

The Palm Reader

Sally and Tom walked, almost next to each other. Tom a step ahead. Sally had to take a little hopping extra step every now and again to keep up with him. She was used to it. Sometimes it annoyed her but other times she didn't mind. It was a small defect, one that was easy to overlook. He had so many wonderful qualities. Generosity, a sense of humor. A good work ethic.

While they waited for the light to change at Seventh Avenue, he reached over and squeezed her hand. But it was harder to walk holding hands—they had to step in unison, which was difficult because Tom's strides were longer than Sally's. Plus there were so many people—weaving this way and that, slow groups they had to get into single file to pass while negotiating the flow of pedestrians from the other direction. Holding hands didn't make any sense so they let go.

Tom stopped in front of a woman sitting at a small table with a sign that read "Psychic Reading Free Sample." Sally was surprised and had to make a U-turn behind a couple of briefcases going in the opposite direction to join him.

"How much?" he asked. The woman pointed to the sign.

"Ten dollars palm reading. You want palm reading or free sample?"

She motioned to the chair across from her.

"I'll take both," Tom said. Sally knew he was being generous. She might have done the same thing. Hell, everybody has to make a living.

She'd always been fearful of psychics. They gave her a jolting sort of panic. What if they actually knew something she didn't? With the years, she was becoming better able to recognize the absurdity of it. She sighed at the disappointing-yet-comforting recognition of her own mediocrity.

She remembered her early twenties and the seeking, tormented certainty that she was either special or defective. Her willingness to believe others' opinions of her over what she thought of herself.

All that had eased well before she'd met Tom. He'd only added to the tranquility of her maturing personality. A steady presence, quick to spot bullshit. But moody.

The woman put her fingertips on his upturned palm, but she barely looked at it. Instead she gazed at his face. "You like to work for yourself. Not so much for others." On the nose, Sally thought. The woman continued. "I see travel, recently, or maybe you'll travel soon."

Tom looked at Sally and smirked gently. They were visiting New York City from Massachusetts, but more than half the people here, on the edge of Times Square, were tourists. And anyone who lived in New York and who could afford ten dollars for a psychic reading certainly had the money to travel. It was a safe bet.

"You lost someone close to you." She waited for Tom to confirm or deny. He shook his head. "It could be someone you haven't seen in a long time, someone you miss. But you miss someone."

Again, Tom didn't respond, but waited for her to go on.

“Someone is envious of you. Someone is holding you back. You need to break free of that.” She looked down at the lines, ran a fingertip across the landscape of his palm. “You’ll achieve your hopes and dreams ... by 2025. Around then.”

“Is that the free sample?” Tom asked. Her smile was small. Not tense, but small. Bemused, maybe a little bored.

“Both.” She looked back at his hand. Her fingertips were still resting on his. She may have closed her eyes. It was hard to tell behind the thick, wire-rimmed glasses she wore. Sally was standing a little behind her, and was fascinated by the few blackheads on the side of her face. She wondered how the woman hadn’t squeezed them out of there. Maybe she wasn’t aware of them. Maybe she thought they were a permanent part of her skin. Or: maybe she was so enlightened that she didn’t care about her appearance. Sally laughed at herself for thinking that, but wasn’t a hundred percent certain that it wasn’t true.

“Where are you from?” Tom asked.

“Romania,” the woman said. Sally didn’t know what Romanians were supposed to look like, but if she’d been asked to guess, she’d have said the woman was Spanish. Jet-black hair. Olive-yellow skin, but pale. Like the flamenco-dancer doll an aunt had brought from Madrid when Sally was a girl. This woman had the coloring, but none of the glamour.

The psychic took a breath. She was calm, and gave the impression that she knew what she was doing.

“There is a curse on you. There is someone in your life that doesn’t want to see you succeed. I can help you with that. I can help to clean this negativity that is around you.”

“That’s okay.” Tom shook his head, smiling, and reached into his back pocket. Sally knew that he didn’t believe any of it; he even seemed jovial as he thumbed the contents of his wallet. He looked up at Sally. “You have five dollars?”

Sally met Tom in a five and dime store. She’d been shopping for thread to fix a pair of red pants and he was in line to buy a trashcan for his bathroom. He’d glanced over and caught a glimpse of her clear skin. She was wearing a lemony perfume. He told her, months later, after they’d been seeing each other for long enough that they’d started talking about moving in together, that she’d seemed *clean*. “Clean?” she’d laughed. “Not sexy?”

“No, it’s not that. Different. You smelled good and, well, okay, if you don’t want me to say clean, I’ll say... uncomplicated.”

She considered it. It sounded good to her. Like she had something other women didn’t. Women who painted themselves up and toddled about on glittery high heels and had secrets and other men—criminals—hiding in their closets. They were complicated. She was uncomplicated.

It wasn’t until they’d moved in together and she was cleaning the toilet one Wednesday afternoon that the conversation had come back to her and she’d remembered that he’d liked that about her—her uncomplicatedness. And she’d thought, uncomplicated: Easy to control. Is that what he’d meant? She’d shaken the

thought loose from where it had started trying to burrow into her brain, and managed to evade it. Until this weekend.

The palm reader brought those thoughts back into focus. When she'd said that there was negativity around him, someone who wanted to hold him back, the first thing Sally had thought of was herself. That, on some level, she'd wished him harm. Sometimes he seemed too big compared to her and she didn't know how to be herself.

When the Romanian woman had talked about the negativity around him, Sally had felt guilty. Yes, he could have moods she didn't understand, times when he'd seem distant and cold, and she'd been driven to check his email and his pockets and even to go through the addresses on his GPS to see where he'd been. She'd been quietly desperate, unable to get him to understand the pain he was causing her or to see that she was losing herself. To him. So, at times, she'd wished he'd leave her or get hit by a bus so she could be free of him.

But she loved him. If she could choose a period of time to stay in for the rest of her life it would be the time between that day when she'd been shopping for the thread and when they'd moved in together.

She was living in the basement of her parents' house at the time. Her parents were good people who were happy enough with each other that they didn't need her too badly. She had a separate entrance and they left her alone, but she could come for dinner whenever she felt like it, and when they traveled she watered the plants. It was the perfect situation for a pre-school teacher living on a pre-school teacher's

salary. And, after she met Tom, and they were dating, some weekends he'd stay with her or she'd stay with him, but they had their own places to go home to.

Things were good then.

But he'd convinced her to move in by promising to pay the rent. He had a good job and it was no problem, he'd said. "You can contribute by doing some cooking," he'd said. Which is what she'd done, and it was a few months later when she realized that she was doing *all* the cooking, and he came home from work every evening, put his briefcase by the table in the hall, and sat down to watch the news and wait for her to put food on the table.

He'd brought her on vacation several times. Places she wouldn't have been able to afford on her teacher's salary. They'd been to Laguna Beach, Santa Fe, Iceland, Mexico, and now New York. He liked nice hotels. She found them sterile and pushed for an Airbnb, arguing that they could have some really nice meals with the money they'd save. He always booked the place though, and told her it didn't matter that it was more expensive—they wouldn't have to see other people's clutter in the corners; they'd come home in the afternoon to find their bed made up. A chocolate on the pillow.

In the end she always relented, but when they went to the west village for a meal with some college friends of his, and she'd seen the red-brick storefronts and cafes serving breakfast-cereal lattes, brioche donuts, kombucha cocktails, chia puddings, she'd wished they could stay down there. The small buildings, the tiny shops and galleries were much more inviting than the gigantic buildings around

Time's Square, and, although she liked the uptown diners, she wished they could've spent more of their time downtown.

It's worth mentioning Tom's friends, not just the ones they went to dinner with, but all of them, and there were a lot. They adored him, and he always had the best time when he was with them. Sally loved to see them too because they brought out a side of him that she sometimes felt she'd lost the ability to elicit. He would laugh and tell stories and there would be so much good humor and cheerfulness in the air. He told Sally that they loved her too, and she liked them. But after a night out with crowds of friends, he always seemed spent, and their time together, just the two of them, felt less fun as he retreated into himself and she retreated into herself in self-defense.

That evening, after the psychic reading, they went for a romantic dinner—just the two of them—at a place that revolved slowly over the course of the meal, so you could have a different view of the city, lit up at night, throughout. They didn't get a table next to the window, so Sally was aware of seeming rude as she stared right through the middle of the couple at the next table: a human frame for the city that passed by so slowly you didn't even realize it was moving.

It was the perfect place for a marriage proposal, Sally thought. She had put on a new dress—it had a scoop neck that she knew flattered her—and smooth glass droplet earrings. They'd walked most of the day. The weather had been good so they'd stayed outside rather than go to museums, and had covered miles of concrete. Sally's feet were sore; she had an appetite and looked forward to eating. They

studied the tall menus. Tom ordered a bottle of chardonnay. He didn't have to ask because he knew Sally was partial to buttery whites.

"Back home tomorrow," Sally sighed, and instantly regretted it. A truly boring thing to say. Tom ignored it.

"You look nice," he said.

"We must have walked ten miles." She turned over her iPhone to check.

"Well. Almost. Nine point two."

"Feels great, doesn't it?" Tom said. "Not to be at a desk."

"I don't sit at a desk all that often," Sally reminded him. He smiled and gazed at the window.

"Look. We're getting a view of the Empire State Building." Sally turned. The lovely rocket-shaped structure had just edged into the window. Sally had to turn to see it. Her neck hurt and she remembered the story a friend had told her recently about a youngish person who had had a pain in their spine that turned out to be cancer. The person was "riddled," her friend had said solemnly. Sally hated it when people used that word.

The thought left as quickly as the pain in her neck vanished, but an unsettled feeling remained, detached from the thought that had sparked it. It crept through her mind, joined forces with the lingering doubt that the palm reader had produced, and wormed its way around, dissolving contentedness like nail polish remover. She took a long, cool swallow of chardonnay.

The next morning, Sally woke first. Her head hurt and her mouth tasted like aluminum. She thought resentfully that Tom must have ordered a cheap bottle of wine. And there had been no ring. She'd slid her fork into the flourless chocolate lava cake that Tom had ordered for dessert, expecting the tines to clink diamond, but there was nothing, just gooey chocolate. For the millionth time, she wondered if he really did love her—a question that reliably distracted her from wondering whether she actually loved him.

After brushing her teeth and pulling on sweats, she stood at the foot of the bed, watching him sleep. The sparse tufts of black hair growing from his shoulders made him seem vulnerable, nothing like the Romanian palm-reader's blackheads. Tom's hairy shoulders were invisible to him, which made him innocent. But the palm-reader's blackheads were an affront.

Sally didn't want to touch Tom. She felt no inclination to curl around his sleeping shoulder and caress him. She wasn't sure why, but she wanted to get out of there. It was all too much. She'd felt stupid for thinking he was going to propose, and guilty for feeling disappointed. She pulled her sneakers on as quietly as possible, slid the key card off the bureau, and clicked the door closed behind her. As she turned, Tom's muffled voice called her name. She froze. At the end of the hallway, the elevator doors pinged. "Sally?" Tom called. Could he tell she was outside the door? Was he dreaming? A cleaning woman pushed a cart full of towels and supplies toward her. She could hear the bed creak, footsteps, but he didn't open the door. He must have gone to the bathroom. She walked resolutely to the elevator. She smiled at the cleaning woman who said "good morning" with a heavy accent. She could've

been somebody's grandmother and Sally felt sorry for her—she should be retired, living somewhere warm.

On the street, the wind was blowing much colder than it had been yesterday. Sally pulled her sweater around her and wished she'd brought her jacket. As she walked, her hair getting whipped into wiry knobs, she started to feel stupid. What was she running away from? This was the man she was probably going to marry. Had she not matured one whit from the six-year-old who'd left a note for her parents, saying that she'd run away, and that they'd never find her because she was going to the park? What was that all about? She'd obviously wanted to be found—despite whatever anger she'd had over whatever slight had set her off. Here she was again—feeling inadequate and stupid and wanting someone—Tom—to make her feel better. She wanted him to wonder where she was. To worry about her. To doubt himself and his ability to make her happy. She walked a couple of blocks south and took a left on Seventh Avenue.

The palm reader's table was there, with the two chairs, and the sign that offered a free sample. She lingered, but couldn't see any storefront—just the table in front of a barber shop, a FedEx store, and a door, to the right of which was a smudged wall plate with a row of doorbells. None of them had names, just numbers. Sally peered through the glass—there was a dark hallway and an elevator at the end. There must have been a door immediately to the right that she couldn't see because all of a sudden, the Romanian palm reader was inches from her nose, on the other side of the glass. Sally stumbled backwards and the woman came out. She didn't acknowledge Sally, as though she were used to strange people peering in the door.

She undoubtedly got a lot of shit. While many people may have come to her sincerely wanting their futures told or their curses broken, Sally was certain that she must've also gotten her fair share of crazies and drunken frat boys. She sat down, took out a cell phone, and started texting someone or checking the weather or Instagram. Sally couldn't tell. She stood and watched her for a few moments, until she started to feel uncomfortable. As she turned to go, the woman said, "You want reading?"

Sally stopped. She could feel the muscles in her calves start to fire up, ready to run, but she took a breath and said, "Maybe just the free sample."

"Sit down." The woman motioned to the chair. She was wearing a black canvas coat that had a layer of something white dulling it, like when you clean something with soap but don't rinse it.

Sally tucked her legs under her and pulled her sweater tight around her shoulders. The woman motioned for her to put her hand onto the table. She peered at her palm and Sally's heart began to race and her arm to numb as though it were in a blood pressure cuff.

"You are sad," the woman said, which made tears that Sally had no idea were on tap spring to the surface of her eyes. She turned away and wiped at her nose with the back of her hand. The cold wind had already made her nose feel drippy.

"You lose somebody close to you?" the palm reader said, looking at Sally for confirmation. "Or you were sad as a child? You were sad child?" Sally shrugged and started to calm down. This woman wasn't going to tell her anything revelatory.

"Is that the free sample? Because I don't have my wallet, so...."

“Yes,” the woman said, taking her phone out again and lowering her head to look at it. “That’s it. You want more, you get your wallet.”

“I’m sorry,” Sally said. “It’s just, I left without my purse.” She patted the pockets of her sweatpants to indicate that they were empty. She pulled out the card and showed it to her—just a room key, not a credit card.

“That’s a nice hotel,” the woman said.

“Yes. I wouldn’t stay there, but my boyfriend....” She trailed off.

“You have a nice stay. Goodbye.”

Sally stood up. The woman was completely immersed in her phone now, and ignored her. Sally hugged herself slowly back to the hotel.

It was a comfort to be back in Tom’s Acura. She would miss the city, especially neighborhoods like the west village. But it was nice to be sitting down, letting Tom drive. She was full—they’d eaten huge omelets and rye toast and those amazing New York City hash browns—before having the car brought back from wherever those young guys had taken it. Slipping into the passenger seat was like getting into her favorite jeans. The leather seat like a gloved hand carrying her safely home. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of her hangover easing.

Soon, however, the movement of the car as Tom hurled it around corners and slammed the brakes at stoplights started to make Sally feel nauseous and she opened her eyes. They were almost to the West Side Highway, but the traffic was terrible. As they waited at a light, a small man with fingerless gloves approached the car with a spray bottle and squeegee. Tom waved him away and changed the station.

As he crossed in front of the car on his way to the next lane, he caught Sally's eye and lingered for a moment. He tilted his head in the direction of Tom behind the wheel and flashed him the finger; but he was smiling at Sally. She laughed out loud as he approached the driver of the car next to them. She looked at Tom to see if he'd noticed, but now he was trying to get Waze to work on his iPhone.

"App used to mean appetizer," Sally smiled. "Not anymore."

"Dammit," Tom said to his phone. He handed it to Sally as traffic eased and they pulled around the corner. "Can you restart this?"

She directed him until they were on 95, halfway to Hartford. Then she went to sleep.

In the elevator up to their apartment, Tom put his arm around Sally's shoulder and squeezed her, kissed the top of her head.

"I missed you this morning," he said, breathing her smell in noisily, lustily. He grabbed her ass as she exited the elevator, tugging her small case behind her.

"You're like a kid sometimes," she said playfully.

They didn't unpack before unwrapping each other's clothing and falling into bed.

After, they watched through the window as the sky darkened.

Sally turned onto her back and stared at the ceiling. It was impeccably white—the little recessed light bulbs so earnest and perfectly spaced. She remembered the ceiling of her childhood room—it was swirled with some kind of

yellow textured plaster and she would spend what felt like hours finding shapes in it as she lay in bed on weekend mornings. Reindeer, butterflies, Virginia.

“What did you think of that palm reader?” she said.

“The palm reader?” Tom pulled the comforter up to his chin. He was on his side, looking at her profile.

“Yeah. What did you think? About what she said?”

“It’s all bullshit, obviously.”

“You’re sure about that? Completely? You don’t think there’s somebody trying to do you harm?”

“Nope,” he said, the word stretched out like a southerner’s drawl. “Nobody’s going to do me any harm. Not that she knows about anyway. You hungry?”

She shook her head. “No, but I’ll make some dinner.”

“I’ll get it.” He sat up, tucked the comforter into his crotch.

“I went back there,” Sally said. “To the palm reader. This morning.” Tom pulled pants on and turned to face her. “She said I was sad.”

He expelled a laugh like air from a punctured tire. “See? She was full of shit. You know that.”

“But I am kind of sad.”

Tom crawled onto the bed and kneeled next to her. He was so tall, towering over her. He used his whole palm to push the hair away from the side of her face. Tears, for the second time that day, showed up in her eyes. One escaped. Not substantial enough to make it to her ear, it dissolved to nothing halfway down her temple. Tom was looking at her. Waiting for her to say more? Confused? Horrified?

She looked away, unsure what he was thinking. He lay down next to her. She remembered the terror and the guilt that she'd felt when the psychic had told Tom that someone wanted to harm him, and it seemed like such a long time ago. It had nothing to do with this moment: Tom breathing, his nose against her neck. He continued to stroke her hair and she felt grateful for the kindness. She wanted to know the answers to so many things but she didn't know how to ask the questions.

"I'll make grilled cheese." Tom stood up and went to the kitchen.

Sally was hungry, so she followed.