

Curse of the Were-Something

by Barry R. Taylor

© Barry Taylor 2026. All rights reserved.

Tanith was in a dark place. Worry and suspicion assailed her. Her husband, Henry, was keeping something from her, some dark secret he didn't want her to know. He tried valiantly to hide it, but Tanith could see the signs.

She and Henry had been married a year. Barely eighteen months ago she had been a nursing instructor at the University of Leeds when she met the aristocratic Henry Seekenhyde, who was visiting for a conference. The spark between them had been immediate and intense. Six months later they were married, and now Tanith was adjusting to living in a castle above a village in Transylvania. Though it wasn't really a castle. More like a small country manor, and the dickens to keep clean. Fortunately for Tanith, Henry was rich enough to afford a few servants.

The land was misty and mysterious, full of ancient forest and long-tended farms, although the village, perhaps once wood-beamed and medieval, was modern, prosperous, and full of tourists. Still, Tanith had heard the stories. Tales of screams in the night, of strange activity around the Seekenhyde estate, and young women disappearing without a trace. Her new home had a dark history.

Nevertheless, the people of the village held Tanith's husband in high regard. They treated him as a local magistrate. Henry told her once that his family name did have a title attached to it, but nobody paid attention to such niceties any more. Sometimes, when she was walking in the village with Henry, people would behave oddly. Some would shy away. Others would point a finger in their mouths, or bare their teeth as if to emphasize the incisors. Were they imagining . . . fangs? It bothered Tanith, but Henry only nodded to the villagers and carried on. "It's a local tradition, nothing more," he explained.

More bothersome still were Henry's own disappearances. Once a month or so he would start to become jumpy and distracted. He would look up to the sky, as if searching for a sign. Whatever was on his mind, he was unwilling to share it with his young wife. Instead he would tell her he had business in Sofia, kiss her briefly on the front steps, and spray gravel as his Land Rover tore away down the circular driveway. He took no luggage. A day or so later he would come back, haggard and unshaven. When Tanith pressed him on where he had been, he said "business" and refused to elaborate.

Tanith wondered if he was having an affair. Perhaps he was driving off to see a woman named Sofia? She had trouble convincing herself of this theory. Such duplicity seemed absolutely foreign to Henry's character. Besides, he always returned from his excursions looking not smug or guilty, but exhausted, as if he had been awake for a long time. He showered and

went to bed soon after. Tanith eventually noticed one more coincidence. Her husband always disappeared on the night of a full moon.

He was hiding something, she was sure of it. She was his wife; she had a right to know. So that evening, as the too-pretty maid was clearing away the dishes, she confronted him about it. Henry Seekenhyde was a tall man with a full head of black hair and a strong chin. He had a measured, dignified comportment, bespeaking the nobility of his ancestors. He listened to Tanith gravely. Then he said. "You are right, my darling. I have been hiding something. It's time you knew." He rose from the table. "Come with me."

He left the room, with Tanith close behind. He led her through the drawing room and the library, then down a narrow back staircase into the basement of the old building. Tanith seldom ventured down there. The space was brick-walled, poorly lit, and littered with broken furniture, dusty and forgotten. What bones and secrets could one bury here?

Henry paused beside a bare wall. "My family lives under a curse," he explained. "Once each month, on the night of the full moon, I transform – into a dentist."

"Oh my god, no!" exclaimed Tanith. "You – what did you say?"

"You heard me rightly. Most days I am Mr. Henry Seekenhyde, local landlord and your faithful husband. But when the full moon rises I become Dr. Edward von Jekyll, D.D.S."

He pushed in hard on a brick in the wall. The wall swung inward, became a recessed door. He ushered her through.

The room on the other side was big and brightly lit. The walls were white. In the centre of the room stood a white dentist's chair, surrounded by drills and polishers and an X-ray machine. Labelled storage cabinets lined the far side of the room. There were innocuous pictures on the walls, as well as a framed degree from a respectable dental school in Bucharest.

Tanith took it all in, eyes wide. "You have one of those televisions in the ceiling," she observed, still astonished. "You're a dentist. But . . . how?"

"My grandfather tried to capture a tooth-fairy. He laid a trap under his pillow, baited with a hound's tooth. Needless to say it didn't work. The fairy was enraged. She put a curse on my grandfather, transforming him into a dentist for one day each month. Who knew the buggers were so powerful? The curse has been passed down to the eldest son ever since. Like my father before me, I am compelled to provide free dental care to the people of our village."

"But, but, you have a degree in agricultural economics."

"That is the Henry Seekenhyde whom you know. But when the full moon rises I become the white-coated Dr. von Jekyll, who has very steady hands and keeps abreast of trends in family dentistry. He encourages flossing and gives away toothbrushes with the von Jekyll name on the handle."

Tanith was still processing. "Where do the patients come in?" she wondered.

Henry pointed to a conventional door on the far side of the room. A row of uncomfortable chairs lined the wall nearby, across from a television and a stack of out-of-date magazines.

“There’s a second driveway through the orchard,” Henry explained. “And a few parking spaces behind the house. I’m working on improving disabled access.”

“It all makes sense,” Tanith murmured. “The old stories. The screams in the night. The people disappearing.”

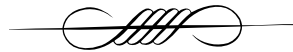
He nodded. “Yes. On the night of the full moon, my grandfather used to kidnap young women, drag them down here, and – clean their teeth. He filled cavities too, but he didn’t always keep enough novocaine. Hence the screams.”

“Why just young women?”

“Because my grandfather was a pervert. My father transformed, sorry, he modernized the curse into a standard dental practice. When he died the curse passed down to me. One day a month isn’t really enough for the whole village. My alter ego has a waiting list.”

Tanith looked at her husband with new understanding, and even deeper love. “Thank you for telling me this,” she said.

“You are my wife. It’s time I stopped keeping secrets from you. And besides” – he paused for a heartbeat – “I could really use a hygienist.”



Intervention

by Barry R. Taylor

© Barry Taylor 2026. All rights reserved.

Will this never end? Walter asked himself, for perhaps the fifth time that quarter-hour. Will this man ramble on forever? The hellish prospect did not seem impossible. The speaker at the podium had already been going on for what seemed like an eternity, and showed no signs of winding down. Walter shifted in his seat. He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He tried to force himself to listen to the man at the podium, who was, apparently, holding everyone else in rapt attention.

Or perhaps everyone else was being achingly polite. Indisputably, no one could be following what the man was saying. His message was either so ethereal as to be beyond the ken of ordinary minds, or it was a jumbled mash of nothing. Walter suspected the latter. Either way, the result was incomprehensible. And interminable.

The speaker was an old man, thin and slightly bent, grey hair in his long beard and rather less on his balding head. The stage lights illuminated his form in the darkened theatre, as if he himself radiated the light of wisdom. He appeared to believe that everything he said was profoundly sagacious.

For he was no ordinary speaker. He was a Distinguished Scientist. He was a Giant in His Field. He had written an Important Book. He was an inspiration to so many who had followed his work, including the moderator, who had used those words in his gracious and grateful introduction. The lecture hall was packed with conference-goers, name tags on lanyards around their necks, their attention fixed on the speaker at the podium.

The distinguished gentleman spoke without notes and used no visual aids. He should have used both. He rambled and he ranted. He interrupted himself. He changed direction whenever a new thought occurred to him. He dashed off on tangents as a fox after an escaping rabbit. He jumped into examples, meant to illustrate something or other, realized he hadn't provided the background to give them context, backed up to the beginning and then forgot where he was going. Every now and again he stopped, looked out over the sea of faces in their padded chairs, and threw out a random sentence that bore no connection to the previous paragraph.

Walter had less patience than some of his fellow conference attendees. He was here only at the behest of his well-meaning supervisor, who imagined that basking in the light of the great man's wisdom would enrich Walter's mind. In truth, he was losing it. He shifted in his seat again; he looked at the floor, then up at the skylights, then all around the room, then back to the man at the podium. When, when, when! would this rambling old man ever wrap it up? Didn't he realize he was over his time already? Did he have no consideration for the other speakers? Why wasn't someone yanking him off the stage?

Far out in space, well out of the plane of the planetary orbits, a tiny bit of rock hung in the void. Call it the mote. It was about the size of a radish, but irregular and pitted. Its velocity, of course, was relative. Compared against the background stars of the Milky Way it was hardly moving at all. Relative to Earth, which lay a little way off its highly eccentric orbit, it was moving very fast indeed. Still, as the mote passed, the gravitational lure of the Earth tugged at it. The pull at this distance was the gentlest of nudges, barely a hint. Yet it was enough to alter the mote's trajectory ever so slightly so that it swung a little closer to the Earth. The tug became a tiny bit stronger, and the orbit diverted a tiny bit more. The mote slipped out of its orbit into a long, winding spiral, with the blue-brown sphere of Earth at its centre.

Down on the planet, Walter was going quietly mad. The distinguished speaker was still speaking, or rather, he was still rambling. Members of the audience were beginning to shuffle. Restlessness was finally overtaking good manners. Off to one side of the stage, the moderator discreetly looked at his watch. Again. The speaker didn't notice, or he didn't care. He raised one finger in the air and made a particularly salient point, which no one understood. Please, please, please, finish up and quit already, Walter begged. I can't sit here any longer. Go off somewhere and write another book. Or write two books. Make a documentary. Anything that gets you off that stage and out of my life.

The distinguished speaker stopped speaking. For an instant, Walter felt hope. The old man looked around the weary audience, then over at the moderator. He said, "Now, I realize I've gone a tad over my time, but I will keep you just a few minutes longer, because there are several further points which deserve explication." Then he wandered off again into the land of maundering meaninglessness.

Noooo! Walter shouted inside his head. I can't take any more of this! He diverted himself by imagining, in too much detail, leaping to his feet, pulling a nickel-plated Smith & Wesson 686 out of his complimentary tote-bag and pumping six blunt-coned projectiles into the speaker's chest. The audience would roar their approval. In reality he shifted in his seat again. He let out an inaudible groan. Please, somebody make him stop talking!

The woman in the seat beside Walter was nodding off. The speaker at the podium was still going on. Walter was going mad. Oh merciful heavens he's gone back to point four (of seven) again! He's going backward!

Outside of Walter's desperate awareness, the mote was curving gracefully toward the Earth, following gravity's ineluctable pull. It gained even more speed. Friction with the upper atmosphere heated its surface. It began to glow. It wound on down, the spiral growing tighter as the air grew denser and the grip of gravity strengthened.

The grey-haired man on the stage made a summative statement. Then he made another one. And another. Then he went back to re-emphasize why the first statement was important, which led to a major digression about a sub-point he had overlooked, or perhaps forgotten about. It was apparent to Walter, and probably everyone else, that the speaker had no idea how to wind up his

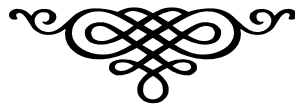
speech. He kept on talking, and talking, perhaps in the hope that he would accidentally spill out a tight summary sentence on which he could end.

The moderator was no longer concealing his impatience. He looked at his watch for the fifth time. People in the audience were looking out the glass doors of the auditorium the way grade-schoolers look at the playground. Sitting in the back, Walter was close to literally pulling at his hair. He was bored beyond expression. Please, please, please, he implored the universe, can't something or someone do something to make this man shut up?

The mote was in the lower atmosphere now, and moving fast. It was red hot. Atmospheric friction had burned off its outer layers. Now it was a tiny fireball, no larger than a pea, but slicing downward immeasurably fast. It blasted through the skylights over the auditorium, struck the distinguished speaker at exactly the level of his heart, tore out through his back and buried itself in the ground beneath the stage. A sonic boom shook the walls. Smoke poured out of the hole at the back of the stage. The great man stopped speaking in the middle of the word 'phenomenological', swayed for a moment, then folded up gracefully onto the floor boards, permanently silenced.

At the back of the hall, Walter leaned back in his seat. He ignored the shouting and commotion going on around him. He let out his breath. That had to be a coincidence, he reflected. Had to be. It was impossible that he could influence the workings of the universe by wishing for it, however ardently. Still, if ever there was a man who deserved to be smitten . . .

He left that thought unfinished. Whatever the means, he had been released from the purgatory that this plenary session had become. He got to his feet, picked up his complimentary tote bag and left the auditorium through the glass doors. He pulled out the conference itinerary to see where he should go next.



Porn Has No Plot

by Barry R. Taylor

© Barry Taylor 2026. All rights reserved.

“Hello,” said the well-dressed man standing beside her table. “I see you are sitting by yourself. Do you mind if I join you for a minute?”

“I suppose,” she replied. “I expect you will anyhow.” She set aside her book.

He sat. “My name is Rocky,” he said.

“Jessica,” she replied.

“A pleasure to meet you, Jessica.” He looked around with interest. “This is very realistic,” he observed. “Remarkable attention to detail.”

“It’s a very real café. And they serve really excellent coffee. Are you new around here?”

He was still turning this way and that, studying the restaurant as if he had never seen one before. “Yes, I think so,” he replied, after a bit. “I came from . . . I mean, I walked right out of . . .” Puzzlement clouded his newscaster’s face. He turned back to the woman in front of him. He said, “Jessica, would you like to have sex with me?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I have a comfortable room very near here. Let’s have Sex. Coitus. Physical intimacy. You and me.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

He frowned. “You are an attractive woman and you are dressed in a sexually provocative manner.”

“I’m wearing a sun dress,” she replied. “And running shoes.”

“You are sitting by yourself in an outdoor café, reading a book.”

“Obviously.”

“Your dress and comportment advertise sexual availability.”

“They absolutely do not.”

“And I am an above-average male in excellent condition with deep sexual experience and an enormous —”

“I don’t need the anatomy lesson,” she interrupted.

“My point is that we should have sex, immediately. It would be pleasurable for both of us, or so I would infer from your grunts and moans. I will propel you to the pinnacle of physical pleasure. How about it?”

“No, thank you.”

“No! Why not? Do you not find me physically attractive?”

“I find you physically adequate. Rather over-built. Conventionally handsome.”

“Am I not in peak physical condition? I work out regularly.”

“I don’t doubt it. Hanging out in the gym is a guy thing.”

“I am well dressed and well composed and I understand camera angles. And I already mentioned my sexual prowess and the above-average length of – ”

“I’m sure you are adequate on both counts, even allowing for male exaggeration. However, still no.”

His frown deepened. “I do not understand. I am a physically attractive man and you are a physically attractive woman, dressed provocatively –”

“It’s a sun dress. It’s July.”

“Are you lesbian, asexual, religious, or in any way opposed to male-female coupling?”

“No.”

“So why would you not want to have sex with me? I can propel you to the pinnacle of physical pleasure.”

“Well, for one thing, I doubt that you would attend to my emotional needs.”

“Your what?”

“Exactly. Also, I’m seeing someone else.”

“Ah, I see. Is that relationship a traditional marriage or an equivalent permanent union with an explicit or implied promise of sexual fidelity?”

“Of course not. We just met.”

“Has your relationship become sexually exclusive?”

“We haven’t even had sex yet.”

“Then I don’t see any barrier to us having coitus immediately. I have a flat near here with a large, comfortable bed, excellent lighting, and a variety of sexual accoutrements. We can have gymnastic sex there. Wouldn’t you enjoy being propelled to the pinnacle of physical pleasure?”

“With you, I don’t think so.”

His confusion only deepened. “I’m sorry, but I still don’t understand. You are an attractive young woman in a sun dress that displays your breasts and I am a fit man with an exceptionally large – ”

“Look, Rocky, you’re a good-looking man and lots of women would love to have sex with you, but there is more to a relationship than physical sex.”

“There is?”

“Oh my word. Haven’t you any experience with dating? Or even with meeting people? Women want men who are interesting outside the bedroom too. Men who can talk intelligently and know how to listen. Men who like spending time with them, who understand their emotional needs, support their life ambitions and share their likes and dislikes. Women want men who can dance, or who are at least willing to try, and who notice their new shoes. They want men who tell them they look pretty when they don’t feel pretty. They want men who will take them to work in the morning, to a good restaurant in the evening and to Paris on vacation. They want men who can make them laugh and hold them when they cry. If you get all those things right the sex

is always great even when it sometimes isn't. You really need to understand the full panoply of female sexuality."

Rocky stared back at her, wide-eyed. He didn't say anything for a good ten seconds. Finally he asked, "Other women feel this way too? It's not just you?"

"This is pretty typical, actually. Within a broad range of personal preferences."

Another pause. Then: "Is there a public library near here?"

"What? Well, yes, there's a branch no more than a few blocks down that way." She pointed. "Why?"

"I suppose they have books on, what did you call it, female sexuality and relationships and all that?"

"Of course. Lots of them."

He got to his feet. "I think I need to do some reading."

"Excellent idea! You're on the right track already."

Rocky pulled a pair of glasses with heavy black frames out of his jacket pocket and put them on. "I thought these were just a prop," he remarked. He paused, considering. "I've heard that librarians are always strait-laced on the surface but seething with repressed sexual desire underneath. Maybe I could find one to have sex with me."

"Books first, Rocky, then librarians."

He nodded. "Right. Books first. It was a pleasure meeting you, Jessica. And thank you."

"You are entirely welcome."

"Oh, and I like your shoes."



The Queen and the Mirror

by Barry R. Taylor

© Barry Taylor 2026. All rights reserved.

Once upon a time, in a mythical, northern European kingdom, a young queen gave birth to a baby girl, whom she named Snow White because of her pale skin. The queen died soon after, and so missed seeing her daughter grow up. When Snow White was still very young, her father the King remarried. His new wife, now the Queen and Snow White's stepmother, was as vain as she was beautiful. Given that she was easily the best looking woman in the kingdom, that was a lot of vanity. The people of the kingdom, awed by her beauty and unaware of her character flaws, all agreed the King was one lucky guy. As the years passed and Snow White grew up to become an attractive young woman in her own right, the Queen's vanity turned to narcissism, and her intentions turned dark.

The evil Queen's chief enabler was her magic mirror, which provided wise counsel and always assured her that she looked smoking hot. The Queen had a ritual to ask the mirror now and again if she was still the most attractive woman in the kingdom. The mirror always replied with, "Yes; Definitely; Absolutely; No question," and similar affirmatives, until one day, compelled by magical honesty, it had to concede that Snow White had a slight edge. The mirror said, "You should be fairest, my Queen, but today not quite. You are first runner-up to stunning Snow White."

The Queen flew into a fit of rage at this news, swore up and down that she would have Snow White eliminated and threatened to smash the mirror against the wall. The latter of these threats concerned the mirror rather more than the former. The mirror was not keen on becoming the sole judge in a monthly Miss Kingdom beauty contest, especially if the wrong answer could prove shattering. Yet it was incapable of lying. It decided instead to equivocate.

A few weeks after that first puncturing of the Queen's vanity, she again asked the mirror if she was on top of the A-list. The Queen said, "Magic mirror, in my hand, who's the fairest in the land?"

The mirror's glass became liquid. It shimmered and rippled as a pond in a breeze. At length the mirror said, "Fairer he than all the rest, is William Tyler of Castlewest."

"What?" demanded the Queen. "Who the devil is William Tyler?"

The mirror said, "A humble merchant, who trades eggs and poultry in the town square. He treats every customer with respect, never short-changes anyone, weighs his birds accurately and always tries to give value for coin. He treats his wife as his equal and strives to treat his two sons without favouritism, even though the younger is a cut-up. No one deals as fairly with others as William Tyler."

“Not that kind of fairness!” declared the Queen, as she admired her own reflection. “I meant, who has the fairest face in all the land?”

“Oh, sorry,” said the mirror. “My mistake.” It went silent for a few heartbeats. Then: “The fairest face o’er water and land is Daphne Dunne of Newtown Strand.”

The Queen’s perfect face darkened in a scowl. “What? Am I not still the fairest? What of Snow White? Who is this Daphne Dunne?”

The mirror said, “She is the second daughter of Richard and Mary Dunne of Newtown Strand. Very blonde, of course, and skin as pale as alabaster. She tries to stay out of the sun because it gives her freckles, but really a bit of colour wouldn’t hurt. The poor girl looks pasty. No one in your kingdom has fairer skin than Daphne Dunne.”

“No, no no!” shouted the Queen. “Not that kind of fairness either. I meant fairness in the sense of beauty. Pulchritude. Nubileness. Attractiveness of form and features, especially those pertaining to romantic allure and marriageability. Now answer me straight: Am I definitely still the fairest in all the land?”

“Oh, I get you,” the mirror said. “Hold on a tic while I recalibrate.” Once again the Queen watched her reflection wobble and wave as the mirror’s surface dissolved into magical light. The mirror was silent for a long, long time.

When the Queen’s patience was about to give out, the mirror said, “Art thou the fairest wherever you go? The answer surely must be yes . . . and no.”

“I knew it! I knew it!” the Queen raged. “Just as I thought. It’s that snooty little princess, Snow White again, isn’t it? It’s always that little rag doll, with her perfect black hair and her snow white skin and her blood-red lips and her trusting, innocent eyes and Wait a minute. What do you mean, yes and no? Am I the fairest or am I not?”

The mirror said, “In beauty and in grace, it’s a five-way tie for first place.”

“What? A Tie! Explain yourself, and quickly, lest you become flying shards of glass!”

The mirror said, “You are the fairest in your queendom, my liege and Queen. Along with Snow White, Rose Red, Sky Blue, and Fern Green.”

“You lie!” screamed the Queen. “There cannot be that many rivals. I alone am the fairest in the land! The prettiest, the loveliest, the most beauteous, the fetchingest, and I have been since high school. Mine is the face that would launch a thousand ships, except our country is land-locked. I can’t be compared with some B-list of blank-faced commoners! Only Snow White, that conniving little weasel, has ever challenged me, and I roll out of bed every morning looking better than she can ever hope to! How dare you suggest there are five!”

The mirror said, “The problem is that beauty is so terribly subjective. There is no agreed, ideal standard of beauty. No way to judge fairness fairly, as it were. Beyond basic indicators such as facial symmetry, big eyes, healthy-looking skin and hair, and a 1.4 hip-to-waist ratio, our standards of physical beauty are too ill-defined and too flexible to allow fine distinctions.”

For a second the Queen's scowl made her look marginally less eye-popping. "Look, you cursed chunk of shiny glass," she snarled, "I asked you for an assessment, not a psychology lesson! I'm the fairest in the land and always have been. Why are you going on about these other women?"

The mirror said, "In classic beauty, when all's said and done, there can be no question, you're still number one."

It went on quickly before the Queen could interrupt: "But your step-daughter Snow White is shapely, and the contrast of dark hair and red lips on her pale skin is dramatic. Also she does housework for the Seven Dwarfs and doesn't complain about it. Rose Red is an outgoing young woman who lives with her mother and sister in a little cottage in the forest. Her outdoorsy lifestyle has given her rosy red cheeks that match her striking red hair, and life in the woods keeps her very fit. Her sister is something of a looker too. Sky Blue is a merchant's daughter in Tunnleydale who is known all about for her long blonde hair and radiant smile. She is exquisitely well proportioned and dances superbly. Fern Green, on the other hand, is small and pixie-ish, almost unbearably cute, with the brightest green eyes you ever saw. All of these women are simultaneously the fairest in the land, depending on who you ask."

"No! I will not tolerate ambiguity!" screamed the Queen. "I am the fairest, do you hear me? Me! Why do you think they call me the Beauty Queen? I'm perfect! I'm hot! Grown men get tongue-tied when I walk into the room. Students buy my picture and post it on their dorm-room walls! I have a fan club!"

She glared daggers at the mirror while she caught her breath. "Fine then, you worthless bit of painted quartz," she decided, "I was going to ask my loyal huntsman to take Snow White into the woods and do away with her, but now I see I have more work to do. This problem calls for four poisoned apples instead of one."

The Queen set the mirror down on her dressing table – appropriately called a vanity – and hip-swayed out of the room. She paused at the door. "And next time I ask who is fairest in the land," she told the mirror, "I'd better hear a better answer." She strutted away.

The magic mirror was left alone on the dressing table. Its face shimmered and rippled for a long, long time.

