

The Skylark Brooch

The sign out front flickered at night and didn't light up at all during the daytime. Of course, that didn't mean Madam Zorina wasn't open. She was as open as the five-fingered palm that crawled across her window. The marine layer had rolled in on wet grunion fins, and the salt air had a warm fishy bouquet with a slight nose of petroleum. This was a lonely stretch of Pacific Coast Highway, just south of Seal Beach, where the sand opens up and the wind really blows. Chances were looking pretty good that Madam Zorina would be getting both kids down after a bowl of Spaghetti Os and settling in with a suduko puzzle and a pint of vanilla macadamia nut brittle. Nights like these rarely produced customers, so she jumped when the first knock rapped at the door. The second was more insistent.

Arias filled the cathedral-like walls of St. Matthews as the mourners filed past the open coffin paying last respects, remembering that Audrey had always worked both sides of the aisle. Some were crying, some were smirking, some were holding their hankies close to their chests or hearts. Her cancer had roared through her like a freight train, and everyone had been caught off guard when those irritable pains she had been complaining about for the last few months—dismissing them as nothing more than the big wheel turning for another year—not only turned out to be fatal, but a dreadful reminder that that big wheel turns for us all. Audrey's last words had been, "Don't cry for me," and not too many tears had been noticeably shed.

The music reached a crescendo and George wiped his eyes. He'd told himself that he wouldn't cry, but the music made him ache and missing Audrey made him ache, and he really didn't care anymore. His friends filed past, their lips moving with words he never heard, while his three grown children gathered at his sleeve. Forty-two years of marriage hadn't been perfect, but damn near good enough that the hole in his heart might prove to be the ulcer that would ultimately kill him. Audrey had been the other shoe in the pair he'd walked in for all his adult life. Everybody loved George; Audrey had an edge. George's comedy tended toward the physical; Audrey's made you think. George could make you comfortable when he handed you a brimful tumbler of really old Scotch; Audrey had a knack for making you turn away when she told a dirty joke and blew cigarette smoke in your eyes. And that's why George grieved and finally cried, because no one could know the depth of the despair he would feel for the loss of his sidekick, lover, mother of his children, and the really funny gal he'd set up for punch lines all his life as the ultimate straight man. George walked to the cathedral doors and out into the eternal sunshine, but that positive gait that he had always counted on now exhibited a discernable limp.

His boys would be driving him home while Grace was saying last goodbyes to all the thoughtful mourners who were kind enough to attend her mother's funeral. Back at the house, Grace would tell her brothers, "Joey, get

Dad a drink. Danny, get the door.” Grace would be the sibling in charge. Joey was still turning it over in his head that his mother had died and that without her cover he might have to start looking for work again, while Danny, who was much more secure with the swing of life’s music, just went with the flow. Grace had their backs. She welcomed the guests, deployed her best friends and thoughtful neighbors as wine servers and waiters, and respectively gathered condolences like flower petals tossed in the air. Though the boys didn’t have a clue, the familial succession had taken place and Grace was the new queen, albeit *sans* crown.

Two months passed and George had his baggage packed, ready to move on. His first steps had been tentative, like walking on the old family albums filled with photos of baseball games, camping trips, and graduations, but there was no doubt in his mind that it was time to take inventory of the life Audrey had left behind. He donated her clothes to a thrift shop. He gave her car to Joey. He packed up all her keepsakes—old photos, souvenirs, nonsensical peculiarities picked up through the course of a lifetime—and sealed them away in cardboard boxes with wide straps of cellophane tape. George was an accountant now, not at all sentimental, touching the remnants of his dear wife like they were part of a rare stamp collection. And now he had one last mystery box to open: Audrey’s very private, never-before-entered, ebony-lacquered jewelry box. George could readily guess what was inside, knowing that he had bought most of these treasures, but he’d always respected the boundaries of marriage and had left them to Audrey’s provenance.

George opened the lid and immediately caught a whiff of Audrey’s scent, not just the perfume, but the oils and shampoos and lotions that had bathed her body, and perhaps a touch of the anger and sweat and restiveness that had given her so much spice. He plucked out the pearl earrings he’d given her on their first anniversary. He ran his fingers across the smooth surface of the jade pendant that had played so often on the field of her freckled breasts. Finally, he pushed aside some of the lesser trinkets and costume jewelry of no consequence, dug a little deeper, and excavated the Skylark Brooch.

Madame Zorina opened the door and welcomed her guest.

“So, you’re a medium, right?”

This seemed a little abrupt, so Madame Zorina trotted out her standard answer for skeptics, “I can be a large or a small if you’d prefer.”

“My mother just died. I want to talk to her.”

“I’ve been known to make those connections when spirits allow themselves to be available and wish to communicate with someone who wants their advice, or their approval, or perhaps merely chooses to say goodbye.”

“That works for me. Do we sign a contract or is this all consummated on a wing and a prayer?”

Madame Zorina asked her guest to come in out of the cold and motioned to the sofa in the living room she used as her receiving area. Readings and spiritual visitations were conducted out of the sight of prying eyes in what she called the Celestial Room. Finally, she handed her guest a hot cup of tea, settled into her chair, and said, “Now, tell me all about your mother.”

The Skylark Brooch was made during the Ottoman Empire in the territory that is now known as Romania by a craftsman nobody remembered by name. But the gold was pure and the bird was beautiful, and some—those with more discerning taste—might even have described it as elegant. The Skylark’s wings were reaching for the sky, she was airborne, and the heights she achieved would only be a question of desire. George turned it over in his hands. He felt the weight. He passed it through his accountant’s mind and considered the diamonds. There were a dozen in all, sprinkled across the wings by a talented jeweler in Antwerp just before the Second World War. Smuggled out of Belgium and brought to New York by Audrey’s maternal grandparents, the Skylark Brooch had been handed down to her mother and eventually to Audrey on the occasion of the birth of her daughter Grace. For George, the implication was obvious: the heir to the brooch should be chosen from the distaff side of the family.

George wondered what it was worth. For all he knew, its value might not be more than the sum of the weight of the gold and the carats of the small diamonds that had been added later. It had never been appraised, though Audrey had once suggested they take it to The Antiques Roadshow when it came to Southern California to see if they might be one of those fortunate couples who ended up being “pleasantly surprised”. They laughed at this idea and dismissed it out of hand because neither George nor Audrey wanted to see themselves—or have their friends see them—on television grasping greedily for found riches when there was the very real possibility that it was neither priceless nor even very interesting in the eyes of the show’s expert appraisers. Why risk the humiliation when the brooch could remain safely in Audrey’s jewelry box, and if ever there came a day when it might be sold, they could find out what it was worth then.

For all intents and purposes, George felt that day had come to pass. Audrey had worn the Skylark Brooch perhaps only a half-dozen times during all the years it had been in her possession, and though Grace, Joey, and Danny knew of its existence, none of them had ever paid particular attention to it when it was on display, neatly pinned to her left lapel just above her heart. And Grace, for whom it was intended, had never really expressed any strong desire to possess it, at least as far as George was aware, so he felt quite comfortable with the idea of selling the brooch without creating some lasting enmity between him and his only daughter. Determining the Skylark Brooch’s value would just be a first step, so for now that could remain George’s secret. Besides, Grace would

get her share. As George saw it, he would get the brooch appraised, and if it truly was a rare, valuable piece, then he would sell it and divide the proceeds among all three of his children. That seemed fair, and George was absolutely certain that that's exactly what Audrey would have wanted.

Of course, getting an appraisal wasn't as simple as taking the Skylark Brooch down to the nearest jewelry store. George knew that its true value would be measured by its craftsmanship and history at least as much—if not more—than by the gold and gems from which it was made. Unfortunately, he had no written documentation to prove its provenance, but he was pretty sure that an expert in antique jewelry could determine a reliable estimate. And should such an expert need any clues in determining an approximate value for the brooch, George had the rich oral history that had been passed along through at least three generations of Audrey's family. Would that be enough? And that's when George remembered those nights sitting on the sofa in front of the TV, Audrey sipping her after-dinner glass of Chardonnay and he taking his Scotch neat, while the Antiques Roadshow appraiser asked some couple if they had any idea about how much their fine example of mid 18th-century American art by a fairly obscure painter might actually be worth. This was always George and Audrey's favorite part of the show. Naturally, the clueless couple would never even venture a guess, but then would find themselves absolutely delighted when the appraiser said, "Considering the excellent condition and the rarity of any painting by this particular artist, I'd have to put its value somewhere in the \$15,000 to \$25,000 range, maybe even more at auction." Maybe even more at auction!

Now George knew exactly what he needed to do. A prominent auction house in Beverly Hills would be just the place to take it, not only because its expert appraisers did this kind of thing all the time, but also because at auction he had a very real chance of realizing his best price from the highest bidder. George could just picture that hapless couple on the Antiques Roadshow segment pretending to be overjoyed at their \$15-25,000 windfall—not exactly the retirement money they'd hoped for—but then, they didn't have the Skylark Brooch.

Another month passed and George finally overcame his post-mourning inertia and made an appointment to see an antique jewelry specialist at an auction house in Beverly Hills. The specialist, an Italian woman from Rome named Gia Scolari who happened to be in Los Angeles on her yearly trip to the states to evaluate recent consignments, showed George into a plush office resplendent with an antique table and chairs, an enormous Oriental rug, and what had to be very good reproductions of famous Renaissance paintings in elaborately crafted frames. Only the high-intensity desk lamp that bathed the tabletop in a freakishly white light was modern.

For presentation purposes—quite literally a case of gilding the lily—George had ensconced the Skylark Brooch in a velvet-lined box that had come with an exquisitely inexpensive wristwatch that had always been Audrey's

favorite. She wore it faithfully every day and returned it to the velvet-lined box every night. Not being particularly valuable—other than for sentimental reasons—the family had decided to bury Audrey with the watch on her wrist. Thus the box was repurposed now to display the Skylark Brooch.

“And what have we here?” said Gia Scolari, an abrupt little woman who appeared to be sixty-something. She had little patience for trivialities, having spent decades quashing the dreams of fortune hunters on five different continents.

“It’s a family heirloom,” said George. “It’s called the Skylark Brooch.”

George had been a successful businessman for many reasons, but mostly because, like a good poker player, he could spot a tell even if it was as subtle as a brief turn of the head. George had one undeniable talent: he could read people. He had sat in boardrooms across the table from powerful CEOs, bankers, and venture capitalists and knew when they were holding back, obfuscating, or downright lying. The little gray-haired lady from Rome was dead in his sights now.

Gia Scolari removed the Skylark Brooch and tossed the box back to George, pretty much saying nice try, but I’ve seen this one before. But she wasn’t disinterested, and the tell came when her fingers first touched the brooch and her eyes darted away.

“Tell me about it,” she said.

“Well, we don’t have any formal documents, if that’s what...”

“That would be ideal, but it’s simply not possible for certain types of, shall we say, little treasures.”

“It belonged to my wife. She passed recently, but her family tells the story...”

“Yes! This is precisely what I want to hear,” said Gia Scolari as she retrieved a small black notebook and a silver Montblanc pen from her bag. “Tell me.”

And so, George retold the story of the Skylark Brooch, which he remembered quite well having first heard it from Audrey’s mother, and then from the lips of Audrey herself every time she wore it and an inquisitive admirer wanted to know where on earth she had gotten such an unusual and lovely piece of antique jewelry. Gia Scolari nodded and dutifully scribbled notes as the story unfolded and cocked an eyebrow occasionally when George was guilty of slight embellishments. When he finished, she snapped her little notebook shut.

“You must leave it with me,” said Gia. “We must photograph it, assay the metal and evaluate the diamonds and begin the research immediately. These things take time, but maybe not so much. I will write you a receipt in accordance with our strict rules, you see, so no worries while we have it in our possession. I will call you when I have news.”

She hadn’t given anything away. Nothing George could take to the bank anyway. Still, when George pulled out of the underground parking lot of the office tower where the auction house did business, he couldn’t help but smile because he’d seen the tell, and he knew the little Italian lady would be working very hard to make the Skylark Brooch just as valuable as it could possibly be.

That very evening George was home alone awaiting the arrival of his three children. Grace, Danny and Joey would be coming by to take him to their favorite Mexican restaurant, more of a joint really, nothing fancy, but the tortillas were handmade on an open griddle by a merry old *abuelita* stationed by the entrance to the dining room. She patted the tortillas flat between her wrinkled hands and greeted you by name if you were a regular. Audrey and George had been well-known there, and now the kids were taking their father on weekly pilgrimages to abate the insufferable loneliness from which they assumed he was stricken. If nothing else, the ice-cold margaritas were soothing.

George was busy doing what so many people do when they suddenly find themselves in an empty house that had been previously filled with laughter and good conversation: he was simply keeping himself busy. The task at hand was washing and putting away the breakfast dishes while he let his mind wander back to his meeting with Gia Scolari. He desperately wanted to share the news of the impending appraisal with his children, but he knew the surprise would be so much better if he had something concrete to report.

The backdoor to the kitchen flew open and Joey stormed in, not quite shouting, but delirious with enthusiasm, saying, “Dad. Dad, we talked to Mom today.”

Sure, thought George, I talk to her everyday myself.

“Seriously. She was right there, well, not really there,” said Joey, “but it was her, I know it, she talked to me.”

George placed a dish on the counter and fixed his son with a stare. He was well aware that Joey was impetuous, but this seemed a bit disrespectful, if not to the memory of the boy’s mother, then certainly to him.

“I don’t find that amusing, Joey,” said George. “We all miss her, but you need to be careful what you say.”

Danny and Grace had followed their brother into the kitchen and had overheard the exchange. Joey looked bewildered, disappointed that his father didn’t share his excitement about this extraordinary news, so Danny stepped into the breach: “It’s true, Dad. On the way over here Grace suggested we stop at that fortune-teller’s place down by the beach. You’ve driven by it a thousand times. I know it sounds stupid or crazy or whatever, but with mom just dying and all it seemed like it might be cool to see if we could contact her.”

“It might be cool...” said George flatly, thinking Danny’s flippant attitude toward his dear departed mother was immature and shameful. This was like venturing into emotional quicksand for George—his sons deserved a reproach, but he was reluctant to lash out at them with a bitter exchange he might later regret.

Fortunately, Grace came to the rescue. “C’mon, Dad, dry your hands and get your coat. It’s not what you think. We’ll tell you all about it at dinner.”

Fortune-tellers and mediums and people who talk to the dead will never become extinct because we all want to know what's on the other side of the curtain. Believers accept their every word, while most people really don't think about the phenomenon at all, and the skeptics just wince. They inhabit a place where ghosts have great credit scores and ordinary people can't make up their minds. George was planted firmly in the skeptic category. He had been a lackadaisical Catholic all his life and believed in God and heaven, but that's where he drew the line on the spirit world. Now, being chauffeured to Madam Zorina's parlor by his three children, he felt more like a kidnap victim than a seeker of spiritual guidance.

Three nights earlier at dinner, perhaps softened by a third margarita, he had listened to his children recount their visit with the "amazing"—Joey's description—Madam Zorina as the medium channeled their mother's words from beyond the grave. Danny proclaimed that "she knew things only Mom could have known", while Joey noted that "you had the eerie sensation that you were in Mom's presence because the mannerisms, the gestures, the body language, Dad, were all the same". Grace had nodded in agreement at these observations, but for the most part had remained silent, and George had sensed that she among his three children had been the least enthralled by the performance and probably saw it as nothing more than harmless fun. Yet, it was Grace who made the invitation, saying, "We'll take you there. You can see for yourself."

And that's when George took the bait. He'd see for himself, all right. He'd read this spooky old gypsy in her mystic's costume just the way he read the big shots in boardrooms and expose her as the fraud he knew she surely was. Still, he felt somewhat uneasy about his impending encounter as their car rolled down the gloomy, fog-shrouded stretch of Pacific Coast Highway and pulled up in front of the lonely one-story beach house with the giant palm painted on the front window and the neon sign flickering atop the roof. Their "visitation" had been scheduled for twilight, a time suggested by Madam Zorina because "that's when spirits are most restless and more receptive to being summoned".

The first surprise was Madam Zorina herself. She was neither old—probably in her mid-30s like Grace—nor dressed in some kind of corny fortune-teller costume. In fact, with her blond hair and blue eyes she looked nothing like the gypsy hag George had been picturing in his mind and was dressed rather casually in a loose-fitting pair of sweats that seemed quite appropriate for lounging around the house on a chilly evening at the beach. The second surprise was her accent—or lack of accent to be more precise. Her speech was measured in the way some people speak when English is a second language, and if there was a hint of an accent—Russian perhaps?—it wasn't the heavy eastern European kind George had been expecting. Madam Zorina showed her party into her living room which was also a surprise: no mystical silky fabrics adorned with curious symbols draped on the walls, no crystal ball on the coffee table; just an ordinary living room, with the small exception being splashes of colorful light that filtered through the palm on her plate glass window. The distant sounds of a television or video game drifted in from the back of the house.

“Please have a seat,” said Madam Zorina. She turned her attention to George and continued, “Of course, I’ve already met Grace, Danny, and Joey, but now I would like to connect with you. I sense that you are skeptical, and that’s perfectly okay, but I ask you to keep an open mind. Can you do that for me?”

She was petite and athletic looking in a feral cat kind of way, and George couldn’t help thinking she looked like someone he’d meet walking her dog in the neighborhood. She would’ve made a fine sheriff, thought George, because she disarmed me with her first smile.

“I’ll do my best.”

“As you should,” said Madam Zorina. “Tell me about Audrey. Nothing specific. Your feelings only. I want to let her know you are here.”

At first, George felt a little awkward expressing his feelings to a complete stranger, but the presence of his children reassured him and soon he was tripping through time and letting his emotions flow through his words about the complex, yet fulfilling world he had inhabited with his wife. He ended his narrative by saying, “I wake up every morning looking to her side of the bed and wondering how it is possible that she’s not there.” Then he wiped the beginning of a tear from the corner of his right eye and felt oddly relieved as if the mere act of talking about Audrey had eased an internal pain that had been pressing against his heart since the day of the funeral.

“It’s time,” said Madam Zorina. “With the four of you here, I feel a tremendous amount of energy in this room, even more than last time. Will you please follow me.”

She led them to the Celestial Room which was really a windowless den in the center of the house. Before allowing them to enter she went to four identical corner stands each displaying a single cream-colored candle. She lit them with her disposable lighter. The room was painted a pale blue—a cool, calm blue, if you thought about it. Once everyone was inside and seated at the round table in the middle of the room, she closed the door and it became so quiet you couldn’t hear the cars passing by on the highway out front. The family was seated in simple slat-back chairs, while Madam Zorina took her place in a mismatched, wingback antique that was positioned strategically so that the corner candles glowed from over her shoulders, lighting the sides of her head while slightly holding her face in shadow.

“I want you to quiet yourselves and clear your minds,” said Madam Zorina. “Focus. Feel the energy in the room. Yes, just so. Now fix an image of Audrey in your mind that is appropriate to your relationship to her. Sometimes it takes a while for a spirit to recognize she is being summoned, other times it can happen very quickly if the spirit has already been drawn near. If it is Audrey, she will want to speak first because she’s concerned about you. Give her some time, and then you may ask questions.”

Madam Zorina rested her arms on the arms of her chair and closed her eyes. She looked so relaxed that George thought she might drift into sleep, when suddenly her body became rigid just as if she had been shocked stiff by a jolt of electricity. Madam Zorina’s eyes remained closed, and it almost felt like she wasn’t even there, and then her face softened and a wry smile appeared.

“Don’t worry about me, Bucko, I’m at peace now. I’m here to talk about you.” The voice wasn’t Audrey’s, nor was it Madam Zorina’s. It had a different pitch and timbre altogether, and that would’ve been shocking enough if not for her words. “Don’t worry about me, Bucko” had been one of Audrey’s signature expressions, and everyone in the family had heard it hundreds of times.

Now Madam Zorina lifted her left hand and reached over and started twirling the watchband on her right wrist around and around, which almost caused George to gasp because this was a nervous habit of Audrey’s—as much a part of her as the cheap wristwatch the family had buried her with—whenever she was thinking about what to say next.

“Joey, you need to try harder to find a good job,” said the voice. “It’s time to start a career and get on with your life. Danny, you don’t worry me because everything comes so easy for you. And Grace, please watch over your brothers. You’re the oldest. They’ll trust you when the time comes.”

And then there was silence. George saw this as his opportunity to ask a question with an answer known only to the family, a chance to remove any lingering doubt that this truly was Audrey speaking.

“Do you remember our favorite place...”

“Hawaii...”

“We went there on our honeymoon, but it was special because...”

“It gave us Joey.”

That sealed the deal. Joey had been the accidental baby. Their private joke had always been that on their very last trip to Hawaii—after a few too many Mai Tais—caution, along with contraception, had been thrown to the wind and nine months later Joey had arrived. Shortly thereafter, George had his vasectomy.

“Do you have any advice for me?”

Now Madam Zorina shifted in her seat and her wry smile became a wan smile and then disappeared. Her left hand stopped toying with her wristwatch and reached up above her left breast and began clutching at her sweatshirt. Her fingers trembled and pulled at the cloth as if trying to locate something that had gone missing. Finally, she spoke again...

“Do not...George...do not ever sell my brooch.”

And with that, Madam Zorina’s body slumped from its rigid pose and her eyes gradually opened.

“She’s gone,” said Madam Zorina. “I don’t understand what just happened, but she became very angry. Maybe you know what it means.”

Days later George was summoned to the auction house in Beverly Hills where a beaming Gia Scolari told him she had some very good news. She wasn’t beaming for long. George requested and received the Skylark Brooch, saying only that it wasn’t really his to sell because it rightly belonged to his daughter. Gia Scolari, however, wasn’t someone who was easily deterred.

“Wouldn’t you at least like to know how much it is worth?” she asked, and before George could refuse she shoved the appraisal in front of him.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said George as he turned to go.

“That’s a considerable amount of money,” Gia called after him. “Once the bidding starts, it would only go up from there.”

George pretended he didn’t hear her and just continued walking.

Another week passed, and on another side of town a registered letter containing a check for \$5,000 was delivered to the place of business of one Madam Zorina. The check was made out to Petra Kaptsova, which was Madam Zorina’s given name. Because Madam Zorina recorded all of her conversations with her clients—initial interviews, visitations, everything—she hadn’t worried too much that her bonus would be paid if all went as planned. And who knew, perhaps the initial recording of this particular client might provide another bonus somewhere down the line in case some unforeseen emergency popped up. Yes, even with her considerable gifts of perception, even Madam Zorina wasn’t immune to facing the unforeseen.