

Amy Parker : Spirit Detective

- Sulk -

Amy Parker was twenty-four years old and reading a book at The Yellow Pages, a used bookstore. The walls were shelves filled with countless paperbacks of ancient history to cheesy romance novels. She sat on a stool at a kiosk with an old-fashioned cash register. She was reading something random from a collection of short stories by Hemingway--that misogynistic bastard could die on that mountain for all she cared.

The bell rang at the front door and Eddy Jeer walked in. He was a forty-five year old man, unshaven, and wearing a yellow dress shirt with a stain on it. "Hey," he said as he stumbled passed Amy at the register and through a curtain to the back room.

"Hey, ass," said Amy. She followed him through the curtain. "I called you twice yesterday."

Eddy was looking through his mini-fridge. He pulled out an egg and a bottle of hot sauce. He disappeared into the bathroom, came back out with a glass tumbler, and sat down on his green, military-surplus cot. He placed the glass, the egg, and the bottle of hot sauce on a bed-side table next to a pair of salt and pepper shakers. He cracked open the egg and poured it into the glass. He threw away the shell in a small waste bin. "Not now," he said and he dripped hot sauce, sprinkled salt and

pepper into the glass, pinched his nose, and poured the concoction down his throat. He winced and after a moment, he sighed and laid back against the wall.

"I brought you some leftovers," said Amy. "Chicken and rice with a red curry sauce. This one's good, actually."

"Thank you," said Eddy as he leaned forward and rubbed his temples. "Could you--"

Amy opened the fridge and handed the meal to Eddy.

"Could you--" he said again.

Amy disappeared into the bathroom and returned with a fork. She handed it to him.

Eddy pulled off the lid and tossed it on the bedside table. With a grin he dug in. "So good," he said between bites.

"Rough night?"

"Not really." Rice stuck to the sides of his mouth. "Geoff got hammered and wouldn't stop flirting with the bartender. He's that way though. He's got to be flirting with someone. Barb's evil though. She just urged him on. The bartender could not have cared less. She made some money though. Barb was excited. We were celebrating. Did I tell you we were celebrating? Barb works with rockets. They launched their first recycled rocket yesterday. Imagine the money they saved? Can you imagine? May help this town too. Get some smart people in it for God's sake. I'd kill to live in a blue county. Anyway, this guy on guitar was playing Radiohead tunes. Nailed it, too. So, we head to the beach and spark one up. We get real nice. The stars were great. Not too windy. We go to Geoff's and listen to a few records.

Barb made it home, I crashed on the couch. What the hell is that ringing?"

"It's a customer, Eddy," said Amy. "The door rings when it opens."

"Go help them."

"You woudn't shut up."

Amy passed through the curtain and returned to the register. She didn't immediately see anyone but she called out to the bookshelves, "Finding everything okay?"

"Yes ma'am," said a quiet voice. An old man appeared holding two books. He wore a tweed blazer and round glasses. Setting the books on the counter, he pulled out a wallet from inside his jacket. "Just these. Please."

Amy rang him up and handed him the books in a paper bag.

"Are you new here?" he said.

"New to the store? Or this area?"

"Wherever."

"I've worked here nearly a year. Lived here. . . my whole life."

"How did you find a job here?"

"I don't know. I applied. Like, how you get a job."

The man raised his nose and adjusted his jacket. He gripped his books. "Well then," he said. "I hope you have a . . . decent afternoon."

"Yeah, okay. You too."

The bell chimed as the man exited the store. Amy returned through the curtain and was startled by Eddy standing near the

doorway with his back to the wall.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," said Eddy. "Who was that guy?"

"What guy? The customer? Some old man. Bought some books. We sell books, Eddy."

Eddy returned to his cot. He picked up a paperback novel and thumbed through the pages. He said, "So what did you want? When you called?"

"Oh," said Amy. "I don't know. . . I'm bored! So bored, Eddy! It's been months since we saw any action. Remember the church near the river? We tracked that flying alligator thing and you threw those bombs at it while we avoided all that debris and I carried all your supplies while you took notes and made bombs and you trapped that thing and blew it away?"

"Yeah, that was a fun."

"And that giant crab at the pier? It was the middle of the night and those kids were skinny dipping and they didn't know what the hell we were doing and you didn't care? I carried two pounds of dead shrimp for hours wondering what the hell we were waiting for and then that crazy-ass crab thing came crawling out of the water. I smelled for days after that."

"That's why I had you carry the shrimp."

"That's what I'm talking about, Eddy. What are we doing here? Let's get out there. Let's hunt some shit."

"I worked on those cases for months, Amy." Eddy tossed the book to the ground. He got up and left through the curtain.

Amy followed.

Eddy went to a small, rotating kiosk and grabbed a pocket-sized journal wrapped in plastic. He peeled it open and handed it to Amy. He said, "This thing we do is not a nine to five job. I'm always working. You go out there. You make the case. If you need help, I'll help. But it's on you now."

"What do I even do? I don't even know how to start."

"One word at a time, one observation at a time, and read, idiot."

Amy grabbed her backpack from behind the register.

"Where you going?" said Eddy.

"You said to get out there. This thing isn't a nine to five."

Eddy pointed at the bookshelves and cash register. "This right here. This is the nine to five. Sell books." He disappeared behind the curtain.

Amy dropped her backpack and sat behind the register. She opened the journal and stared at the blank page.

"It's been awhile," said Omar Amari. He was Amy's friend from Ju Jitsu class. He was twenty-seven, a single father, and could choke people unconscious with his legs.

"It's this new job," said Amy. She was spraying the workout mats on the ground with a disinfectant. "I was learning the ropes."

Omar followed behind her with a mop. She would spray and he would wipe. He said, "Don't you work at a bookstore?"

Amy ignored him. "How's the kid?"

"Jason's good. He just started first grade."

"He like his teacher?"

Omar blushed and quickly mopped the next section of the mats. "I think he likes her."

Amy eyed him. "He's not the only one."

"Anyway, Jason's been good. My mother moved in though. I thought it would be nice for the kid to be around his grandmother."

Amy sprayed the mats. "What's up with your mom?"

Omar mopped. "Her husband died."

"I'm sorry."

"It happened quick. I took her in. Like I said, I thought it would be nice for Jason. And I could use the help. But she . . . she's been acting weird."

"Weird?" Amy didn't spray.

"Spray?"

Amy sprayed and said, "How's she acting weird?"

"She won't leave her room for one. She just watches the TV and hardly says a word. I try and get her talking but she just grunts and barely eats. I leave Jason with her sometimes but . . . I don't know. It stresses me out."

They packed their bags and waved goodbye to the rest of the class. A few streetlights lit the parking lot.

"Walk you home?" asked Amy.

"Sure."

They walked down a Cocoa Beach back street. There was a

strip mall. It was closed for the night. They crossed the Minute Man Causeway and passed a police station.

"How's your dad?" asked Omar.

"He's fine."

"Sorry I asked."

"He's hardly home. We're pretty good at avoiding each other."

The sky was clear. They approached Omar's duplex and stopped at the wooden gate.

"Oh," said Amy. She reached into her bag and pulled a small container of chicken and curry. "I brought you leftovers."

"Thanks."

"I'd like to come over and cook for you guys. Maybe. . . I could get your mom to eat something?"

"I don't know. . ."

"I'll come by Friday. Leave it all to me."

Omar opened the gate. "Okay," he said. "I'll see you then. Six o'clock."

Omar closed the gate and Amy turned back to the street. She dug into her bag, grabbed her journal and a pen, and leaned into a streetlight. She wrote "Omar's Mother" on the top of the page. She stared. Pressed the pen to the page and wrote "Acting Weird."

"This is what I've got," said Amy. She sat at the register of The Yellow Pages. "Isolationism, shift in character, obvious

signs of depression, unable to speak . . . Omar seemed surprised. Not the mom he knows."

"Who's Omar?" asked Eddy. He was leaning on the doorframe with the curtain open. He had a romance novel tucked under his arm.

"My friend from Ju Jitsu."

"You know Ju Jitsu?"

"You're kidding, right?"

Eddy shrugged.

"So what do you think? You think I have something?" said Amy.

"I don't know. Her whole life just took a big turn." Eddy disappeared into the back room and returned with several, small brown bags. He handed them to Amy. "Here."

Amy peered into each one.

"Smell 'em," said Eddy.

Amy inhaled each bag and let the scent sit with her senses.

"Tell me again what's going on," said Eddy.

"Makaela Amari's husband passed. She's . . . Getting on in years and has no where to go. She has to move in with her son and when she does, she has a huge shift in personality. No longer gregarious, she is shut off and not talking."

"Okay. Emotionally, what's going on here?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like, how do you think Ms. Amari is feeling?"

"I guess. . . Embarrassed? She spent her life taking care of her children and then boom--she's the one that needs to be

taken care of. She's the burden."

"And she can't even admit it," said Eddy. "Smell these again. That's seaweed there. That's crushed, dried cantaloupe. Oh, and that's wheat grass. Can't go wrong with that. And fresh ginger. Notice anything?"

Amy let the scent into her nose, and she tracked it as it flowed down her throat and into her chest. She said, "I can breathe easier."

"Really opens up the throat, right?"

Amy sat with the idea. The woman couldn't speak. Eddy had mentioned again and again how these spirits latch onto the living: they find the vulnerable and exasperate that weakness, warping the world around them to feed. She asked, "What about the bombs? What do I use?"

"For something like this, use rice paper." Eddy grabbed a piece of paper from beneath the register and crumpled it into a sack. He pulled a thread from his pocket and tied it closed at the top. "Like this. Remember, it's reveal and dispel. Take your time and feel it out. You've done the research, now trust your intuition."

Eddy pulled the romance novel from under his arm and pried it open with his thumb. He smiled and asked in affected enthusiasm, "Will Gastan forgive his family for hiding those letters from him? Will Levianna say 'screw it' and leave town before they have a chance to reunite? I'm at the edge of my cot." He disappeared into the back room.

"Romance novels are dumb," said Amy.

Amy knocked on the door.

Jason Amari, Omar's son, answered. He was six years old, his hair was a mess, and he was wearing socks. "Hi," he said. "Come in."

The condo was small. There was a living room with a couch, a table, and a flat screen television. Immediately to the right was the kitchen. It was narrow with a U shaped counter top: a sink, an oven, a microwave, a coffee maker. On the counter closest to the living room, there were stacks of mail and magazines and a bowl filled with loose change.

From the kitchen was a hallway.

Jason sat down on the couch and resumed watching something on the television. "Dad, someone is here," he yelled.

Omar appeared from the hallway. "Oh, let me clear a space."

Amy set down her bags next to the stove as Omar redistributed the countertop.

"I'm making cucumber salad with raw tuna," said Amy. "I brought figs and lots of wasabi. Where are your bowls?" Omar gave her a tour of the kitchen. A very short tour. Amy pulled out cucumbers, vinegar, sesame oil, soy sauce, several dried sheets of seaweed, green onions, a large tuna fillet, a bag of wild figs, fresh ginger root, her own large cutting knife, and a small, wooden mortar and pestle.

"Wow. This looks incredible."

"Here." Amy grabbed a bowl and filled it with figs. "An

appetizer. And where's your bathroom?"

"First door on the right." Omar took the bowl and sat down on the floor around the living room table. "Jay, have a look at these."

Jason slid off the couch and sat at the table. He said, "What is that?"

"They're called figs. Here, have one."

"They look really weird."

At the very end of the hallway, Amy saw a slightly open door. There were flashes of light. A television? There was something between the frame and the door. It looked like cobwebs. They looked wet and stretched out like fingers from underneath the door.

Amy paced in the bathroom, killing time to make it seem like she was peeing, but also trying to piece together what she just saw. Cobwebs? Or. . . Webbing? Like a spider?

She flushed the toilet, ran the sink, and returned to the kitchen. She put on a pot of water and turned the heat to high. She pulled several brown bags from her backpack and placed them near the mortar and pestle. She crushed a few ingredients together and distributed the dust onto a sheet of rice paper. With a piece of twine, she tied the sheet of rice paper into a small sack and placed it in her pocket. She made four more.

The water was boiling. Amy poured the water over the dried seaweed and while it rehydrated, she sliced the tuna into tiny squares and placed them into a bowl. She chopped the seaweed and threw it in with the fish. She added soy sauce, sesame oil, some

sesame seed, and tossed it all together. Next, she peeled and sliced the cucumber and mixed it with soy sauce, sesame oil, and some rice wine vinegar.

Using the mortar and pestle one last time, she made five more sacks with the rice paper. These were different than the first batch, containing mostly ginger, and she placed them in another pocket.

Amy got three bowls and distributed the cucumber salad into each. Then, with a deliberate non-deliberate poise, she spooned the tuna into each bowl and let the cubes fall where they may. She sliced some green onion and sprinkled it on top. "It's ready," she said as she balanced the three bowls and brought them to the living room table. "How are you liking the figs?"

"They're delicious," said Omar.

"They're gross," said Jason.

"I'm sorry, Jason," said Amy. "They taste just like those fig cookies, but with none of the crap in it."

"Crap in it?"

"They grow on you," said Omar. He got up, retrieved some forks and some napkins and sat back down. He passed them around and said, "This looks amazing, thank you."

Jason stared at the bowl. "What is this?"

"Raw tuna with cucumber salad. It's a little something I've been playing around with."

"Raw tuna?" Jason knocked a few pieces around with his fork.

"Oh, I almost forgot." Amy went to the kitchen and returned

with a clump of wasabi. She divided it between Omar and herself.

"What's that?"

Omar said, "It's a radish, um, kind of paste. It's really spicy."

"Well, bon appetite." Amy took a bite. Then Omar. They both hummed in satisfaction. Jason stared at his bowl. He stabbed a piece of tuna and brought it to his mouth. He closed his eyes and plunged the fork into his mouth. He chewed. Amy took another bite but Omar was watching Jason.

"You like it, Jason?" said Omar.

Jason looked at Amy and then his dad. He smiled and only nodded.

"Wait, what?" said Amy. "You don't like it?"

Jason grab his napkin, brought it to his mouth and spit the chewed up tuna into it. "I don't like it"

"I'm so sorry, Omar."

"It's okay," he said. He grabbed Jason's bowl and napkin. He went to the kitchen. "How 'bout a PB&J?"

"Yes, please."

"Tell Amy about school, Jason. You like your new class?"

"Oh, well. I'm in first grade. I like my teacher and I'm really good at math. My best friend, Josh, is in the same class as me."

"Your teacher nice?" Amy ate some tuna and cucumber.

"She's okay, I guess." Jason hid his hands under the table.

"And does your dad like her?"

Jason grinned and leaned in like he had a secret. "Yeah."

"Ah, come on Jason," said Omar as he sat down and handed him a sandwich. "Don't give away your pops like that."

Jason giggled and took a bite.

"So tell me about this job. The book store?" Omar took a bite of the tuna salad and chewed. "This is so good."

"Well, I work for this weird guy named Eddy. He lives in the book store. He's never where he says he's gonna be, he's always hungover, and won't stop trying to get me to read these awful romance novels."

"Sounds like a character."

"I'll say. I'm not even sure how that place stays open. We barely get any foot traffic. Eddy says we do well online."

"But you seem to like it."

"It can be . . . Fun."

"Dad?"

"Yeah, Jay?"

"What's 'hungover' mean?" Jason ate the last of his sandwich.

"It's how you feel when you stay up too late."

"Is it like being tired?"

"It's like being tired," said Amy, "and sick."

"Oh."

"You like have your grandmother live with you?" asked Amy.

Jason hid his hands again. "It's okay," he said. "I think. . . I think grandma is hungover."

Omar laughed. Amy only stared. "Why do you say that?" she asked.

"She sleeps a lot."

"Come on, Jason," said Omar. "We'll brush our teeth and get ready for bed."

"And then movie night?"

"Of course."

Omar and Jason went to the bathroom.

If she was going to do this, it was now.

Amy got up and tip-toed passed the sounds of the faucet and toothpaste on toothbrushes. Light flashed from down the hall. There was webbing in the corners and webbing on the floors. She passed Omar's bedroom and approached the end of the hallway. As she neared the door, webbing sucked her feet to the floor. Almost dragged her. She pressed her nose to the door and peered through the crack. Makaela Amari sat on a small, cushioned chair. It was dark. The T.V. flashed on her face and illuminated the room. The woman was hunched and her eyes were barely open. Silk strands oozed from her hands and dripped from her fingers and left her strapped and shackled.

Amy reached into her pockets and squeezed the rice-paper bombs.

Reveal and dispel.

Amy pushed open the door, raised a bomb, and threw it. The rice-paper hit the woman in the leg and fell gently to the ground. The woman's eyes opened. She looked at her leg and then, slowly, she raised her eyes.

"Um," said Amy. "Hi Ms. Amari."

"Hi Ms. Amari," said the woman. Her voice was an old

record--worn by countless needles.

Amy threw another bomb. It hit the woman's head, burst into flames, and spilled onto her face. The woman inhaled the dust and she shrieked as her body convulsed. Makaela wrapped her arms around her own shoulders and rose to her feet. Her eyes were open and her head rocked back. She stared at the ceiling, screaming. Her jaw stretched open. A nub stuck out, jagged and black. The nub grew--no, it was not a nub. It had a joint and then another another joint as it slid from within Makaela and found a footing on the ground. Another came out, pouring mucus, and then another until finally, an abdomen with the face of a young woman, painted white, slid from Makaela's morphed mouth. The face had two rows of eyes that rose up its forehead. It had two maniples from its jaws. The spirit pulled free its remaining legs and sprawled across the entire room, crammed against the ceiling. It howled violence.

"I thought it would be a smaller," said Amy.

"What the hell is going on?" said Omar from the doorway. "Stay back, Jason," he shouted down the hall and stepped into the room. "Stay in the living room!"

"I can handle this," said Amy.

The spirit swiped its leg across the room. Amy and Omar were rocked back. Books and papers flew across the room. The curtains raptured. Makaela dangled by her mouth from the abdomen of the creature. Her arms and legs were lifeless. Limbs on a doll.

"Is that my mother?"

"Yeah." Amy pulled bombs from her other pocket. "We'll get her back." She threw. The spider swiped the rice paper and it burst open into flames. The dust clung to the spirit and it shrieked.

Omar and Amy covered their ears.

Amy threw again and struck its face. It shrieked and Makaela crumbled to the ground. Webbing poured from her mouth.

"Mother!"

Amy held him back. "Hang on. I don't know why it's still here." She launched another bomb. The spirit swiped it out of the air and shrieked again. "I'm missing something. . ."

"I don't care," said Omar. He bolted toward the spider. Amy watched as the spirit swiped at him. The creature's leg passed right through him, but he stumbled and dropped to a knee. He pushed forward while Amy threw another bomb, pushing the spirit back.

"Mother!" shouted Omar as he swept her up in his arms.

The spirit shrieked. Amy threw another bomb, pressing the creature into the ceiling. The shelves shook as debris flew around the room.

"Mom," said Omar. "It's going to be okay." He squeezed her to his chest and buried his face from the wind.

The spirit swiped at the two of them, but it passed right through. Its jaws screamed, but it was only silence. Amy stared at Omar and his mother. That was it. She shouted, "Tell her you love her! And that she's not a burden!"

Omar glared at Amy. "What is happening?!" he shouted.

"Just do it!"

"Mother," said Omar. "Can you hear me?"

Makaela stirred. "Omar? Omi?"

"I'm here."

Wind whipped through the woman's hair. Omar presses it aside and said, "I'm glad you're in our lives, mother. We're happy you get to live with us. You're not. . . A burden."

The spirit shook. It swiped at the walls as it rose through the ceiling. The wind died as it disappeared.

The room was still. The room was quiet.

Makaela wept.

"Omi," she said. "I have to talk to you. I can't live this way anymore. I've been . . . away since all of this happened."

"Since what happened?"

"Dan passing. Coming here. I just can't be a burden on you and Jason."

"Is grandma okay?" Jason was staring through the cracked-open door.

"Come in," said Omar, and Jason joined them.

"Give me a hug, darling," said Makaela. "I can't tell you how much I've missed you."

"Mom, you're not a burden on us, said Omar,

"How can't I be?"

Amy stepped back, slid out the door, and moved down the hallway. She grabbed her bag and gathered her things. Her stomach felt sunken. How would she explain what just happened? Did Jason see it? Did she mess up? She felt like she broke

something that she couldn't possibly fix. She waited in the living room, her bag over her shoulder. She waited ten minutes. Then another five. Should she leave?

Omar appeared in the hallway. He pointed to the door and said, "Outside."

Amy and Omar stepped out the door.

"Tell me what the hell that was." Omar's gaze was a brick wall.

"Okay." Amy sighed. She crossed her arms.

"Does it have something to do with this new job?" He pointed back inside.

"Yeah."

"I knew it. I knew something weird was going on. Why would you work at a used bookstore? For like, no money?"

"I don't know what to tell you. I don't know what the rules are about this thing. This. . . was my first time alone."

"Could you have been hurt? Could you have hurt my mother? What about my son? What do you mean this is your first time alone?"

"I'm sorry. When Eddy and I worked together, he always had the whole thing figured out. It's like he knew what would happen. Hey--it worked out, didn't it? We did it."

Omar rubbed his hand over his head and paces back and forth.

"What about Jason?" asked Amy. "What did he see?"

"He didn't mention anything weird. He asked about the room--which is a disaster, by the way. What the hell happened in

there?"

"Is Makaela okay?"

"We talked in there. She was . . . her old self. Did that thing do this to her?"

"Not exactly. That thing only. . . amplified the problem. It fed on her sorrow and isolation and made it worse. I've seen giant monsters, Omar, that crawl from the ocean." The words were spilling from her mouth. "Eddy says they feed on all levels. From societies to individuals. They can affect us all. And I. . . hunt them."

He only stared at her.

Omar rubbed his forehead. "We're gonna talk about this. This doesn't end here." He opened the door. "I need to go back in. Jason may be a little shook. And by Jason, I mean me."

"Okay."

"And so?" said Eddy. He was sitting up on his cot with a mouth full of leftover tuna salad.

"It wasn't working. I threw the dispel, but it just screamed. And it hurt!"

"Until Omar reached his mother?"

Amy leaned back against the doorframe, crossed her arms, and hummed. "Yeah."

"Everyone knows to dispel an arachnoid, it takes the love of a family member to pull them from its web."

"Everyone knows? You're an ass."

"Look." Eddy took a bite of salad and then pulled a novel from under his cot. "Read these romance novels." He tossed the book across the room. Amy caught it.

"Are you serious?"

"It's all there."

"Is this the third in the series? I can't start in the middle."

"The first two are garbage. Just start with the third."

The front door rang and a small group of voices entered the store.

Amy read the cover. "A Web of Silence."

"Those are customers, right?"

"Yeah."

"So do the work thing."