

How To Chase Your Umbra

Your January horoscope warns you to focus on what matters. Just like your fortune teller. And your tarot cards. And your mother. They all say the same thing—that you’re spending too much time on a man who isn’t worth it. And yes, it’s these vague words on a monthly advice column that scare you. The mere suggestion conjures paranoia, and so, you choose a spell that will protect your soul and repel negativity. A positive reinvigoration for the New Year. Your year, the Year of the Pig. Believe it, even though you say you don’t. Your body nods in agreement. Demand your mind to get on board.

Wait until the moon is right, a week after winter solstice, to cast the spell. Midnight. Witching hour. Your mind fights with your body, a slender vessel still shivering, even when you say the spell won’t work. As if you’re too stubborn for magic. And yes, yes it will be a lot of work to gather all the necessities, but you’re even bolder now.

Ask your best friend to do the spell with you because you hate going out alone. She’ll be struggling with the men and the work and the disappointment, too. Sift through spells on her phone, but if you want to brush off the negative mojo, you have to take it seriously. Looking back, Wiccanspells.info doesn’t exactly scream reliable, but you won’t care. Neither of you practice Wicca, but anyone can cast spells. It’s simple. It’s all about energy. You’ve done it at least once or twice. Like on birthdays, when you make a wish and blow out the candles. It’s a tradition, a simple way to move and displace energy elsewhere for good luck.

You’ll get better if you try. Horoscopes provide a slip of control you’re okay with. The idea that there’s something else out there, equally as omniscient and unseen as any god, is uncannily comforting. Like paying for a movie that you saw a preview for: you don’t know the ending, but that’s the joy of it. You like that. The movement and position of the planets, stars, and the moon—that is a type of power you praise.



On the eve of the casting, lose the map. Drive until you aren't sure exactly where you are, somewhere between Lawrence and Lenexa. Stop when it feels right. You'll just know, as if the place is fused with your muscle memory. A familiar brain imprint. Notice the streetlamps—how their warm yellow halo invites you in.

Your best friend parks in front of a standard cookie-cut house, almost identical to the rest on the cul-de-sac. It's got a classic look. Bay windows, regal entry way, three-car garage. Take it in—the barricaded drive, the earthy lawn, a sad plot of dirt yet to be planted, the lone *For Sale* sign as you walk upfront. No one lives there yet, but you like the calm energy.

It's then that the sky opens with rain. Heavy wind tosses your jackets and hair, and you shudder as wet mist settles on your skin. Sit across from each other on the landing, and fight nature as you try to light a candle with no success. The flame dies instantly. Return to the car because tonight you aren't as powerful as you set out to be.

It'll be good enough—modern witchcraft at its finest. Chant the phrase you won't remember later about repelling harm and drawing in security, but it doesn't matter what it was. The air in the car shifts. Everything is quiet. Double check the empty street. An image of the police holding present-day witch trials or shutting you into a weird Satanic insane asylum blurs your mind. No one's there. Assume no one will come until you feel the familiar pull behind your neck, like someone's watching from afar. Scan beyond the windshield. Look in the house down the hill about a hundred feet away. There's a woman in the window gazing back.



Night revealed the other side to you when you were seven or eight. Write that down so you don't forget—so that when you think there's a ghost following you, you can rediscover something you already know. You lived in a one-floor bungalow on Hollywood Drive, and once in a while, long, lucid blobs filed into your room and encircled you. A pink night light cast its own jagged

shadows, but the blobs still came, blocking your sight like a veil. Were they trying to hurt you? Or guard you from something even more sinister?

Remember how that same month, your mother hung an antique mirror at the end of the long hall between the family room and your bedroom. Once, you woke in front of it, fingers pressed against the glass, a living web of desertion. A woman with long dark hair stared back at you, her eyes deep like black forest, dark and full. They beckoned you to reach past the smooth surface and touch her velvet dress. You didn't scream, too afraid her lips would remain frozen. You're still debating if she was a stranger or even more—an estranged you—that only comes out at night.

Maybe this is why you hate mirrors. Maybe this is not the way she looked at all. Maybe you've watched *Memoirs of a Geisha* way too many problematic times. But the point is you know you saw a woman. The point is you want her to be Asian because you're tired of perpetuating the white narrative. So, you retrace your steps. Back then, you pulled your blanket over your head, eyes squeezed shut. But now, you're jaded, eyes hung starry in disbelief. Have courage. Manifest beauty from dust.



Carl Jung coined the term Shadow Self. It's another you, a combination of desires and fears from your past that project unconsciously onto your present self. Imagine it as a parallel universe. Or a reincarnation. Let that dissolve into your skin. Soak it up. You've seen the failure of incorruptibility, the wax-figurines posed in the Vatican on top of saints' caskets. You've heard about your ex boyfriend's past life, which he told his late mother when he was six. And for the longest time, you believed that you were once a humble sea snail because you love water and you always stop on rain-drenched sidewalks to save earthwalkers. Find it both reassuring and terrifying, that the way you lived before can affect your now because you're not very good at letting things fall as they may.

When you remember this, you'll be lying next to the man you're spending too much time on. It's not commitment you hate—it's the whole revelation, the voluntary discovery of raw, unfiltered, somewhat unhinged self. You'd much rather sleep than talk. The man's arms are folded across his chest, hands stacked eerily on top of his heart. A fitting objective correlative, treating each night next to someone else as another bemused evening—another temporary death. Wonder how often he gravitates to this position. Maybe he's guarding himself from pain, from you. And this is where you know it must end.



Top Five Preferred First Meeting Places (for men and/or umbras):

1. An easily accessible café patio
2. A fiction reading
3. The Thai restaurant five minutes away that has the best crab rangoon
4. A mutual friend's apartment
5. Not the shower, please anywhere but the shower



Never underestimate a novel circumstance because your umbra-self enjoys an uncanny entrance. You won't be anything near like what you imagined. Who's to say where you'll actually meet, but when you do, you will be able to recognize your obscurity. You won't feel violently electric, even when you tuck your hair behind your ear, and your umbra doesn't copy. The wonderful part is the way you make a soundless introduction. Study the mouth and the fingers. You have whiter teeth, and your nose is longer, and your eyes aren't dark anymore but a deep blue. You'll spot your cheek freckles and your straight black hair and the unique flatness of the back of your head.

At first, your umbra-self won't move, body stiff as unlit wax. Don't let that deter you. Treat it as a quirk, like how you must always reach behind for the second item on a grocery shelf. Once you acknowledge your own, you'll realize just how curious you both are. You won't be worried as you sit down together. How about that? How about meeting someone and knowing exactly what they're going to say and what they'll do and how they'll feel after you leave?



In the heat of the spell casting, realize she's supernatural. The more you focus, the more unusual the window woman appears. Her arms hang loose at her sides, disproportionately long compared to her torso. Squint harder. Command your eyes to magnify her face. There's nothing there—no eyes or lips or nose. Only a blank canvas. What you realize is that you're not yourself, yet wholly complete. And that you aren't sure where you end, and she begins. You can't untangle identity. The pieces of you that fused together.

Grab Laura's arm. When she spies the woman, her mouth falls out. Suddenly you're a flurry of chaos—cops mentioned, flame extinguished, gas flooded like a getaway car. Laura swerves right onto the main road. Remember the candle. Reach blindly, your hand closing around as it slides on the console. Warm wax adheres to your fingers. Your eyes remain fixed, determined to observe the woman as long as possible, but then you fly past a telephone pole. Your gaze is broken. Blink and hold your breath. You're unsure what you might see in the next second, but when the kitchen comes back into view, it's empty. The lights are still on, but the woman's gone, and so is that alluring pull you felt before. It's like she was never there.



Sometimes, you crave the unexpected. Like rearranged furniture. You liked how the man who isn't worth it had an apartment that breathed whenever you walked in. He moved most pieces—his vintage couch, his IKEA bookshelf, his antique desk, solid wood and extremely heavy.

Sometimes, he moved his liquor posters. He even bought a frame for the canvas he never got around to painting. That blank slate, another fitting correlative, full of potential. Imagine yourself as object under his eye—you, naked, mons painted bare, even if you let it grow out for that moment. What you really didn't like was his bicycle. It took up the foyer space in front of the door. He knew how often you'd run into it on your way in and out, yet he kept it there regardless. It didn't bother him. He didn't care how much you would beg for it to be moved.



You should also remember how any altering of the past can cause irreparable damage. The night he framed your portrait, you were away, visiting a Chinese beekeeper in hopes of writing another essay. She lived just down the street from your apartment in a large almost manor with a multi-level deck that kept her hives protected from the rain showers.

That essay had everything to do with bees—their honey, their hives, their matriarchy. It had nothing to do with your interactions with the Chinese beekeeper or her white husband. Like how his breath always smelled of whiskey, no matter what time you came. Or how she hovered over you, wanting to feed and water you. Or how she gripped your shoulders and stared at your face, noted your almond eyes and your flat nose and your full lips. The mild embarrassment and discomfort as she examined your Asianness—that you decided to keep buried, never to be recorded. It lived in the dredges of your own memories, not fit to take flight on paper.

The Chinese beekeeper clicked her tongue. “You have royal features,” she said. She thought your ancestors must be from the Han Dynasty. All this speculation over Korean cinnamon tea—a classic brew when visitors came. You had never tasted it before. The woody spice spread over your tongue, and you pretended you knew what she was talking about, something you often did when you didn't care to engage further. Then she asked you if your parents had emigrated to America, and you felt even more out of place when you revealed you were adopted. She touched your shoulder as if

trying to press an entire life's worth of comfort into your body in just a few little taps. You still aren't sure if you felt warm because of that, or if it was just liquid spice you drained from the cup.



Later, when you researched more about the Han Dynasty, you learned that the Han ruled the kingdom with astronomical and astrological signs as a source of guidance for earthly decisions like military and political moves. From the sound of it, many people during this time were extremely superstitious and used fortune tellers for everything. When you picture your birth parents, you rarely imagine the man. It's all female-oriented. Mother, Empress, Budding Moon. Something about water and bodies pulled by an invisible surge. In China, the moon symbolizes yearning, gentleness, and beauty. China even celebrates her celestial body with the Autumn Moon Festival. When you were little, you ate a mooncake in hopes of a celestial awakening. What you didn't expect was the umbra.

Wonder how you might be now had you experienced the simple life you were born into. You see the stereotype first—a poor rural girl in mainland China, a girl who was raised to be a proper Chinese woman. Who may or may not have fought against the arrangements thrust upon her. But you remember the beekeeper's observation. *Royal blood*. And then you think, no, instead of someone poor, perhaps a royal fortune teller. A woman who holds the key to all your futures, pasts, and presents. A power you once thought nonexistent, suddenly blazingly undeniable.



Leave a pen in every space you inhabit, even your car, because you never know when you might need to write something down. You often type a note on your phone, but you've noticed just how unproductive you are with a smartphone as time's gone on, mainly because you obsessively check to see if the man who isn't worth it has texted you. Instead, you leave your phone at home and spend the night watching the lunar eclipse. You forgot to bring a notebook, so you put some old fast-food napkins to good use.



4:30 – Twenty minutes before the moon entered Earth's penumbra

On the last day of January, I am dreamless. My college roommate sleeps. The full supermoon slips past the curtain, and my room glows like it did when I was younger. This time, there are no shadowy lurkers. I drive to the scenic lookout on the west side of town—Top of the World, we call it. I enjoy the feeling of sitting alone. A monumental step. The creases under my eyes feel heavy, as if I could burst into tears. I blast more heat and wait to feed my nighttime alter-ego. She distracts me from the other side—the daring and unexplainable, the synapse tingle below my skin.

5:30 – Earth's penumbral shadow begins to appear

I'm alone with Blaise Moore in the background. I don't sing and I'm not tired and I'm pleasantly surprised to find other cars at the overlook, too—fellow moon fanatics. I'm still alone, kind of, but now I don't feel quite so stranded. We watch the penumbral eclipse begin like a drive-in movie. The left curve of the moon flickers. A light shadow spreads.

I squint at the bright glow, the sun's light gleaming on the moon's surface, a living reflection with its own characters and dips beyond the sun's reach. My mind drifts to the antique mirror at the end of the hall. Would it be possible to rewrite that? Speak and confirm she was a part of me and not something entirely outside myself? When the moon finally enters Earth's shadow, the penumbra smudges the entire left side.

7:01 – The total eclipse begins

The entire moon enters Earth's umbra. The surface morphs from pale yellow to a muddy brown. I realize just how fast Earth moves. I'm almost dizzy. I lean my seat back and curl my knees into my chest. The sky has turned from midnight blue to nearly black. I text my mom to ask her if she's awake because it's nice to think this event connects the people I love, even though we aren't physically in the same place. I often keep track of different time zones

where my friends reside. Korea, Australia, Spain, South Africa. Everyone's in a different part of the day, but we all exist here on Earth right now. I'm sure most of them are asleep now. I view the full moon, now a brilliant blood red. Stunning and majestic like a rich pomegranate. How bittersweet to reach out my arm and grasp nothing.

7:34 – *The sun rises and the moon disappears*

In Kansas, eclipse totality only lasts for seven minutes before moonset, but I wait there on the hill overlooking the city, black dew specked with lights, roofs shifting to gray and then purple. The sun's rays drip below the horizon, and the moon slowly disintegrates back into the universe. I can't see the lunar event anymore, but it's still happening in other parts of the world that continue to dance with twilight.



Once home, you dream of a modern granite shower somewhere in a big city. Lean back and wash the shampoo from your hair. Admire your reflection in the mirrored wall facing the showerhead. A figure with a white t-shirt and an old camera stands before you. You can't see her face, but you know it's a woman. It's then that you feel everything—the shower steam, the running water, soap suds dripping down your skin, but the reflection—the clothed woman inside—is completely dry.

Bolt from the shower down an unfamiliar hall and straight into your apartment. You're safe here. Crawl into your real bed and lay down, so that even though you're dreaming, your physical body can reattach. You aren't vulnerable when you're together.

The woman from the shower follows you and stands at your bedside. Soon, her energy fills both places—mind and matter. She cranes over you, torso longer than average. You're disturbed, even in your sleep-induced state. Your sleeping body sits up to pull the covers over your head. Your arms cover your chest like a mummy.



A human woman wouldn't do that. The body, full and fleshy, doesn't somehow disappear. The moon's magnetic pull doesn't melt blood into thin air. You and Laura ride in charged silence until it becomes much too heavy, and she has to turn on the radio. Drift in the passenger seat until you're home, calm and happy, laughing at all the absurdity. It feels like a dream, but you'll remember everything from that day, even reading your horoscope in the morning.

It's possible you didn't see anything. Maybe the moon's energy swilled your brain and created a woman, but if that's the case, the lunar effect was on full-fledged attack. You both saw her. You're almost afraid to imagine what other god-like power could pierce your tissue with such purpose.



When you told your psychic Shannon about the dream during your annual tarot reading, she set her teacup on the glass table. The doily cover folded against the porcelain, shifting the dreamy blue kyanite you'd picked at the beginning of the session. Then Shannon leaned forward, her scarlet bob falling against her rounded cheeks. She grasped her reading glasses and set them in her lap.

The autumn wind rushed through the Lavender House, stirring wind chimes and birds as Shannon flipped another card in her deck—a turquoise flash followed by The Moon XVIII. Your birth card. A black wolf howled at the moon's full face, and a lobster waited, poised in front of a winding river. As if waiting for an accompaniment. Shannon smiled.

She offered you a theory, almost as ridiculous as chilling. You came face to face with another you. A slightly more ethereal you—part intruder, part teacher. The newfound energy couldn't possess you. No, she was bespoke to you. The other you wanted to teach you how to access your intuitive talents, to connect you to the ethereal realm. Shannon waited until your pencil stopped moving. You wrote with such frantic scribbles it was hard to read later.

After a few minutes, Shannon stirred her teacup and took another sip and leaned close again. She said that if you look yourself in the face, you would invite her in, and she would fuse with your soul. In that moment, it was easy to believe Shannon—she’s already imparted scarily accurate fortune telling over your last couple years. But you have the right to be skeptical. After all, it’s in your nature.



At the end of fall semester, you miss three days of class because of lower back pain.

Your doctor tells you that it is kidney inflammation caused by infection. She taps her acrylic nails on the clipboard as she stares at your chart. She asks if you have any genetic preconditions. You squirm on the examination table, crinkling the paper. You absolutely hate that question. Now you’re obligated to explain why you have no family medical history. Give enough detail so she understands the situation, but not enough that she thinks you still feel sorry for yourself because it happened so long ago, and it’s socially unacceptable for old trauma to linger on your bones.

Shannon tells you that bodily ailments normally relate to emotional aches. She recommends a book. You search the index for kidney pain. Flip to page 201:

Cause: fear, shame, and anxiety. Normal adaptive emotions but can become chronic when we ignore them. Anxiety can also be caused by disharmony between the kidneys and a blazing heart fire.

It reminds you of the last night you spent with the man who isn’t worth it. Sex and sadness. He left town for the winter holidays. You thought he sold the ugly old couch, but it sits fondly in the reopened bookstore, a long second life ahead.

Your professor tells you that when you sleep next to someone, their body emits the lowest form of radiation. It’s weaker than a phone, but isn’t that fucking wild? And on your walk off campus, you wondered about that. Radiation. Acute radiation.

Then you remember how you spent the last six months lying next to the careless man with the breathing apartment. Of course, you foolishly connect it all.



The mirror woman comes back over winter break. You stand in front of two black wooden doors. A line of Chinese people waits outside. You're the host of a banquet in an old mansion. You don't know how you know this, but you live there alone.

Invisible hands open the doors, and the line moves. Men and women of all ages file in. They march past, heads down, as if you don't exist. They're carrying food, the aroma wafting is traditional Asian cuisine—something you may have smelled at a time that you're too young to remember. Soon, the hall fills with whispers. There she stands at the end of the line.

You know it's her because the air whooshes through the gallery. As she steps closer, you lose feeling. The floor is nonexistent. Strange, how insignificant touch can be in a dream world. When it's finally her turn, lift your head high.

Inspect yourself. A shroud covers your umbra face. It's uncanny how beautiful half-dead can look. You stand there waiting for an offer you haven't yet received. This is your last chance. So, you invite yourself in. As you pass, your eyes lock. Look yourself up and down from inside your umbra's eyes.

Everyone stands as you make your way to the head of the table, carried by the wind. You're important, a leader of your own soul, and the others can only watch you in awe as you glide past them. Your new bones carry you to the opposite end, and there you stand face to face with the company you knew once before. Inspecting each other until the chill wakes you up.



What happens to innate cultural characteristics and ideologies that are said to be passed down through generations? Do they cease to exist if your lineage is broken? Do they become

dormant in the bottom recesses of your soul, only to awaken when you succumb to an hour's slumber? Who's that girl you were supposed to be before you became the woman you are now? When you imagine Jung's Shadow Self, a different image emerges. For a Chinese adoptee, the idea of umbra takes on many forms. The version of you that vanished. She is the woman in the mirror, the faceless specter in the window, the figure in the shower. The baby girl in your adoption photo.



Interview Wishlist to Yourself:

1. What's your real birth date and time?
2. What strange and mysterious form will you take on after you're dead?
3. What's the secret to dissolving midair, skin and skeleton?
4. Will you ever be brave enough to make a decision without consulting your tarot cards?
5. Did your birth mother desperately cling to you before giving you to the Budding Moon?



You cast that positivity spell on January 6th—the last day of the waning gibbous. In Wicca, lunar phases are believed to hold different energies that amplify certain spells. You didn't know at the time, but waning energy repels rather than attracts, so it's most productive to cast spells to get rid of things. A proper coincidence. The magnitude of the spell created stronger waves than we expected.

Maybe the spirit you summoned was trying to protect you from another entity that might have sensed your energy shifting when you set the spell in motion. Or maybe she was attached to that lot, unable to move from the land that claimed her, desperate for some type of connection. Some familiar face you didn't know you could give her.

You bet other entities came too, even though you didn't notice. You're almost certain your two guides sat silently in the back of Laura's Suburban—two older women, your birth mother's

ancestors, whom she summoned to protect you when you came to America. According to Shannon these two women despise each other, yet they both stay by your side. Maybe their strength made the rest of you jealous. Shiver, even now. That night, the wet mist that settled on your skin like fingers.



Praise the summer heat six months later. Your kidney has shrunk back to normal, and now you have a boyfriend who doesn't hurt you. He invites you to crash at his when you touchdown in Kansas City after a weekend in Texas—a family reunion with other women who were adopted from the same orphanage as you.

You're feeling extra vulnerable as your boyfriend rubs your back. Take another deep breath, even though your lungs just expanded. Outside, thunder cracks, disrupts the otherwise peaceful night. A full moon shines tonight—you know this because of your moon calendar—but your boyfriend's black out curtains cover you from the bright beams.

He hesitates, unsure how to phrase the question. Finally, he says, "Are you happy you were adopted, or do you wish you could have just stayed in China?"

You immediately think yes—you're glad to be here on this life path. The opportunities and freedom given to women in the States surpass anything China could offer. For the past two decades, so much of your time has been spent worrying about what you don't know. What you can't control. What you may have missed out on. So, like your horoscope said, you refocus.

Here is what you know: You have two mothers. You often think of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, and his dichotomy of nature and nurture. Two supposedly separate ideologies that alter the core of you. You question the idea of struggle, one against the other. It doesn't make sense. These two ideologies must work in harmony to cradle the rest of you, mind and body. A new identity, multiple identities, bound in one.

You are Chinese, even if you cannot speak Mandarin. You learned one rule about Chinese grammar: words do not change. They have a fixed form that is the same no matter what they're used for or where they appear in a sentence. Mother is always mother. Anger is always anger. Story is always story. But most importantly, you know language. The fundamental power—the core of your umbra that holds you together and makes you whole.



We exist and continue to learn in multiple dimensions. We've traveled far and wide, conscious and unconscious, as woman, as daughter, as lover. And now, we gather here, on the page, in one unanimous space. Time and space controlled. We record life. A discovery, a reflection, a once-in-a-life encounter. All these fragments of us trickle from the ether into a carefully formed letter—fuzzy and raw and sometimes much too heavy to speak out loud. We live in fiber and smoky ink. That kind of power eclipses all the heartache and the unknowns and the solitude we embrace.

So, when you tell yourself again that it's impossible—this unfettered life—we'll be ready. We'll record even the smallest occurrence, trace all the uncanny connections. And then we'll meet again, discuss everything we learned from our time apart so that if the time comes, we can write it down, burn it with a single flame. Cast a spell with language meant just for you. Words that demand you, every version of you, to pluck a star from the sky and swallow it whole.