priestess within. I lived with her for eight years, and I owed her this: to recover her memory, her identity.

The most difficult thing in collecting together these statements was persuading people to let me use their real names. Some said they didn't want to be involved in this kind of story, others tried to conceal their opinions and feelings. I explained that my real intention was to help all those involved to understand her better, and that no reader would believe in anonymous statements.

They finally agreed because they all believed that they knew the unique and definitive version of any event, however insignificant. During the recordings, I saw that things are never absolute, they depend on each individual's perceptions. And the best way to know who we are is often to find out how others see us.

This doesn't mean that we should do what others expect us to do, but it helps us to understand ourselves better. I owed it to Athena to recover her story, to write her myth.

Please, don't call her Athena. Her real name is Sherine. Sherine Khalil, our much-loved, much-wanted daughter, whom both my husband and I wish we had engendered.

Life, however, had other plans—when fate is very generous with us, there is always a well into which all our dreams can tumble.

We lived in Beirut in the days when everyone considered it the most beautiful city in the Middle East. My husband was a successful industrialist, we married for love, we traveled to Europe every year, we had friends, we were invited to all the important social events, and once, the president of the United States himself visited my house. Imagine that! Three unforgettable days, during two of which the American Secret Service scoured every corner of our house (they'd been in the area for more than a month already, taking up strategic positions, renting apartments, disguising themselves as beggars or young lovers). And for one day, or rather, two hours, we partied. I'll never forget the look of envy in our friends' eyes, and the excitement of having our photo taken alongside the most powerful man on the planet.

We had it all, apart from the one thing we wanted most—a child. And so we had nothing.

We tried everything: we made vows and promises, went to places where miracles were guaranteed, we consulted doctors, witch doctors, took remedies and drank elixirs and magic potions. I had artificial insemination twice and lost the baby both times. On the second occasion, I also lost my left ovary, and after that, no doctor was prepared to risk such a venture again.

That was when one of the many friends who knew of our plight suggested the one possible solution: adoption. He said he had contacts in Romania, and that the process wouldn't take long.

A month later, we got on a plane. Our friend had important business dealings with the dictator who ruled the country at the time, and whose name I now forget [*Editor's note: Nicolae Ceausescu*], and so we managed to avoid the bureaucratic red tape and went straight to an adoption center in Sibiu, in Transylvania. There we were greeted with coffee, cigarettes, mineral water, and with the paperwork signed and sealed. All we had to do was choose a child.

They took us to a very cold nursery, and I couldn't imagine how they could leave those poor children in such a place. My first instinct was to adopt them all and carry them off to Lebanon, where there was sun and freedom, but obviously that was a crazy idea. We walked up and down between the cots, listening to the children crying, terrified by the magnitude of the decision we were about to make.

For more than an hour, neither I nor my husband spoke a word. We went out, drank coffee, smoked, and then went back in again—and this happened several times. I noticed that the woman in charge of adoptions was growing impatient; she wanted an immediate decision. At that moment, following an instinct I would dare to describe as maternal—as if I'd found a child who should have been mine in this incarnation, but who had come into the world in another woman's womb—I pointed