

Astra the Witch

by Troy Kirby,

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Hey, boy, you finally coming around, huh? You look like you're coming out of that stupor. Betcha that noggin of yours' ain't feeling so hot right now. Mine would neither if I got it the way that you did. Now hold up, don't try standing, sit still on the bed and get your bearings. You don't want to go down again. Yeah, that's right; you were awake before, ten minutes prior. You got up, dropped and were out until

just now. Well, fine, don't listen to me. See, there you go, jumping up just so you can sit down again.

I know you want to see what's occurring out there. It's the Coming as far as I'm concerned. How do I know? Have nothing to go on but my instincts. And they say we're best to be inside, away from all of the turmoil. Even with blood on our hands. Yeah, not just mine, my friend, you have some on yours' too. Now sit still, you look ready to spill your guts and I don't care for the smell of sick in such tight quarters. When they built the jail cell, comfort was not among their first priorities.

You don't recall any of this that I'm saying? Man, you were out quick after the Sheriff clobbered you from behind. Yep, did it with his Colt and dropped you off of your horse. I think at the time, you were distracted, laughing with me about that lady we dunked. You didn't see how quick I was to go for my own gun, but the Sheriff had his bearing down on me, ready to squeeze off a shot in my heart. Only took me seeing what he did to you to know how serious of a man he really was.

So I did what he says and we all headed off to jail like good boys to wait for Judge Ross to bang on his gavel and give us three months for our crimes to settle up with the house. Yep, I don't see as to Disturbing the Peace being a major offense, but you know this little mining town ain't got much in the way of sense to it. If it had, they would never have gotten between ole Astra and her man, Hollis. You know I'm right, even if you don't want to admit it. We got here just in time; however, trust me on that if nothing else.

You hear that racket going on out there? That's Astra going upset at everyone. That ugly bird that snared the town hunk Hollis Stamperfield as if he were nothing. Had him up in the mountains, took him away from his family and everything. Didn't even have the ability to understand what was going on to him. This town, they knew, even though Astra was from here. Since she was born, she had those marks on her back which swore that she would not be welcomed not matter how much praying to the Lord she did.

You remember how everyone talked behind Astra's back. Said all of those horrible things about her kin, wondering why her sister Kathy didn't grab hold of Hollis when she had the chance. I believe that most of the town's folk realized that Astra didn't play fair. I mean, Hollis had but a ton of lady friends who waited for him to be their gentleman caller. Even after Kathy was selected as his one-and-only, it was Astra who swept him away from everything, left her family to go up into those mountains around Badger Creek. Everyone knew something strange was going on, happening right before our eyes, but it was a little too much from any of us to comprehend at the time.

You remember anything about tonight? It's been a long one but I ain't believing I'll forget it. Hollis came running into the saloon, crying up a storm, saying that Astra killed her sister Kathy when she came to visit. Saying Kathy tried to break the spell, do what it took to take Astra's hold off of Hollis. Saying he had been cursed into loving an ugly woman. Some of the boys inside the saloon laughed up a storm, didn't they? Hell, you remember, we all gave it a good laugh.

But then Ebley Wilson stopped playing on his piano so it was nothing but a hall of laughs. He looked like the barkeep, giving a sour offering to Hollis. Handsome as that man was, Hollis was never too bright. Especially after Astra had him doing her bidding, making him a slave with a spell so thick that nothing short of death

could break it. That's what Hollis said, man, ain't you listening? That Kathy went up there, gave him a sloppy kiss, then stuck a knife in Astra's side to break the hold on him. Did it to give herself some peace of mind, knowing her sister had stolen the only man she had ever loved out of spite for all of the times Kathy treated her bad.

Stop it, now, you know you ain't talking in that voice to me as if I don't make a lick of sense. That's foolhardy if you keep it up and I can bust you in the chops the same way I did when you started trying to take my money in that pickup card game three weeks past. Yeah, I forgave you, but it don't make me no fool. And I have a little bit of respect to my name.

And I know how it sounds, but serious if nothing, the thing you gotta realize is that when Astra came after Hollis tonight, all of the sense got sucked out of this town. It was bad; you could smell it in the air. Wait, you telling me you ain't got the foggiest of what I'm speaking to? Man, the Sheriff knocked your brain hard, didn't he? Keep rubbing at the spot; see if the memories don't start flooding back at some point.

Astra came into town riding on a horse that was anything but normal. You remember that, yeah, you do, vague at least, I see it in your eyes. You recall how that horse had fangs stained with blood. That the town became pitch black and no one could see more than two feet beyond their nose. There she was, screaming as she did, lightning charged from her hands. Everything was Coming to an End as I thought it might. That's what people had been calling her since the day she was born in this town.

Asked her parents to club her with a stone, bury her on the church premises in order to keep the evil from taking us one day. And her mother would have none of it. Had her husband all prepared, aiming a shotgun while up every night for a good year and a half, ready to shoot anyone who tried to make an attempt at that child. Had it not been that the new people had ushered in with the color rush on the mine, the town rumors would have been dealt with. But so many people came in, the influence went a little south and Astra stayed alive by indifference.

Well, how am I supposed to know? I guess the first time people questioned it again was after the river went dead. Recall all of the fish floating up? This place almost starved to death, and I want to believe that was after her fifteenth birthday. The whole town, including you and I, did our part and ushered her out of town. Made her sure that we didn't want her, and would have never seen her again if not for Hollis. That fool got a spell put on him about a month later, and he ran away from Kathy and into Astra's arms as if he belonged there the entire time.

She's Legion. That's wickedness which will destroy us all, I tell you. Hollis dropped dead in front of everyone in the saloon and Astra charging on her steed, weeping loud and swearing a curse at the town's people for doing nothing. You mean to tell me that you're drawing a blank for the accounts of tonight? Man, the Sheriff got you good, didn't he? Pray tell you help me understand how when you help drown a woman, as we did less than an hour ago, you don't have that memory burned into your brain. I know I'll never forget it and neither will this town.

Damn Sheriff and his laws. Stupid is what I have to say to them. He came after us despite our taking charge of the situation. You know if we hadn't shot Astra

through the heart twice, tied her some rocks and dropped her over the bridge, we would still be free. We did some good work of decency for the town by hanging that bitch and got repaid by having cuffs slapped on us. You get hit over the head with the Sheriff's pistol and a mark for life. All for what we did two weeks prior when shooting up them empty stables while liquored up. It's starting to come back to you now, ain't it? That Sheriff, he's a man with a thick mustache and a thin memory who thinks that the criminal mind all works the same.

He carted us off to jail, that's what. Made us ride through town on one horse. My hands were bound; you over my lap out like a light, letting everyone get a good stare at us as if we were scum like the James Gang. That's loyalty for you in this town. Maybe that's why Astra has left us alone thus far, we got to understand how cold this town really is.

Pardon me a sec; I got to get this chew out from under my bottom lick. Got tucked there while I was talking, starting to make me gag. There, that's better. No matter how many times I get a pinch, I never can get used to the stuff that the loggers and law enjoy chewing. All of that wintermint flavoring that cleans out your nostrils. I guess they got a tonic for it, that traveling man likes to come near the mines and jabber it up, but I ain't got the nickel nor the inclination to be the first to try it out.

Oh, you're asking why I'm thinking Astra's still going. You can't hear that out there? Those sounds you hear calling are a woman pissed at the world, especially this town. Said before we dropped her in the water, despite the bullets in her, that she would rise and destroy us. You heard her, don't lie and swear you ain't done that much. Town preacher was giving his blessings to us for the drop, read a passage out of the good book I ain't never heard before and thought it would quell the demons from rising. You and I both know he was as nervous as someone without the Lord on his side. Well, she came up the second we were off in jail; I heard what happened from the people rushing outside our cell window, screaming on fire when she came riding through. That damn steed of her's is pure evil and it jumped into the water, brought her out in five seconds flat to ride the earth again.

Yep, Astra killed ten people in half a minute. I heard it; don't take no denying at this point. Burned them up, could smell it for miles and see the smoke. Some people guessed it was an injun attack, one of those up on the hills where they think you got something they might want. But nope, ain't none of them going to be held accountable for this. I told them all that, even if most of the town don't listen. You and I were up there a month or two back, prospecting, remember? And we saw those injuns packing up, leaving their camps behind as if they knew something was coming, either they were too scared or wise to see what we couldn't.

Damn that Astra, she's a mean one. That's why you see those spirits floating around the center of town; banshees helping her do the worst to us. Wait a minute, you hear that? I think that was the front door to the Sheriff's office opening. You know, I can't believe he's coming back. Hey, stop calling him, friend. You don't know who could be out there... Hey, I'm serious... stop calling him... Oh, see, now you've gone and done it... Boy, does Astra look pissed at us...



