

In the Night Kitchen, it is the night of the end of the world-story, and a group of old friends have gathered for one last supper at the house of the Goddess. What happens next is up to you.

Looking for a resource for a workshop on climate change, a readymade text your library discussion group, or a kickstart for your drama crew?

"Night Kitchen" is a free short story for public use, with a Creative Commons license. (See full information below.) "Night Kitchen" can be read in about ten minutes, and is formatted to launch discussion or to transform into a play reading.

Below the story itself are six suggestions for ways to use the story in a workshop or other public event. Feel free to create your own.

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Night Kitchen

by Rho Mack

Goddess is in the kitchen, cooking breakfast for dinner. The angle of the sun is low and unseemly for waffles and eggs. The curtains in the country house are open to a sky glazed gray over ash. In the gloom, the shadows shift into the wrong corners. It has been an afternoon of sorrow and regrets and the moan of grief. There are no tears left.

“Cheers!” she says. “Tonight there will be murder and death, so let’s throw a party and feast and dance until midnight. Let’s empty all my kitchen drawers of old birthday candles and light them while you sing your mayday rounds for me.” She bangs a drawer open. “How does that song go, the one about how only yesterday you stood out in the morning air with your coffee, and anything was possible?”

We are silent. We have no space in our empty chests for singing.

She dances among us in the old familiar sway, seductive and menacing. “Show me how it was for you,” she croons. “Dance that old lullaby of rocking the child, of holding home and tomorrow in your arms. I want to hear it again.”

We shuffle and murmur while Goddess breaks sturdy-shelled eggs against the rim of the hot iron pan. “Well then, old friends of mine! If you won’t dance and you won’t sing, at least tell

me some kitchen stories before the night comes down on all fours. I want to remember them tomorrow when the sun comes up in a new place.”

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Rivka: I Have to Say This First

How can I dance when the news keeps coming in on shockwaves? It is too late. It is much worse than we imagined. How can I dance? I thought, because I am doing the work, we are going to be alright. I was even a little arrogant about my generosity.

What matters is that you show up, they said. Do your part and the universe will be abundant, they said.

But it was a lie. It was never going to be enough. Now a quick death is more merciful. Let the corpses rot. You were right to summon us here. It is proper to bear witness. But is it appropriate to hold the wake while the body still flails like the torso of the beheaded?

How can you ask us to celebrate?

How can you ask us to dance when there is no tomorrow?

No. I have to say it. I will not dance to this.

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“Cheers!” says Goddess, plunging a fork into the golden mounds of yolk. They bleed across the pan in sunny streams.

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Eva: After That, I Need a Walk in a Garden

I don't know what you are asking, Goddess. But I do have a story for you. And it's green.

Once I had a garden in the clearing behind my little carriage house. I loved that garden. It was my refuge from poverty. I broke blisters, hauled compost, built terraces. I learned how to properly use a Japanese hoe. I learned how to coax a succession of greens, even in winter. Some days it seemed the plants themselves were talking to me. I was never happier than when I had dirt under my fingernails.

So let me tell you how I lost the garden. It happened while I was not looking, working two jobs, doing start-up and catch-up, trying to pay bills, the whole spiral of events that brought us here. I'm not making excuses. It's the way it happened.

First, they knocked down that rocky stretch of woods behind me for a new apartment complex, and then the owners went bankrupt, and all that was left was the raw clearing. Then the scarred ground grew over, but I was too busy to pay attention.

Years later, one evening I had the energy and time to walk out to my old garden, and I couldn't find it. I thought my memory was faulty until I stumbled against a raised bed in the hogweed, and that's how I learned it doesn't take but a blind half decade for the weeds from our careless undoings to invade the garden. I felt my way along the old garden paths where barberry, knotweed, and binding weed spread like tangled claws.

I ripped them out by the merciless armload. I let the roots bleach like bones in the sun. I scraped my arms raw with barberry thorns. But I couldn't save the garden.

Coming back to my own front yard, I confronted an irony; those invasives were kin to the innocent runners of pachysandra I once planted in the bare yard. When I admired the perennial green up at the main house, they said, "Of course, take some, we have more than enough. It is choking itself."

I should have paid attention. Now the green mat sweeps down across my lawn and into the last bit of woods left along the road, where it has smothered the dogtooth violets. Now I pull long tendrils of root and watch the ground cover close over as if nothing was taken.

But your garden, now, Goddess. I have seen you at play. The nettles in the wet spots and chicory in the dry, purslane in the cracks of the rocks, burdock and garlic mustard in the meadow. I have eaten them all. They will survive. I can dance to that.

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Goddess says, "Pass me the salt.

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Cora: But Still, the Animus Rises

Is that how you do it, Goddess? Rip us out when we choke the garden? We who have stumbled into being here at your invitation?

Why did you do it then? Why let life rise, knowing what we were capable of?

Did you have a nihilist's yearning for the blasted and blackened?

Or were you an innocent, touching everything to life with your curious fingers? Did you only wish for company in your gardens?

Did you not know that we would break the bones of our mother, and you did it anyway?

Did you wish for a hallelujah among the dying?

Do we amuse you now?

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Goddess' hands are many. One stirs the pot, one idly scratches her crotch, one crushes eggshells deep into the compost pot, one holds a bowl of maggots, one a child's wide-eyed severed head. Three hands are behind her back, where we can't see what she is doing.

Oh, a glass of wine in that one. Cheers and hallelujah.

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Anna: But It Wasn't Me, Goddess—I Am a Light Worker

Listen to me. I have a lot to say here, and I will not be intimidated. I am a Lightworker. I had mentors, the best. I was trained in the mystery of Divine Compassion. I was taught how to hold the moment open for the entrance of the sacred. To breathe the divine Yes.

It wasn't me, Goddess, that did the killing. I did what I could, didn't I? Of course, with a glass of wine now, I will acknowledge that I could have done better. I could have done more. But I did what I could, given my own personal needs and failings.

At least, save the children. Mine anyway, please. They are good-hearted. Enlightened. The seeds of tomorrow. They deserve to be among the survivors, if there are to be any. For the generations to come, I beg you.

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Goddess flings the broad kitchen knife from a hand behind her back. We scatter, spilling wine. The thick blade slices between us, lodging deep into the kitchen wall where it shivers like a metronome.

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Orpha: That Knife Does Bring Up Some Questions

I need to know this, since we were your idea.

The questions that slide like a thumb along the sharpened edge of the knife:

Did you try to stop us? Did you weep?

And now, do you hold us in grace? Or do you turn away and allow our immolation?

I have to know this: What creeps back from the ashes?

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From behind her back, Goddess holds out to us a great ceramic platter pouring seaweed and seawater, mounded high with thrashing fish and octopus tentacles, scuttling clams and scallops under the presentation of steaming eggs and waffles.

“Take, eat,” she commands, “so you will remember me tomorrow.”

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Sofia: Since You've Asked That Question, I Have Some Answers

Here's what I learned about holding home. Rockabye is the first word in the sentence of goodbye. Gathering and holding are even harder than letting go. The wild seed pushes through the paving stones. Gratitude and joy are the color of sunrise. I have seen it. That's how it was for me.

I have been honored to be here in the garden with you, ragged as it is, suffused with being as it is. I have tried to be a wise gardener, but I am never done with my own hard weeding.

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It has the cadence of a blessing. We eat from the wriggling platter while the wind lifts the rafters and the night kitchen shudders around our leaning shoulders.

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Lucha: Speaking for Myself Only

For myself, I have to admit that as I come to the age of white hair and wrinkles, I know very little. I know much less now than when I was thirty, when I knew everything.

Tonight I admit I know nearly nothing.

For so long, what I thought I knew was how to hold up a piece of the sky for as many of us as I could. Sometimes my arms nearly broke, and my knees buckled, but as long as I could think of all of you standing there alongside me, I could hold on. I could hold on through the dark and the cold. I could trust that in first light the great tent of being would still be standing.

But tonight I have no more time for illusions. Tonight I have come to the end of myself and the fantasy that I could ever hold up the sky for all of us. Tonight there is nothing more for me to lose.

Speaking for myself, what I know is that I am old, and the land is burning. But I don't think I will ever be done with grief.

But tonight I know something new. Tonight I am fearless and fierce. Because tonight I have nothing left. Listen, Goddess, I see that last back hand moving. That last left hand reaching from behind you. Please let it be a hand for the children—

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“Tonight I am in need of a watering can,” Goddess says, sweeping out from behind her the last hidden hand. She holds high a punctured bucket that sprays water wildly over us all.

“I will pour water on your heads—” and she does— “though you protest!”

And we do, drenched and dripping, nearly drowning, ducking away from her out of the night kitchen, down the hallway toward the front door.

“Then I will go out and soak the roof. And when my watering can is emptied, I will gather smoke for breakfast.”

From her raised arms torrential waters plunge through her hair and down her body. Her armpits are thick with hair and the smell of old sweat. The waters rise around us.

“Show me to the door,” she says, dancing over us with the streaming water. “I will be gone for a while. I will be occupied. So let yourselves out into the night too, while your feet still touch ground. Last one out, close the curtains, turn off the lights. But leave the door unlocked, and the kitchen untidy to welcome the mice.”

Swollen with floodwaters, pregnant with winds, she barely fits through the door, her browning gown streamed behind her like fish fins. Just once, her face turns back toward us in a watery afterthought. We strain to interpret her words.

“Your garden notes—” But her words are the scream of the wind, or the thick syllables of the falling, rising waters. “Leave them out on the seaweed platter.” I think she said that. I would vouch that she, or the wind, or the rising water said that. And I did.

As I remember it now, no one closed the door.

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USING “NIGHT KITCHEN” IN A GROUP GATHERING OR WORKSHOP SESSION

Following are some suggestions for creative ways to use the Night Kitchen story in a group setting. Choose based on your group’s dynamics and what you want to achieve, or take your group into the Night Kitchen in your own way.

1. Survivor’s Mind Session

Read the story as a group, then answer these questions together, and let the discussion lead organically to a summary.

1. Our old paradigms no longer hold: the land is burning, and the roof of our safe haven is being blown off. We are being forced to leave our old home behind and enter the storm. What is "outside" the known?
2. As we face the destruction of the old order we have known, remember how the butterfly emerges from the imaginal cells in the biological soup of the dissolved caterpillar. What is the quantum leap into an alternative way for our human story? What happens next? What do we build in this moment of collapse, when we build a new imaginal world from the broken present? There are no right answers to these questions, and even better, there are no rules.
3. If you were a historian 10,000 years from now, what would you name the post-Anthropocene age? How would you describe the next stage of human culture? Looking back, what happened to us?
4. Looking forward from today, what happens next? What do we, as individuals or as a group, want to imagine, see, and build together right now? How does the story go from here? How do the energies of joy, gratitude, and hope charge the possible future? What do we conjure, call into being, and manifest as we tell the next part of the story? It is your turn to play, to plot where the human story goes.

2. Group Questions and Journaling

There are seven women in the Night Kitchen, each with a very different story. Use these suggested questions to get to know them—and yourselves—in the soul’s Night Kitchen.

Round 1: Read the story aloud together, stopping after each woman’s response to chat about them as you would about an old friend. Do you know this woman? How do you see her? Is one of them you? Are there missing voices? Consider these questions, and add your own. Allow the conversation to grow organically, building on the energy of the group.

Round 2: Have writing material of your choice ready for Journaling. Set a time limit on this journaling activity.

Consider these questions, and jot down your own answers as they come to mind. Listen inwardly for your own first spontaneous answer. Then elaborate. If no quick answer arises, dive deeper, and see what thoughts, impressions, and emotions are alive for you right now. What rises to the surface?

1. If you were in the Night Kitchen that evening, what would you say to the Goddess and to your old friends?
2. The women in the kitchen respond out of their own personal stories. What are the habits of thinking that inform your response to the human catastrophe? What habitual thinking is it time to let go of? To embrace and foster?
3. Like individuals, groups have biographies. What is your group's biography, and how does that shape your direction? If your group were a personality, what kind of person would it be? What motivates your circle?
4. Come back to the group and share your responses.

3. Improv Theatre-in-the-Round

Every story has gaps in the narrative for the reader to fill in from their own life story. Do an impromptu theatre-in-the-round where you fill in missing parts of the story. Assign parts, and add new Night Kitchen guests if you have more than 8 participants. Or, answer these questions with group storytelling, where you answer the prompts as a group.

Here are some improv prompts to work from:

What happened in the alluded-to afternoon before the story opens?

Where is the Night Kitchen? What is the setting--gardens, wild mountain forests, a rocky crag, a seacoast, downtown city apartment?

What characters are missing? Are there archetypes among this group of women? What is the backstory of the Goddess? Who is she?

What is breaking or being destroyed as the storm rises?

Does the roof blow off the night kitchen after everyone is gone?

What happens when we go out into the storm together?

What about those garden notes—does someone, someday, find them? What are the garden notes we would leave behind?

Wrap-up: Reflect back to the group on something you have learned from acting out or storytelling our earth crisis.

4. Jumpstart Session

This is for a group in a moment of feeling ready to go in a new direction, to launch an initiative, or to re-gather energies. Use the story as a jumpstart to your brainstorming, group coherence, naming of the quantum leap, or initiative building. This can be full circle rounds, or freeform response, depending on the group dynamics.

Begin by reading *Night Kitchen* aloud together, where it can reverberate in your consciousness.

Round One: Each person brings a question to the group that this story has sparked in you. What question lives in you right now, standing in this crisis moment for life on earth? Just state the question, and let it linger without response for a moment before moving to the next one.

Round Two: Respond to a question—yours, or someone else's—that especially resonated with you.

Round Three: Bring this back to your group's immediate purpose or intention, and allow these questions and responses to work as a warm-up for the decision-making or brainstorming at hand.

5. Circle Rounds

This suggestion is based loosely on the format of Restorative Justice Circles. It is helpful to have a leader who clearly, smoothly directs the order of the circle, especially online, so no one is missed.

Round One: Read the story together, assigning a different voice for each speaker. You can simply read, or you can do this as spontaneously theatrical as you wish.

Round Two: Circle around to hear each person's response to the question: if you were in that "Night Kitchen of the Goddess" after these seven women have spoken, what would your response be? What story would you tell? Would it be elegy, grief or rage, wisdom or regret? Something else? What is your truth about how it has been for you, watching life on earth in danger? Is it a keening for what is lost, or a quantum shift toward something new? Is it a moment of personal accountability, or a moment of reflection? There are no wrong answers. You can also say, "Pass."

Round Three: Circle around again to allow each person a brief moment to reflect on what they have just heard, or to further deepen what they have said, if there is something still alive from the first round. "Pass" is always an option.

Round Four: What happens next to this group of old friends expelled from the house of the Goddess into the storm? How do you go out into this dark night of the world-soul? What is your intention? What quantum leap do you summon? It can be something out of reflection on your own life situation, or it can be an intention offered as a gift to the group.

6. Story Circles

The Night Kitchen holds a story within a story. Eva tells a lengthy memory of her garden in response to the question: "Tell me how it was for you." Eva's story is part nostalgia, part parable, part cautionary tale.

1. What do you associate with this mixed tale of loss and overgrowth and abundance? This is a moment to acknowledge the human hubris and habitual tendencies that bring us to the edge of unbearable loss and possible extinction.
2. In a few words, or at most a sentence or two, how would you describe the state of Planet Earth as a garden right now?
3. What is your personal story of "being in the garden"? Name a place of living earth that you think of fondly. Is it your backyard, or a place you once visited? Close your eyes to visualize walking in that scene, breathe in that air, and listen quietly for the feeling this space has for you. What word or phrase would you use to describe this personal garden space? What does it feel like to hold this space in gratitude?

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