

Malevolent Maine

Episode 28: The Ritual of Air

Malevolent Maine is a horror podcast, and may contain material not suitable for all audiences. Listener discretion is advised.

INTRO:

MARK: A middle school dance that ends with men in black suits. A haunted stretch of road with a seemingly endless supply of ghosts. And a house of ill repute with a sinister past. These are the stories coming your way in the next few weeks.

Hi guys. It's Mark, Junior Investigator here at Malevolent Maine. We want to thank everybody for listening and supporting our show. We're growing daily and we're so thankful you keep coming back week after week. We have investigated some bizarre cases so far this season and I can tell you we've got even more for you.

Don't forget to follow us on Instagram where we're releasing some sneak peeks and pictures of some of the items we recover during our investigations. And a reminder about our Malevolent Mob over on Patreon. Join us there for even more exclusive content. Oh, and don't forget to keep sending us your stories of the weird and the unexplained. Maybe your story will make it onto the show!

The mountain air is chilly against your skin and you can see your breath as it floats away from you. All around you people in hooded gray robes march silently, climbing the mountain. A slight breeze picks up and you catch the first hint of mysterious chanting on the wind. The trees begin to thin and you can just make out the odd structure at the top of the mountain. Twisted branches and planks of wood have been lashed together to form intricate geometric shapes. The longer you stare at the

wooden structure between the trees, the more your mind begins to twist and turn. What is this strange edifice... and what's that hanging from it?

This is Malevolent Maine.

Guys, what was that?

I saw it with my own eyes

No, seriously, what was that?

It's just not scientifically possible.

I can't explain it.

Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.

This stuff is wild, man. It's real wild.

But... what was that?

This one might give you the creepy-crawlies, MMers. For this story we're heading back to the Andover/Newry region in Oxford County, Maine. We visited this area in Episode 9 when we investigated the mysterious cryptid known as Stridda Long Body. We're heading back there with a brand new case that piqued our interests.

Newry is home to one of Maine's largest and most popular ski resorts, Sunday River. It's a beautiful part of the state with plenty of trails for skiing and hiking, lakes, and beautiful farm lands.

It may also be home to a group of witches.

Tom recently spoke with a woman named Skye who admitted that wasn't her real name.

TOM: Skye told me that she had always been super interested in the occult and alternative lifestyles. She was at a metaphysical store in South Paris, when she was approached by a woman inviting her to join a group of like-minded individuals. Skye appeared to be in her mid to late thirties, long blonde hair that she kept in a big braid. She said the woman was about her age, maybe a little older, and while she didn't recognize the woman, she said she had seen her in the store a few times and thought she might be interested in getting together with others to talk about and practice harnessing energy from the Otherworld.

For those unaware "Otherworld" - one word, not two - is the source of magic in many pagan and wiccan beliefs. It is a spirit world that witches can draw power from through rites and rituals.

Skye told us that she didn't recognize the woman, who introduced herself as Astra, but she admits that she didn't often pay attention to people around her and had been in the store plenty of times for sage, crystals, and other components.

Astra handed Skye a business card with "The Sisterhood of the World Tree" printed in gold letters against a black backdrop. On the back was a location along with a date and time. Astra told Skye that she hoped she would join them, then smiled and left the shop.

Skye says she thought about what to do for a few days before finally deciding to go. "Astra seemed nice," she told us. "And I thought it would be cool to talk to others who were as into practicing as I was." The meeting took place just a few weeks ago, she said, at 8:00 PM at a house in Andover. When she pulled up to the house she was greeted by Astra and a few other women, all in their thirties and forties. They offered her her choice of red or white wine and welcomed them in.

TOM: Skye told me the house was a normal Cape Cod style home with an attached two-car garage. The living room was spacious and nicely decorated, but all of the furniture had been pushed to the sides of the room. The only light came from a dozen or so candles set about the room. For the first hour, Skye said the woman drank wine and talked about normal things - jobs, kids, bad dates. It was fun and relaxed. She said it felt more like a girls' night than a coven meeting.

Things changed a little after nine o'clock, when a woman who had been quiet for most of the evening suddenly clapped her hands together three times.

"Sisters," she said. "The hour has come. You know the rules, dress as you see fit, but it is time to don the ceremonial robes."

Skye wasn't sure what to do, but one of the other women began passing out large gray robes. Several of the women removed their jewelry and let down their hair. Some removed outer layers of clothing, some slipped out of undergarments. A few of the women stripped down completely before slipping the robes over their heads. Sky said she removed her earrings, her sweater, and her shoes and socks, then shrugged into the dark gray vestment.

"It was kinda exciting," Skye told us. "Maybe it was the wine, or just their enthusiasm for the ritual, but after I got over the initial shock, I went along with it. It was fun."

The leader of the Coven, the woman who had given the instructions, led them out of the living room and into the garage. It was mostly empty, with heavy black curtains draped over anything that had been too big or too cumbersome to remove.

Set up in the middle of the garage was a long wooden table with benches on either side. More candles were lit along its length, throwing dim light around the room, making it seem almost cavernous in the gloom.

At each place at the table was a spool of twine, a sharp knife, and a collection of twigs and sticks. The leader indicated that the women should take a place along the long table. Astra put a hand on Skye's arm and guided her to a place beside her at the table.

"Sisters," the head witch said. "It is time to build our altars."

Skye said she wasn't sure what to do, but she watched the others. They began twisting and tying the sticks and twigs together, using the twine to bind them together into three-dimensional, free-standing shapes. These altars, as the witch called them, were no taller than eighteen inches and Skye said most of them would have fit easily in a reusable shopping bag, which is an original if not adequate size descriptor.

Soon Skye was crafting alongside the more experienced witches, doing her best to construct something similar to those around her.

TOM: She told me that at first she didn't really know what she was doing, but soon, she felt something. She said it was like... inspiration or like a force came into her and was guiding her hands. Her exact words were the Divine Mother was moving through her. The jumble of sticks began to form into a twisted, gnarled structure.

These altars were half Puritan era voodoo doll, half cage looking things. If you've watched HBO's *True Detective*, you probably have a good idea of what these wooden things looked like. That show called them "devil's nests," but according to Skye they were small altars for charms of magical tokens. In this coven's case they were the resting place for small stones inscribed with magical symbols or glyphs.

When it appeared the altars were nearly finished, the lead witch brought out a plastic tote that rattled as she lugged it over to

the table. Inside were dozens of small bones. One by one, the witches began grabbing bones and adding them to their altars. At first Skya blanched at the idea.

"They're mostly old chicken bones she keeps after dinner," Astra whispered in her ear. "And some collected from roadkill. It enhances the magic."

Reluctantly, Skye took two of the bones, which she admitted did look a little like bone from a chicken leg, and using the twine attached them to the altar she had made. Then the head witch handed each woman a stone with a sigil or glyph painted on it. This symbol was two half circles back to back, resembling a pair of wings with three dots in the center. There was a triangle, pointing up with a single line drawn through it horizontally.

Astra explained to Skye that these were wards or charms to protect against pests - black flies, mosquitos, and ticks mainly. These were sold at a farm stand as a means to supplement the coven's expenses.

Then the head witch led the others out of the garage and out to the backyard where a fire burned in a small fire pit. She gestured to the woman to gather around and hold hands. She stood in the center of this circle, illuminated by the light of the fire.

"Mother. Mother of air. Mother of all," the leader began. "We evoke you. With the Offering of Wings, with our promise to you, we seek your guidance. Dark Father who watches from the towers in the East, we ask that you come into your loyal Betrothed and grant her your power."

If you're thinking this sounds familiar, you're not alone. We'll get back to that in a minute.

The coven leader, the Betrothed, produced a cup, or more accurately a chalice, from behind a stump and held it up.

"Tonight, sisters," she intoned. "We complete the Ritual of Air. Drink from the blessed cup and sanctify your being. Then we begin our trek to the ritual site."

The Betrothed took a drink from the cup, then passed it to the woman next to her, who in turn took a sip and passed it along. When the chalice got to Skye, she says she took a sip. In hindsight, she admitted, she might have gotten carried away by the events of the night. The liquid in the cup was wine, she is almost sure, but it had a strange taste to it she said she didn't recognize. It burned as it went down her throat, then turned her insides frosty. She closed her eyes and shivered.

TOM: Skye told me that she remembered what happened next clearly, though it seems hard to believe. She admits that the wine they drank around the fire may have been spiked with something. She says she felt weird during what happened next, like her skin was alive and pulling in all different directions. She insisted, however, that everything that happened after they left the circle of the fire, played out exactly as she described.

The coven began walking down a path that led away from the backyard. Soon they began going uphill, and Skye realized they were hiking up a mountain. She claims she has no idea how long the hike took. She said it couldn't have been more than an hour and yet it felt like a very long time. The entire time they hiked, in a single file line, the Betrothed chanted incantations from the front.

For Skye, the night felt like it was moving all around her. Darkness seemed to stretch and twist around her and she felt like hands were reaching out to grab her, but she was never touched. They had only the light of the stars to guide them, but she said she had no trouble finding the path. None of the coven stumbled, not once.

The night was full of strange sounds, animal sounds, but none Skye had ever heard before. At one point, as the Betrothed

finished a particularly aggressive intonation, Skye thought she saw a ball of purple fire streak across the path. There were movements in the darkness and strange smells on the air. It seemed like all five of her senses had gone haywire, and yet she continued following the witch in front of her.

Sometime later - Skye couldn't tell us exactly how long it had been, they reached the summit of the mountain. Just before clearing the last cluster of trees before emerging at the top, two other witches, dressed in similar robes joined them. They nodded once to the Betrothed and then fell in line as they finished their ascension.

At the top, bathed in the light of the moon and the stars, Skye could see that a large wooden structure had been constructed. It was made from saplings and small trees lashed together with rope. Upon closer inspection, it revealed itself to be a much, much larger version of the wooden altars the witches had constructed earlier.

Dangling down from the center of the giant altar was a human skull with a rope running straight down through the skull attached to several vertebrae hanging below it like some gruesome wind chime. A triangle with the point facing up with a horizontal line through its lower third had been carved or painted on the skull.

Without a word, the women encircled the strange mountain top shrine, and Skye found herself next to Astra and another witch whose name she either had never learned or could not remember. The Betrothed stood directly in front of the skull and seemed to be staring into its empty sockets.

"We now enact the Ritual of Air," the Betrothed said.

She began chanting in strange words in a language Skye had never heard before. She said it sounded ancient, far older than the English language, than perhaps any language, and yet... she found herself joining in with the others, responding or echoing at the

appropriate times. What's more, she said, she actually began to understand the words, or at least their intent.

TOM: They were summoning a force. A powerful, dangerous force. One that would enter the hanging skull or imbue it with its energy. That skull would then serve as a beacon or a focus point, drawing more and more spiritual energy to it. Skye said she understood this, even though she couldn't make out any of the words the Betrothed was saying or any she herself was replying with.

Skye's head began to swim. She swayed on her feet but whether it was from dizziness or the strengthening ritual, she didn't know. Her vision doubled, then tripled. At some point she realized she was holding hands with the women on either side of her and then were all writhing, flowing, like feathers caught in a cross breeze.

A bright light, a sickly shade of toxic green shot down out of the sky and into the center of the skull, focused down from the heavens through the wooden altar. The empty eye sockets of the skull glowed with a malignant energy, then burst out around them. Skye felt it like a blast and almost fell down. Then the night was still.

The energy or being or whatever it was they had called down left an icy fear in her chest. She shivered, but she said it was more like a tremor, shaking her entire frame. For a second she was sure the green energy had meant to hurt her, had meant to fill her up until she burst apart, and that only the directing aura of the altar had saved her, that it had directed that force ... somewhere else.

Slowly, the women began their descent of the mountain. They were mostly silent, subdued. Skye tried to ask Astra what had just happened but the other witch just shook her head. When they returned to the house, Skye said she was still reeling from what she had experienced. The women quietly changed out of their

robes back into their street clothes, then one by one, they left the home with nods or quick hugs to the others.

Astra caught up to Skye in the driveway. "This was good," she said and there was a weary, satisfied smile spread across her face. "You did great. I hope you'll join us again."

Skye said her head was swimming the entire drive home and that she struggled to stay in her lane. She told us she was thankful it was so late and the back roads were mostly empty. She managed to get home and dropped into bed where she slept for twelve hours.

Skye said she hasn't gone back to any further meetings of the coven. Something about the entire experience didn't sit right with her. From the altars and charms they made in the garage to the final, bizarre ritual atop the mountain, all of it had felt wrong to Skye. She did say she drive by the house where they had gathered a few times, but was shocked to see it looked nothing like what she remembered it. It was red instead of gray, and there was no garage. She said she hasn't run into any of the women she met with that night, at least not that she recognizes, but that she has talked to Astra on the phone a few times. She always finds an excuse as to why she can't make the next meeting. She has avoided the magic shop where she first met Astra and many of the other places she knows people into the metaphysical might gather. Whatever happened that night scared her. The forces she felt, that flowed through her or into her, felt dangerous and her understanding of witchcraft was do no harm, and whatever they summoned that night meant explicit harm to any and all it encountered.

We have some theories about what happened that night, but before we do that, we want to talk about some listener comments we received about some previous episodes. We think in light of Skye's experience, they may shed some light on what's happening.

First, long-time friend of the show, Paul wrote to us and said he thought something in Episode 24, our episode about the coven

of witches practicing dark magic at the University of Maine Machias, sounded familiar.

"There was something the girl said about the ritual she witnessed," Paul wrote, "that I couldn't quite put my finger on. Then I went back and listened to your Episode about Mooretown. You said that the witches of Mooretown worshiped someone called the Mother Witch, and Grace said they were calling to someone they referred to as Dark Mother. Could they be related?"

Another listener, Cathy, mentioned something similar. She said that when Mark read a passage from the witch's bible found in Mooretown, there was a passage about Lords of Watchtowers and that the Ritual of Fire mentioned, "The Dark Father who watches from the towers." She also noted that the Mooretown ritual asked the Mother Witch to enter her servant and so did the ritual Grace Vickery experienced.

So the question is, are these two covens, separated by over three hundred years, related somehow. And what connections are there to the coven Skye was briefly a part of?

It didn't escape our notice that the leader of both the coven at U Maine Machias and the one in Andover referred to themselves as "the Betrothed." The descriptions of the two women don't seem to match so it is highly unlikely that they were in fact the same person. It appears to be a title granted to a powerful witch, the leader of a very specific coven.

The ritual or spell the Betrothed enacted around the campfire in the backyard of the home in Andover sounded awfully similar to the one performed in the sub basement of the Merrill Library in Machias. Both evoked the Dark Mother, both evoked Satan through the use of the term Dark Father.

Which brings us to the ritual on the mountain top, the Ritual of Air. In witchcraft, the four elements - Earth, Air, Wind, and Fire - are powerful forces to be called upon. In Episode 24 we discovered that the so-called Ritual of Fire performed by the

coven at the University was a charging ritual, one meant to prepare the land for a future spell. From what we gather about the Ritual of Air Skye participated in, it sounds like something similar. The energy that Skye says entered the skull then dissipated into the air, could be used to charge the land, to instill it with power for later use. The fact that Skye said this energy felt dangerous leads us to believe that this coven, the Sisterhood of the World Tree, has a nefarious purpose.

We should note that, Ostara, one of the eight Witches' Sabbats, is held on March 20th, and this is the date Skye claims she partook in the ritual. The Ritual of Fire also took place on a Witches' Sabbat, Imbolg.

Before we go any farther, we'd like to pull back the curtain a little bit and explain how we investigate claims of the paranormal or supernatural. Often when dealing with cases like this, it's easy to fall down the rabbit hole, so to speak. When dealing with something we believe to be actually supernatural, we ask another one of our investigators to play Devil's Advocate, if you'll excuse the phrase. This investigator's job is to doubt everything, to look for holes in the story, or rational explanations. Humans, by nature, tend to suffer from apophenia, the tendency to perceive a connection or meaningful pattern between unrelated or random things, and our Devil's Inspector, as we refer to it, their job is to keep us from making those perceived connections where there are none.

For this case, which we're now combining with both the Ritual of Fire and the Mooretown coven, we've asked Mark to serve as the Devil's Inspector. We asked him to look over Skye's story and see if there were some conclusions he could draw that were far different from the insidious ones we were seeing.

MARK: So the first thing I thought was that Skye could be a fan of the show. She could have listened to Episodes 21 and 24 and made up her story to coincide with it.

Episode 21, where we talked about Mooretown, came out on February 15th of this year. Episode 24, the Ritual of Fire, was released on March 29th. We spoke with Skye on March 27th, two days before we went public with Grace Vickery's story. It is possible Skye could have been inspired, let's say, by our episode on Mooretown and concocted her encounter, but it would have been nearly impossible for her to match up the words of the rituals nearly word for word.

And before you ask, we looked into whether Skye knew Grace Vickery. All of our investigating seems to confirm that the two women have never met or communicated with one another, either before our episodes came out, or after.

MARK: Then there's the admission from Skye that she was drinking. She even mentioned that she thought her drink might have been spiked with something. One of the leading theories about witch's flying on broomsticks, at least historically, is that they rubbed hallucinogenic ointment onto their skin to induce the sensations of flight. There's also plenty of evidence that psychotropic drugs have been used in various occult and wiccan practices and rituals over the years.

So, is it possible that Skye might have been under the influence of psychedelic drugs and hallucinated the entire encounter, or at least the more fantastic elements? It is entirely possible. She mentions that after drinking the strange-tasting wine around the campfire, she begins to lose sense of time and place. Her hike up the mountain is full of strange visions and sounds - common side effects of psychedelic drugs.

MARK: The house she claims she was at is different now, which could be an indication she's making the story up, or making it difficult to disprove. Now, this could be an effect of the drugs on her memory, or maybe she got turned around a little going to a strange place for the first time. There's also the charms and altars she said they were making to sell. That should be easy to find, if it's true.

And of course, the giant altar on top of the mountain. If you found that, it would lend some credibility to her story.

Thanks, Mark. He suggests that an inspection of the area should reveal evidence of Skye's story. So that's exactly what we sent Tom to find.

TOM: I drove up to Newry one weekend to have a look around. Skye had told us where the house she visited was and gave a pretty detailed description of it. There weren't any houses like the one she described on that road. In fact I couldn't find any in all of Newry that looked like the one she told us about.

The address of the house she claimed to have gone to belonged to a man named Brent Oxman. He was in his seventies and had lived in the home for the past fifty years. We checked the town's records and confirmed this. He was never married, had no children or sisters or any other women in his life who could have used the house as their own.

TOM: I also didn't find any wooden altars or stone charms for sale. However, after asking around, I did find several people who had discovered some of those charms and totems around their property. A few of the people said they found these stones beneath their windows or near their doors. Some were found on fence posts or in gardens. They had the runes on them just like Skye described.

As we talked about in Episode 24, sigils or drawings carry a significant power in witchcraft. We found the symbol for memory all over the Merrill Library, but with three lines drawn through them, to indicate the absence of or "not."

The symbols on the charms Tom discovered seemed to indicate pests of some kind, insects and bugs most likely. It's not a common symbol in witchcraft, but we were able to find a few references in some more obscure texts that resembled the sigils.

However, everything we read and everything we know about arcane symbols seems to indicate that these aren't protective wards, but instead charms used to summon or draw forth these pests.

TOM: The people in Newry have been complaining about the black flies this year. They said they came early and they seem extra vicious too. I should note that I did pull three ticks off me after walking around some of the trails in the area.

Could this coven be trying to summon large batches of black flies, mosquitos and ticks to the area or is this just normal Maine spring, when these pests come out naturally? It's hard to say. We did try to contact the Sisterhood of the World Tree to ask them, but the phone number on the card Skye was given was no longer in service and we haven't been able to find anyone associated with the number.

Which brings us to the final, large altar with the skull on it. The symbol of a triangle with a horizontal line through the bottom is a common witchcraft symbol for "Air," which would coincide with the ritual that was performed there. It is also from the same visual dictionary of magic symbols, if you will, as the fire symbol Lucas and I discovered in Machias. This at least implies some sort of connection, even if only a basic one. Skye claimed she hiked up a mountain to where the other witches had already constructed this altar, so we sent Tom looking for it.

TOM: There are at least fifteen mountains in the Newry area, including some well known ski mountains. I wasn't able to check all of them, but no one in the area I talked to mentioned seeing a giant wooden altar with a skull suspended from it.

Which doesn't mean it's not there, somewhere, or perhaps has since been removed. We're asking our listeners in the Newry/Andover area, if you're out hiking, to keep an eye open for this strange structure. It could still be standing, or could

have fallen into some form of disrepair. If you see it, take a few pictures and send us the location so we can confirm the discovery.

This case, like that of the Ritual of Fire, largely remains a mystery. The common language and rituals seems to imply some sort of connection between the two groups, though we do not believe they are one and the same. While the summoning of flies and ticks is an inconvenience more than a real danger, if what Skye said about the final ritual done on the mountain top is any indication, this group seems intent on causing serious harm.

We do have some connections in the world of witchcraft, though none of our informants seem to know what is going on. Rituals of Fire and Air seem to suggest the strong possibility of rituals for Earth and Water as well. We're asking all of our listeners to keep an ear to the ground and if you hear anything regarding these rituals or groups or covens performing any strange ties, please reach out to us.

For now, we're going to say that we tentatively believe Skye. The business card for the Sisterhood of the World Tree, the magic charms discovered in the area, and the similarities between two different cases makes it seemingly more than a coincidence. We're going to take a trip back up to Bowdoin College, where the witch bible of Mooretown is stored and see if we can uncover anything that would link these two cases.

In the meantime, and as always, we'll remind you to...

Stay safe out there, Maine.

Malevolent Maine is Lucas Knight, Tom Wilson, and myself, Chris Estes.

If you'd like to read more about our investigations check out our website at malevolentmaine.blogspot.com/

While there, don't forget to check our merch store. And, if you're so inclined, support us on Patreon at patreon.com/malevolentmaine

Thank you for listening to Malevolent Maine.

And as always, stay safe out there, Maine.