

## I HOPE YOU'RE WRONG ABOUT SCOTTSDALE

I'm paid by the minute to tell the future, no matter which way I tell it. That's the best part about being a phone psychic in the first place— if there's a consequence to being wrong, it isn't one easily measured. I answered the ad in the Independence Tribune on a whim last week after the third in a series of faux-Italian restaurants where I had waitressed let me go, citing a dour disposition and habitual lateness. This from the same eatery that advertises, *If our service doesn't meet your standards, lower your standards*. The woman at Psychic Source who took my call had a voice like cotton candy; the words melted sweet and hushed in the lilt of her southern drawl. Her laugh was the sound of a cork pulled from a champagne bottle. In this industry, voice is everything. Hers was one you instantly trusted your future with; one from which any prophecy of grandeur felt attainable and any promise of gold seemed imminent. She called herself Eden, a name far too fitting to have been given to her at birth. That there was an interview process seemed antithetical to the psychic powers the job title implied, but it was a cakewalk; a charade that lasted all of five minutes. Do you consider yourself a rather intuitive person? Yes. Would you describe yourself as having premonitory instincts? Yes, very much so. Do you currently have a landline phone in your home? With that, Eden had given me the job and explained the rules and regulations. The first five minutes are always free. You are not obligated to inform the customer when these five minutes have run out. Do not entertain questions about the hiring process. Do not, under any circumstance, give out medical advice. Don't be afraid to eat up time. No Jesus.

Eden set up my dial-in extension, processed my contact information, and told me I was set to start the next day. All I had to do was dial in, enter my four digit ID code, hang up, and wait. I could take calls for as long as I pleased, at whatever time I pleased. You are your own

boss, Eden said, and I reveled in the glory of those words. At the end of every month, I'd have to drive to the central phone bank in Wichita for quality control testing to retain status as a gifted advisor.

"One more thing," I said. "What if someone confesses a crime?"

"Hang up," she said.

Today is the first day I feel like I'm nailing it. The clairvoyance has been easy to fake from the beginning, but there's a pitch I haven't been able to find, a register that says, *I have answers for you*. I've consistently been a notch below or above, which is the difference between sounding unenthused and sounding overzealous. I had the same trouble a few years ago, after I graduated college and decided to be an actress in Los Angeles. The only casting calls I found were voice-overs for dish detergent and organic shampoos. In the auditions, I could never strike the balance they were looking for. You sound like you hate the product, they'd say. Or they'd say, Try it again, and remember, it's only hand soap. But I'm finding the happy medium today, that place where Eden's voice came from.

The first call of the morning is from a woman in Scottsdale. I stretch my introduction to a minute-thirty, a personal best. You do enough of these and you find the nooks and crannies of conversation, the avenues that open up with a particular phrasing or a well-timed pause. I give her the same reading I have been giving every caller these last two weeks, but she'd never know it. You come off as a confident person, I tell her, but inside, you hide your insecurities and worries. In a place where no light gets in. People think of you as brave and this makes it difficult for you to seek help when you need it. When she asks what I see in her future, I go straight to finances. I'm getting the sense that you're concerned about your financial situation, I say. That

you're struggling. And I see that clearing up very soon. I see you finding stability there. The people that call in are convinced of the exceptionality of their lives, but this script has proven to be a catch-all. There's something in my voice today, something that sells it. I've just described the human condition, but Gladys From Scottsdale is awed and relieved by my foresight. She asks for my extension, says she'll call again soon. The call lasts eighteen minutes, and I make twelve dollars for telling her what she wanted to hear.

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Loretta Lynn is on the radio, and Willie's back from disappearing. He slams a pack of Salem Ultra-Lights against his palm in the passenger seat of my pick-up. The sun is hidden behind the Wichita skyline, and the moon turns the plains blue. The highway stretches into Southern Kansas like a set of arms outstretched. Willie has disappeared three times this year, each time for three days. He goes when he gets the feeling it will be the day he dies, and comes back two days after it isn't. The doctor is the one who told his future. He gave a year, maybe two, on Willie's liver. We are on the maybe two. The transplant list is long, and Willie can't stay sober. He's resigned himself to the doctor's promise, and wants to be alone when it comes true. He is too proud to die with an audience. When he disappears, Willie takes the bus to Wichita, rents a motel room under a different name, and waits. He comes back alive, and with whiskey on his breath. He is as old as my father, and I am loving him until he dies.

Willie rolls the window down and tries to light a cigarette, but the flame won't catch. I tell him it's because he's supposed to light the cigarette first, then open the window. That he's been doing it backwards since the day I met him. From the dash, Loretta sings, *Don't come home a-drinkin, with lovin' on your mind*. Willie rolls his eyes, says he isn't in the mood for talking.

But I am. I've got questions. I want to know what motel he picked this time, and what Western he watched as he waited for a death that never came. Was it Big Country or Red River? I want to know his symptoms, if he's been coughing up blood in the middle of the night like the doctor warned. I know he will deny me this history, so instead I look at his face in the passenger moonlight, a sketch of the face I first loved. His cheeks have since sunken in and his jaw has drooped like a Rottweiler's. His skin is now taut and yellow. The expression he wears is so serious, the fifth face of Rushmore, and he has not made me laugh in a year.

I open my mouth to speak, but Willie stops me. "Don't," he says.

The headlights of the Dodge Dakota flash fluorescent on a frantic deer by the side of the road. I spotted a dead one less than a mile back, its belly peeled open like a pomegranate.

"Say it's the last time. Say, 'I will not disappear again.'"

"I will not disappear again," he says, but he's only quoting me.

It wasn't always like this, though it has been like this long enough to feel that way. I first met Willie almost two years ago after moving back from Los Angeles, where I had given up smoking and hope. I returned to Independence as the town's prodigal daughter, and the zookeeper's ex-wife, Ms. Clack, rented me the basement apartment below her house. It is in the same neighborhood where my parents once lived, but even they have had the sense to leave this town that God forgot. They've retired on Cape Cod, with money from my father's medical practice and some inheritance from my dead grandfather, who won the Texas state lottery in 1990. In the beginning, it was their money that paid my rent. A week after settling in and already unhinged by the racket of Eloise Clack's parakeets, I decided that Independence was to be a stop-

over, a six month detour at the most. I would leave in the winter, look for work in a city like Minneapolis or Boston. I thought my plan called for celebration, so I drove myself to the only bar in the one-bar town. It is, unsurprisingly, where the story of me and Willie begins.

In the story, Willie enters the bar and sits on the barstool next to mine. He orders scotch and asks for an ashtray. I nod politely at him as I nurse the third Manhattan of the evening. It's karaoke night at Garfield's. Someone ruins "Lovesick Blues." Another, "Ring of Fire." The prize is a fifty dollar credit at the bar, so I figure I'll give it a go in a drink or two. I tap the bartender's shoulder and ask for another.

"I gotta ask you something," Willie says, turning for the first time toward me. "Why a Manhattan?"

"Why not?"

"I don't know," he says. "Just seems like the kind of drink you'd want if you were going to watch Matlock. Or Bonanza." He smiles into his scotch. "Or M.A.S.H."

"What do you suggest I drink instead?" I ask. From the stage at the back of the bar, a fat cowboy sings "Friends in Low Places."

"All I'm saying is that I've never seen a girl pretty as you drinking a Manhattan."

I chug what's left of the drink, knock knees with Willie as I swivel out of the barstool.

"Now you have," I say.

I walk over to the DJ and take the last slot of the night. I can see Willie from center stage, his face framed in the neon blue light of a Corona sign. The music starts and I close my eyes, my body humming with alcohol and swaying to the steel guitar.

I sing, *Sometimes, it's hard to be a woman, giving all your love to just one man.*

Most days, I wish the story ended there, with me singing “Stand by Your Man,” and Willie wearing the biggest smile a man ever wore. I wish what happened was that I got off the stage and walked right past him, right out the door. Started the truck and headed back toward the basement, with its cold linoleum and its score of whistling tea kettles and chirping birds. Lay in bed and loved the anonymity of the man who charmed me. What happened instead is that I won the fifty dollar bar credit and spent it with Willie until last call. We drank ourselves into another dimension, and our laughter echoed against the walls of the quiet bar like screams in a canyon. I told him about the mistakes I made in Los Angeles, and he told me about his failing liver and the doctor’s prediction. It didn’t scare me like it should have. Willie rested his hand on my thigh and told me I had the prettiest voice he’d ever heard. I wondered aloud if I’d ever leave Independence. The night ended with us making love in the back of Willie’s Astro van, too drunk to drive or leave one another. It was the first time I’d felt more alive than dead in years.

If a single interesting thing has happened in the time since, I can’t remember it now. I waitressed. Willie drank. We fought occasionally, fucked often. I have loved him despite the forecast, and he has tried his best to let me. The seasons of Kansas have folded into one another like the bellows of a concertina, until we’re here, pulling into Willie’s driveway, the third disappearance over.

I walk inside and Cain, Willie’s black labrador, tunnels through my legs. Cain. I like the name for the irony—an ancestor of evil, but with a fear of mailmen and thunder and mirrors. The only time Willie will talk to me in the future tense is when it comes to Cain. I am to inherit the dog. I get Willie settled in, pour him a tall glass of water and close the blinds. He’s asleep by the

time his head hits the pillow. I turn out the lights in his bedroom, fill the dog's bowl with water from the tap, and lock myself out, leaving the key underneath the light fixture.

“Goodnight, my Willie,” I say, to the darkness of Kansas midnight.

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This morning, I got my first prank call—a set of teenage girls from Salina, using voices they got from television. One said, If you're really a psychic, tell me what color my top is! Another said, If you've really got psychic powers, what are our names? My instinct was to hang up, but I didn't. “I have a feeling you girls are calling me for another reason,” I said. My voice was calm but confident, the way I'd been practicing. “I think one of you is interested in a boy, and you want to know if he feels the same way.”

With that, they were hooked. On the other end of the line, the girls shrieked and giggled into the receiver. I imagined them sprawled across a fuzzy pink carpet, a bowl of popcorn between them and someone's parents away for the weekend, listening to Top 40 and pulling kernels out of their teeth. I talked the girls past their free time, and ended the call right before the twenty minute mark. I filled the space with predictions of real love and college acceptances, of getting the hell out of dodge. They asked where I saw each of them in ten years, so I invented destinations. One in Milan, as a high-level executive in the fashion industry. Another in Manhattan, her name in lights. I told them opportunities are unlimited for pretty girls in big cities. I told them, Run, run, run.

A string of elderly widows fill up the afternoon hours. These women clip coupons and watch Wheel of Fortune, carry tote bags that read Ask Me About My Grandkids. They are from places like Lincoln, Nebraska or Butte, Montana, cities where people live their whole lives

without once dipping a foot in the ocean. I'm not sure believability is a factor for these types of women. It is the story itself, the telling, that they call for. My job is to piece together a more fantastic future, regardless of the reality. It is scam therapy, and sad work if you think on it too much, but I've got enough to worry about that it doesn't keep me up nights.

Eden had said that the real money was in regulars, so I'm glad to see Gladys From Scottsdale's call near the end of my shift. She says that my reading last week was dead-on: she found forty dollars in an old pair of jeans brought down from the attic! She tells me she almost put them in the donation pile, but felt compelled to check the pockets. The thin hairs on my arm rise to salute the evidence of my telepathy, but before I can get too proud, Gladys From Scottsdale says she has a bomb to drop, and that she needs my help. My husband, she says. He's two hours late getting home on Thursdays and blames the traffic. She tells me she's been checking the AM radio for reports of congestion on the 10, only to hear that the highway is clear. I imagine a bowling ball tossed down each lane of Arizona's empty interstate, rolling, rolling. Gladys From Scottsdale says she would have kept her husband and his empty highways to herself if not for the miracle of the jeans. When I ask her how long this has been going on, she says it's been three years and she's close to having had enough of it. She's this close to following him from his office in Phoenix next Thursday. All she needs is a sign, someone to tell her she isn't crazy. For the first time in two weeks, the gravity of what I'm doing here hits me. I swat it away like a diner fly. I tell Gladys From Scottsdale that I didn't want to mention it during her first call, didn't want to upset her, but she's not far from the truth. I tell her she's onto something.

I tell her she isn't crazy, because it's what I want somebody to tell me.

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Willie's head rests in my lap as we watch the news on the tiny television in his den, and I run my fingers through his thinning hair. Cain yawns and stretches himself flat on the hardwood floor like an area rug. The woman from the local access station interviews the mayor about the proposed plan to make Independence a dry town, nodding wide-eyed at his response. The papers say it'll pass by the end of the year. The town will be drained of its liquor, but Willie won't be alive to see it, to hate them for it. I want to scream at the TV set, tell the mayor he's too late, but I don't.

"What do you say to the people who call?" Willie asks, bored with the mayor. It is the first question he's had about my new line of work. The job has too much to do with the future—a notion Willie doesn't entertain.

"I use a script for most of them. It's called a cold reading."

"Cold?"

"Not cold like frigid."

"Then cold like what?" he asks.

"I don't know," I tell him. "Cold like cold reading. It's just what they call it."

"Well, what do you say in your cold reading?"

I relay the advice Eden had given me: Nobody's paying four dollars a minute to hear the bad news. Keeping the customer on the line has everything to do with wish fulfillment. He asks how I know what these people wish for, and I tell him it's simple: Happiness. Stability. The promise of bright lights at the end of long, dark tunnels.

"People," he says. "Not as complicated as they'd like to think."

Sometimes I think about what Willie wishes for, or if he wishes at all. It's nothing I'd ask ever ask him. In the movies, the people who know they're dying go to Niagara Falls, or the Grand Canyon. They parasail in Malibu or picnic on the summit of Mount Osceola. They gather their families around gargantuan dining room tables, exchange remember-when's over a five-course meal, laugh and cry into glasses of red wine. Someone makes a toast, another sings a sad, sad song. There is something like beauty in this cinematic refusal to go gently, in living life to the fullest despite the impending expiration date. Willie's story would not make for one of these movies. Since the diagnosis, his life is one of disability checks cashed in for booze and overflowing ashtrays. The house reeks of half-empty take-out containers, and the pattern of the couch is imprinted on his ass like a bad tattoo. He knows every commercial jingle.

"There was this woman from Scottsdale," I say. "She wanted to know what I thought about her husband. She thinks he's cheating."

Willie tries to talk, but has a coughing fit instead. They are getting worse. He clears the phlegm from his throat and tries again. "What makes her think that?"

"He's late coming home on Thursdays. And there's no traffic."

"Uh-oh."

"She's thinking of following him home next week. Wanted my advice."

"What'd you tell her?"

"I told her to go for it. But I hope I'm wrong."

I blink away the sudden tears. Willie holds my face in his hands, thumbs my cheeks like windshield wipers. The last great American man. I want to trace him on the surface of the moon. I want the night to be lit with his name, with my love for him.

Driving home, my only thought is this—I want him to live forever.

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A week goes by, and I'm in Eloise Clack's kitchen because the phone lines are down. I didn't intend to stay for the tea she's making. All I had wanted to do was ask about the disconnected service, to see when it would be up again. I remind her that I work from home, and I need the phone. Ms. Clack's hearing is as bad as her vision, so there's no real way of knowing if she understands what I'm asking. She picks up her phone and hears the same buzz, the same hiss. She shrugs her shoulders, says it happens a few times a month. When I ask how long the phone lines are usually down for, Ms. Clack tells me a few hours at the most. The tea kettle whistles from the stove. The parakeets won't quit.

Some forty years ago, Ms. Clack was married to the town's zookeeper. The Independence Zoo is nothing special—a tiger here, a lazy lion there—and it would be just as unremarkable as the town itself if it weren't for Miss Able, the rhesus monkey that went to space. Ralph Clack had raised Miss Able since birth, and she became something of a town mascot. She could do every trick in the book, even stamp her paw as an autograph. Then NASA called in 1959. They flew the Clacks and Miss Able to Cape Canaveral, put them up in a five star hotel. They wanted to launch Miss Able, along with Miss Baker, a squirrel monkey from Miami, into space. The three times that they had tried it before, the monkeys had died from suffocation or parachute failure. The people at NASA had assured the Clacks that they would get it right this time. They said they had learned from the first three failures. The launch was in May, and the flight lasted only sixteen minutes. They lofted from Canaveral and ended up near Puerto Rico. Both monkeys lived, and the photograph taken as the capsule was opened made the cover of Life magazine.

Four days later, finishing up their stay at the fanciest hotel in Southern Florida, the Clacks woke to find Miss Able flat at the bottom of her cage. Still and silent. The autopsy came back inconclusive—her heart had stopped, and for no good reason. One of the photos from the Life spread is framed on the mantle, but Eloise has removed her ex-husband from it. It's just Miss Able, held by a disembodied hand. I stare at the photograph and wonder if it's true that your heart can stop just because of all the glory you've seen.

Eloise pours tea for the both of us, does her best small talk. She asks if I think I'll renew the lease for another year, and I tell her I'm not sure. When does she need an answer by? Ms. Clack says not to worry, there's still time. She says I'm the best tenant she's ever had, and I have to wonder if it's because I'm the first not to complain about the parakeets. The silence between us is interrupted by the telephone ringing. The lines are back up.

There's a message from Willie on the answering machine, left early this morning. The second I hear his voice, I get the feeling that today will be the day he dies. I think he's finally asked for my help, and the goddamn phone line was down. But he says he woke up feeling great, and decided to drive to see his sister in Topeka. And there it is—the proof that I've got no business telling the future. Willie promises he'll drive safe, says he'll be back in the morning. He says he's fed Cain, but wants me to check on him later tonight. I hope that a visit with his sister will do him good, maybe give him a reason to fight after all. His sister is married to a deacon, and they've had the congregation praying for Willie the whole time he's been sick.

The first call of the afternoon is from a man in Dallas who can't decide what to do about his daughter. He says that she's wasting her potential, and wants to know if I see that changing

anytime soon. My own father has raised similar concerns in the past few months. He calls from the Cape once a week, reminds me that they've got an extra room. He hates to see his little girl wither away in a podunk town. Wither is the word he uses. I have almost told my parents about Willie a dozen times, but I know I'd never hear the end of it. I'm here for a reason, I want to tell them. I'm here for my love. I instruct the man from Dallas to cut his daughter a break. I tell him she's going to come around to realize her own potential, and she'll do right by him. Just give her some time. When he asks for some sort of timeline, I tell the man from Dallas that isn't how it works. Find the patience, I say. Give her your support. She loves you more than you know. The call is over before the free time is up, and it's just as well. I haven't told him anything worth paying for.

It's seven o'clock on the dot when Gladys From Scottsdale's number shows up on the caller ID. There is no part of me that wants to answer, no part that wants to hear the verdict. What will it mean if I'm right? If I'm wrong? What have I gotten her into? I pick up the phone. Nora, she says. Nora, Nora, Nora—you were right. She is crying, and I can hear the honking of cars on the highway in the background. I feel dizzy, and my mouth goes dry. I lie down and press my face to the cold linoleum, wipe the tears from my own eyes. Tell me everything, I say. It's a few minutes before Gladys From Scottsdale can put together coherent sentences. She says she drove into Phoenix in the afternoon, parked in the lot opposite her husband's office. I wore a big hat and sunglasses, she says. Can you believe that? She goes on to say that she tailed her husband to a bar in Apache Junction. A woman was waiting for him, a woman in a sundress and five-inch heels. Gladys From Scottsdale tells me she pulled the car around back, got a table with a view of

her husband's. I needed to see it for myself, she says. I needed to see them touch. And they did, she says. Her husband held the woman's hands in his on top of the table, leaned across to kiss her lips. They ordered beers and shared an appetizer. Gladys From Scottsdale tells me her husband checked his watch only once, while the woman was in the bathroom. She says she was half-tempted to follow the mystery woman into the ladies room, to raise hell and knock her off her heels, but instead left a twenty dollar bill on her table and walked to her car. Now she's driving, without any specific destination. Just driving until she's lost.

"I just thought I'd call and let you know," she says. "You were right. You were so right."

"I didn't want to be," I say. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," she says. "Learn from me. Let me tell you one thing about men, Nora — they're never where they say they are. But then you know that."

I hang up and call Martha May, Willie's sister in Topeka. As it rings, I can feel my heartbeat in the base of my neck, thumping like a kick drum. When she answers, she can already hear the panic in my voice. And when she says it, when she says, What's wrong? Is something wrong with Willie?, it's as if I can tell the future for the very first time.

Here's what will happen. I'll break every speed limit in Willie's name. I'll run every red light, roll through every four-way stop. I'll slam on the brakes, turn into his empty driveway. I won't even pull the keys from the ignition. I'll throw open Willie's front door. The TV will still be on, and Cain will be pacing nervously around the den. I'll look to the sink—blood and vomit clogging up the drain. A thin film of red across the countertop, and a note that reads, *My Nora—I love you, and I hope you're wrong about Scottsdale.*

I'll grab Cain by the collar, lead him out the door and into the pick-up. He'll sit in the passenger seat and stick his head out the window. I'll turn on the radio and hold the steering wheel in my shaking hands. And I'll go to Wichita. I'll go to every last motel they got.