

## Socks and the City

Intuitive senses sharp, I slide onto a stool at the lobby bar of the William Penn Hotel, scene of the crime. My crime. I take in the carved bar, the hushed conversations, the ultra-spongy carpeting, all under lighting that's both moody and classy. Everything is as it was on that fateful day. I've returned on a professional mission, to discover why I sabotaged my relationship with Oscar. Oscar was the love of my life. He was, and probably still is, an Altoid-crunching tech nerd and supreme realist. I say probably because he won't answer my calls anymore.

As for me, I'm an eco-psycho-experientialist. That means I study the relationship between the physical, psychological and experiential landscapes of peoples' lives. Even if I made up that field, which I did, it's huge. Lucky for me I'm in Pittsburgh, the perfect setting for my work.

For starters, Pittsburgh spills, dips and plops itself along the banks of three rivers: the Allegheny, the Monongahela and that shining ribbon of compromise, the Ohio. The town's psychic runoff floods these waters, washing them with schizophrenic serenity or eddying them with unrest, although, admittedly these conditions are often related to the performance of the local sport teams.

Today, the rivers are muddied, roiled, as if they don't know whether to adopt their saleable postcard finish or revert to their more frequent sheen of self-deprecating sludge. I sense indecision, forks in the road, a situation awaiting a solution. I take this as a sign for Oscar and me.

It may seem strange, but people actually pay me to do this sort of thing. I have superlative powers of observation. At work, I ask my clients simple questions, for

example, what they see out their windows, where they like to vacation, if they prefer lace to leather, sand to soil. I find the map in their streaming output, and reconnect them with their lives. If someone loves stands of wild hibiscus and bouillabaisse and holes up in a hovel on the Swissvale-Etna bus line, they're practically engraving an invitation for disaster. Trust me, it happens every day. I've counseled lots of people right out of their self-made prisons. Unfortunately, it's a lot harder to work on yourself. Selfie-appendectomy? See what I mean?

With my clients, I employ all sorts of strategies. For example, I probe their memories of pivotal events to discover omens. Think young Meryl Streep in *The Deer Hunter* when that drop of red wine hits her wedding gown. The instant her bridal white reddens, movie-goers grip their seats. Omens like that happen every day.

The trick is to read your own. That's my mission here right now.

“So, sweetheart, what can I get for you?” The bartender leans toward me. I note that he wasn't here that day two months ago when I gouged the heart out of the love Oscar and I had for each other. I'm not sure how to interpret that piece of information, so I turn my attention to the drink specials.

Naturally, today's feature is a banana daiquiri. I gasp. It's another coincidence in a string. Oscar and I split up the day I learned the sad news about bananas. If you've managed to shield yourself thus far, our beloved Cavendish banana, the one you smell and taste when you so much as hear the word banana, is on the verge of extinction. This is scientific fact. And today's special is a banana daiquiri? Coincidence? I think not.

When we were together, Oscar called me a starless astrologist, a root-reader. That was when he was in a jesting mood. When he was cranky, he called me a crackpot and a

coincidence whore. But I know better. I understand that a coincidence is a message from God, an anonymous note pointing us down the right path if we can just interpret it properly.

"Give me a minute," I say to the bartender. I close my eyes and picture a pack of feverish lab researchers in a sweat to create an acceptable banana substitute and realize that no matter what they come up with, it will never be the same. Just like Oscar and me?

"I'll check back," the bartender says.

I sigh and look around me for help. But the middle-aged blondes to my right are portraits of cluelessness. One fishes a tube of fuchsia lipstick from her purse and stabs at feathered lips. The other spelunks in her giant bag and emerges with a wad of tissues, sending a roll of breath mints crashing to the floor along with a couple of those orange-brown vials that harbor prescription drugs. The professional in me is tempted to tell these ladies that all the magic in their Mary Poppins' bags won't help them until they honor their woefully neglected egos. I see these things in a nanosecond. It's my job.

Like I say, it's always a whole lot easier with other people.

But back to coincidence. What if I told you right now that Oscar's last name is Cavendish, just like the doomed banana? I swear on a stack of lovely yellow peels, soon to be blighted, this is the honest to God truth.

Now I'm getting somewhere. I sink deeper into my banana-charged reveries to zero in on the apocalyptic fight Oscar and I had at this bar two months ago. I immerse myself in the memory and I realize I'm angry.

I'm angry because I'm here doing all the work, and I'd bet my favorite pair of jeans that Oscar has already moved past our nasty fracture. He always had a formidable ability to ignore his surroundings, to lose himself in the flat vastness of his computer.

The truth is, Oscar just isn't reflective. Once he told me his life wouldn't change even if we figured out the point of it, so I might as well quit the fortune-telling shit and do something constructive. Like cook without setting off the smoke alarm. Or knit, like his grandmother. The Argyle socks she'd left him were his ultimate cherished legacy. He wore them everywhere and people were always admiring them. I admit that Oscar had a point about the socks. They were definitely cool. But he was wrong about almost everything else.

For starters, no matter what it looked like to him, it wasn't infidelity that happened two months ago at this bar, swallowing our love like a karstic sinkhole. I was merely exploring possibilities, kind of like what the banana scientists are elbow-deep in at this very moment.

The bartender saunters my way again. I spot a bottle of Campari on the shelf above his head, its pinkish-red nicely bloodless and comforting. Oscar once told that shade of red comes from insect shells, maybe even cockroaches. Like Oscar, cockroaches probably wouldn't change their behavior one iota no matter what they figured out.

"A Campari," I say. I laugh and add, "On the rocks." I laugh some more. "Not just on the rocks. Shipwrecked."

A slight widening of the bartender's eyeballs tells me he isn't sure how to respond. I almost divulge my mission, but I don't have enough cash on me to tip him to listen. Promise him my firstborn? Deed over my car? In the end, I'm the eco-psycho-

experientialist, not him. Still, he lingers in front of me as if it's his bound duty. What a thankless job. I'll have to leave him my card after I sort out my own mess, maybe even offer him my friends and family discounted rate.

The blondes distract him, knocking over full glasses of water as they conduct what seems to be their final excavation in their purses to settle up. "Campari on the rocks, coming up," is all he manages before he runs for a towel.

I wait for my drink and go over in my head what happened here two months ago. The events are as clear as the wine glasses hanging overhead. I'd parked across the river in the South Side, my sadness palpable as I switched off the radio, fresh from learning the bleak prognosis for the Cavendish banana. I hopped the T at Station Square, banana extinction thoughts heavy in my heart, and arrived in the heart of Pittsburgh, the Golden Triangle, which, by the way, truly is a triangle wedged amid those living and temperamental rivers. I planted myself at the William Penn lobby bar and began my vigil, waiting for Oscar who was annoyingly, inexplicably and seriously late.

As I mull over these events, a group jostles my bar stool and I scoot out of their way. The jostlers are a pack of young office workers, law or finance I would guess by the well-draped suits the guys sport. The women are in dresses, cut to suggest the toned muscles they conceal, their high heels teetering on the brink of titillating. The sexual heat is so palpable I shed my scarf in a sweat. Rounds of glasses pile up around them in no time as shoulders touch, arms brush, coiffed heads incline. Lucky them. A bunch in Pittsburgh semi-formal mode, oversized team jerseys over generously cut Levis, laughs and weaves its way over to a corner. The noise level ratchets up to happy-hour-heaven mode.

My gaze falls on a skinny guy in a white shirt at the other end of the bar. Like me, he's alone, hunched over an amber something, reading a newspaper. He's so nondescript it occurs to me that maybe he's been there all along.

The bartender sets my Campari in front of me and escapes without so much as eye contact. Maybe I won't offer him that discount after all.

So back to that terrible day. As I waited for Oscar, more irritated by the minute, up the maroon and gold carpeted steps walked a man who could have been his twin. Or his brother. Or at least cousin. He edged up to the bar, leaving just one mahogany stool between us.

So naturally, I studied him.

He ordered some complicated vodka drink with very precise instructions—so beyond the James Bond shaken-not-stirred dictum that Bond seemed a dilettante in comparison. Oscar's lookalike is a heavyweight, I thought, a man who knows his way around this world. I wondered what would happen to my love for Oscar if he were similarly sophisticated. Would it finally blaze into that sort of cinematic firestorm I always dreamed about? My next thought was: where the hell was Oscar?

I remember that I tried to be discrete while I observed Oscar's suave doppelganger. The trouble was, I was getting really hungry and when I nearly slipped from my stool, I realized I was pretty tipsy as well. I needed food, pasta arrabiata, or the cauliflower and pine nut tapas from that new restaurant in Market Square. Anything, and the sooner the better. I got out my cell phone. No missed calls. No texts. I started to call Oscar, but aborted. I wolfed down a very unsatisfying handful of the salty, crunchy bar mix.

Just then, pseudo-Oscar leaned over the empty barstool between us, right into me. “I like a girl who knows what she likes.” He sort of purred this and licked his lips.

Aha. That was the moment of doom. I see it now. My training should have kicked in even when instinct failed, meaning I should have realized he was full of shit. A girl who knows what she likes? I didn’t even know whether I should order another drink, call Oscar and nag, or just worry. But right then, face to face with full-of-shit-pseudo-Oscar, all my immersion in omens and coincidence and reading the situation fell away, like a pair of last summer’s shorts on a raging Jenny Craig success story.

I was experientially naked. As an eco-psycho-experientialist, that’s what I call it when people lose their grip and fail to see the obvious, such as the proper way to behave. It happens all the time. Just watch the evening newscast, when supposedly smart lawyers or dedicated teachers get led away in handcuffs and orange suits. I warn my clients, you see what happened to them? For God’s sake, people, keep your wits about you.

But there I was, as experientially naked as my most deluded client. I said to myself, yes, you will believe this Oscar-clone who has in a flash sized you up all wrong and is one hundred percent toxic with his mind-numbing Sith-Lord ways.

He told me his name, Ben, and we made jokes about Pittsburgh’s more famous Ben, the legendary quarterback, and just how big can a Ben be, and exactly what parts of a Ben are the biggest. Arm in arm, we peered into each other’s eyes, dredging up childhood stories and in slurred certainty, vowed that we two had met through some providential chain of events.

We were on an epic drunk, Ben on some vodka version of perfection and me on a run of slushy and very pink umbrella messes when a wounded and very real Oscar,

admittedly a blurred and moving target, appeared out of nowhere. In his hands, he held a turquoise box from Tiffany's, and began to explain something about being so late because of the traffic between the Ross Park Mall and downtown. My gut squeezed into knots, the pain of which I did not manage to expel with the remnants of the umbrella drinks sometime later in the lovely but echoing William Penn bathroom.

“Another Campari?” The bartender notices my nearly drained glass and brings me back to present reality.

“What do you have in something a bit less, well, pinkish?”

He nods and sets to work. All around me, the sexually charged office bunch has proceeded to organize itself into couples, matching up inflamed body parts and migrating to shadowed corners. My psychic radar picks up a thrill of the forbidden here and there. I sense one couple in particular closing in on the hunt, probably each with partners at home making dinner, wondering why they're late. I have to remind myself that it's not my issue.

The bartender brings me a mojito, fresh and green, and I sip while I wonder how I could have been such a jerk. I watch as the high priestess of the beer drinkers in the corner, a young thing with severely flat-ironed hair and Lemieux shirt over skinny jeans, leads the black and gold crowd out.

In a blink, the pale skinny guy planted in the corner of the bar and me are the only ones left. He's still hunched over his amber drink and his newspaper.

My mojito is reduced to leafy sediment and chips of watery ice, and I can't make any more sense of bananas and Bens and Oscars and Tiffany blue than I could two

months ago. I signal for a check. Maybe I need a therapist like myself to lead me through my trademark exercises. It's funny, in that tragic human way.

The really tragic thing is, had Oscar-impostor Ben and I met at any other time, we would have gone our separate ways. So what if we indulged in a few alcohol-laced promises and kisses? I never even knew his last name. It was my farewell dalliance, that last hurrah moment of singlehood that bachelorette parties celebrate, only this time without the bother of invitations and rickety tiaras bought online. Unwitnessed it would be rightly unconfessed. Oscar and I would be together today, the contents of that Tiffany-blue box tight around my ring finger.

I stand, still waiting for the check.

"It's covered," the bartender says.

"No, don't be silly, you can't be giving out drinks on the house."

"Not me. The gentleman over there." He points to the pale skinny guy with the amber drink and the newspaper.

I debate a moment, then wrap my scarf around my neck and amble over to thank him. Easy does it, not another William Penn Hotel bar fiasco.

I dredge up the blind-justice monotone I use with my clients. "You didn't need to do that, but thank you."

He shrugs. "Figured you could use the lift."

What does that mean?

He looks down and adjusts the legs of his trousers to cover the too-big expanse of socks that stick out. Argyle socks. I try not to gasp. What the hell?

"Last time I saw you here, you really had a time of it," he says.

For the first time in two months, the murk begins to clear. So, he'd witnessed the scene with Oscar and me. Despite its fuzziness, I could vouch for that night's memorability. Golden Globe caliber hysterics, messy tears, wracked sobs and nose-running, and even the grand finale of a Tiffany blue box in flight over the bar like an evil drone. Unlike almost one hundred percent of our time as a couple, the falling out between Oscar and me was not subdued.

"So you were here that day? Sorry about that." I'm not in the mood to discuss it. Clearly this bar just doesn't work for me. Could it be that it was built on cursed territory, site of a mass convention of angry spirits, maybe lives and lungs consumed by old steel mills and coal mines? I'll make a note of that for future research. Now I need to leave.

"Well, thanks for picking up my tab." I start to walk away.

"So, which one did you end up with?" he asks my retreating back.

I turn around.

"That night. Mr. Tiffany Blueballs with the hangdog face, or Happy Drunkard? I haven't been here since, so I don't know how the story ended." His smile wrings the rude sting right out of his words.

"I haven't been here since then, either, but if you must know, the answer is neither one of them."

"Well, good for you." He gives me a little nod and plunges his head back into his newspaper.

*Good for you?* Really? Easy for him to say. Anyway, how dare he pass judgment?

And then, all of a sudden, I see it. Bright as if it were in lights on a marquee. It was sitting in front of me all the time, as visible as the blotch on Meryl Streep's gown.

The two blighted Cavendishes. The weird Oscar clone. Could it be that all along, Oscar and I were just close enough to compatible that we'd never bothered to figure out how ill-suited we really were for each other? It hit me like a Halloween blizzard. Big Ben Pseudo-Oscar had entered my life in the nick of time and vanished the same way.

And now, this timely stranger in the Argyle socks emerges from behind his newspaper to reveal the truth of what happened with one simple statement, *good for you*.

It was good for me. Why hadn't I seen that? Of course I missed Oscar, but I missed him in the way I missed the recliner chair I had to pitch after my college roommate's cock-a-poo claimed it for a personal urinal. That is, it might have been a really great chair if things had gone better. Sure, when I heaved it onto the sidewalk it left a gaping hole in the feng shui of the apartment, but even necessary losses leave their peculiar scars. What kind of eco-psycho-experientialist doesn't know that?

Like I said, it's hardest to see these things when you're in the middle of them.

I drop the therapist voice. "Hey, really, thanks for the drinks."

"Least I could do." His voice is a surprise, nice enough for radio.

I'm out the door and halfway to the T stop when my feet disobey my order to move. My body knows I am missing something here. And it's something huge.

I use the strategies I use with my clients. I go over the facts. I was drawn to the William Penn Hotel lobby bar today. The stranger with the newspaper was drawn to the William Penn Hotel lobby bar today. Sure, he was thin, and his trousers were too short. But he was funny, even a little gutsy. Mr. Tiffany Blueballs?

And, he was sporting a gangbuster pair of Argyles. As I said, Oscar was wrong about most things, but he was absolutely right about those socks. A sign for sure.

I'm almost dizzy as the pieces come together, merging. Positively copulating. If I don't turn around right away and find out his name, I'm not worthy of my profession. Those banana researchers and I are the same, hell-bent on searching for options until we find the right one.

I race back to the regal William Penn Hotel lobby bar and take the carpeted steps in twos. I burst into the bar and he's still there.

I stride right up to him, and he looks up from his newspaper, his expression a bit quizzical. We stare at each other in a long buzz of awkward silence. "So. Can I buy you another drink?" he finally asks.

I shrug.

"The special is a banana daiquiri."

Silence.

"I have kind of a weird thing going on with bananas right now," I say.

More silence. He ruffles his paper, sips his drink and leans back in his bar stool. "Funny you should say that. I was just reading an article about bananas. Seems there's a nasty blight already in progress. If you haven't heard, I'm sorry to tell you we might have to cast our lot with some other fruit, although the banana is technically a berry. I digress, but the point is," and here, he points to the newspaper as a grieving witness to the calamity, "bananas these days are in a bad way." He clears his throat and adjusts his socks.

All of a sudden, my scarf is way too warm. "I agree," I say as I loosen it and mount the vacant stool next to him. "By the way, I really like your socks."