

CALIFORNIA THE WALTZ THE MUSTACHE RACE
 SEX AND THE SICKBED TRICYCLE PRIME-TIME YOU BACKLASH
 THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX BUT STAY INSIDE THE GRID
 FINDING THE BEAT YOU SHALL GO OUT WITH JOY AND BE
 LED FORTH WITH PEACE **THE IDIOT'S GUIDE TO YOUR PALM**
 SHEER DOMINANCE LIVE NUDE GIRL AN EVENING IN APRIL
 CLICHÉ RAPE STORY ROCK MY NETWORK GOODBYE TO ALL THAT
 ALL THE RIGHT ANSWERS WHY I HAD TO LEAVE IN-BETWEEN PLACES
 A RED SPOON FOR THE NAMELESS MY LITTLE COMMA FIGHT ME
 THE SECRET LIVES OF MY PARENTS MY ROARING TWENTIES
 IN, FROM THE OUTSIDE THE MYSTERIES OF LIFE . . . REVEALED!
 SO YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION WORKING AT WENDY'S
 JESS LACHER MARY BETH ELLIS BRONSON LEMER JENNIFER GLASER
 RACHEL KEMPF JOHN FISCHER SHAHNAZ HABIB EMMA BLACK
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I was walking along the shoulder of a quiet road in Michigan when a sign promising PALM READINGS caught my eye. The sign, aglow in neon red, sat in the window of a humble white house. Open for business, it tempted.

People who make a living by predicting the lives of strangers have always spoken to my irreverence. Raised Catholic, I was taught to seek counsel in old men wearing white collars. No matter my sins, they prescribed three ourfathers, two hailmarys, and a glorybe. The jewelry-draped psychic was, I imagined, the deliberate opposite of a priest. A palm reader could wear purple eye shadow, smoke cigarettes, and charge cash. If her clientele were dull on a given afternoon, she could entertain herself with more lurid prophecies: lottery tickets bought on birthdays, dark strangers in Paris, breast lumps. I wanted to meet one of these people and hunker down by the crystal ball. "Take your best shot," I'd say with a wink.

Some other time. It was eight P.M. already, I reminded myself. I still had a mile to walk before reaching my hotel. But before I could even get to the edge of the palm reader's yard, my feet stopped, reconsidering my flimsy excuses.

Why not?

My day's work was complete, and no one was waiting back in the hotel room. I didn't know a soul in Ann Arbor, or all of Michigan, for that matter. I turned back toward the house, not quite decisively, and approached the porch. Soon I was on the porch, my hand reaching for the door.

Knock, knock.

"Who's there?"

"Sorry."

"Sorry who?"

"Sorry-just-wondering-about-the-palm-readings?"

"MOM! LADY HERE FOR YOU! C'mon in."

"Wow, what a . . . *purple* room."

"You can sit. My mom's getting outta the shower."

I sat in the purple room with a quiet boy and thought about all of the things a quiet boy might wish his mom did instead of palm reading: filing medical records, driving buses, painting toenails? Anything, really, that didn't involve opening the front door to wide-eyed strangers.

When his mother came out, towel-drying her hair, she smiled warmly. Her eyes held mine while she uttered a generic welcome. I repeated that I was just there to inquire about the price of a palm reading. She told me to come inside her office.

The office was a freshly painted white room, the perfect size for two strangers sitting face-to-face. She sat down at a desk with tidy piles of books on it. Arranged on the bookshelves behind her were small pastel-colored stones, spaced out liberally, as if each had demanded personal space.

The palm reader was petite and attractive. Her skin was what dated her beyond thirty; shallow wrinkles fanned from the far corners of her eyes, and faded pockmarks covered both cheeks. Her hair was dark blond and hung in wet clumps on her shoulders. She wore faded jeans and a classic gray V-neck shirt. No makeup. No mess of bracelets slid from wrist to elbow, elbow to wrist.

"Twenty-five for palms," she said, and then rattled off a list of higher prices for services involving cards, baths, and crystals.

"Twenty-five . . ." I mulled the price over, then thought about how awkward it would be to turn back now.

A thin white cat slunk into the room, nudging the door partway open. The palm reader cooed at the cat, seeming pleased by the company.

"How old are you?" she asked, making small talk.

"Twenty . . ." Since leaving behind college and all its tidy calendar divisions, I'd had to think harder about my age. "Three." Last year's number kept arriving on my tongue first.

"Young," she judged, widening her eyes slightly. "How did you find me?"

"Oh, I was just walking back to my hotel."

"You're visiting?" She looked doubly curious. "What do you do?"

The answer was too long. I was in Michigan to give a talk to university students about "postcollege adventures" (i.e., any first job not involving a cubicle, photocopying duties, a boss named Stan). I had become some kind of overnight authority on the matter when I published a book called *Delaying the Real World*. The publishing company seemed most keen on my age, not to mention the fact that I was newly back from living abroad and not yet employed by The Man. I volunteered to set aside my job search for a few months to play poster child and promote the book. Michigan was one of the last stops on the publicity tour. For months I'd been spouting the carpe-diem spiel and could now field questions in my sleep. All except one. *The* question that tied up every Q&A:

What do YOU do for a living?

"I'm a writer."

"Books?" The palm reader looked hopeful.

"Yeah . . . one."

From the change in her face, I could tell that this detail impressed her more than it should. She saw some young Danielle Steel, love affairs

with men in tuxedos and stiff Ken-doll hair. Meanwhile, I was still tabulating the contents of my wallet, hoping the grand total cleared twenty-five. The honest answer to the question of what I *did* was simple: nothing yet. The book about delaying the real world had done just that.

“You’re a pretty girl,” the palm reader commented, keeping a firm gaze on me.

“Thank you,” I replied, startled by the flattery. Still, I couldn’t help considering how I might appear in the palm reader’s office. I was wearing a long embroidered black jacket that belied its sale-rack origin and suggested a hipper brand. Around my neck was a red speckled scarf, and dangling over it were long fake-gold earrings that I always wore for publicity events. The subtle wind-chiming below my earlobes lent me confidence that I had reason to hold a microphone and advise total strangers. Beneath my coat, blue jeans tempered the costume, promising I was somewhat laid-back. See, kids? Take it from me: The cubicle can wait for an adventure or two!

The palm reader leaned her chest against the rim of her tall desk, where her hands were clasped in a fist. If we chatted any longer, she’d gather the equivalent of a Google search on me. I could sense her probing, plotting.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll do palms.”

She looked unsurprised, nodding once.

The *door* was open. This was a problem. I was about to have my *life* forecasted, and the door was hanging wide open. I thought of the quiet son in the next room, watching television. Would other quiet family members come home? Put the TV on mute? Snicker?

Mortified to show that I cared this much, I got up out of my chair and reached over to close the door. It took one long second. I sat back down, feeling the color in my cheeks, hoping it would pass.

“Give me your palms.”

I offered my open hands across the desk.

The palm reader began by using a smooth scalpel to trace the longest creases. The scalpel’s metal felt cool and piercing on my skin.

I looked around. The cat must have been underneath my chair; I didn't see it anywhere.

"You'll live a long life," the palm reader began, raising her voice so noticeably that I almost laughed.

Predictable, I thought. Though I didn't disagree. I'd always been able to picture myself as a wrinkly old woman.

The palm reader pulled apart my skin with her thumb, as if she might find something other than sweat.

"You are more of a giver than a taker," she announced. "Some people take more than they give. They *take, take, take*." She impersonated greed with a snarl and pawing at the air. "But you're the opposite."

I stared at her, not moving. Worse than untrue, this statement was formerly true. Only lately had I felt self-engrossed. It was one of the odd, unintentional trends of my early twenties—like growing fond of the early morning and binge-drinking less. I couldn't say why, but I felt myself molting generosity by the fistful.

"I can sense this about you. An outward current." She sent one arm floating away from her body, her fingers in a fan.

Listening to the palm reader's airbrushed version of me, it was impossible not to wish I bore a closer resemblance.

"You live for God," the palm reader continued, seeming pleased to bear me the good news. "Material things are not your focus, because God is."

Even worse! A holy misreading. I'd been on deliberate hiatus from all things religious for years, calling myself a "recovering Catholic." I hadn't gotten around to finding a substitute for my past faith. Idealism had filled in for a while, then waned, along with my zeal for moving overseas, living out of a backpack, volunteering. Nowadays, self-conviction was my main religion. Bouts of guilt hit only occasionally, like now.

"What I feeceel is that you're a spiritual being. Deeply spiritual."

The palm reader then paused, inviting commentary on how God and I got along. I stared back with glassy eyes, saying nothing.

She proceeded. When she spoke, she cocked her head to the right

and scrunched her brow as if something were hurting her right above and between the eyes. She made grammatical slips every so often, and it took me a while to figure out that she had a slight Eastern European accent.

“You keep very busy.” She was shifting to new territory. “You have gotten very good at filling up your days.”

Aha. I smiled slightly. The busy trait was more mine than freckles. There were few minutes of the day you could catch me not moving. Even when pinned at a desk, one of my legs was bouncing below. Sometimes both.

“Lately, this is all you do. Work.”

I thought of the hefty stack of papers I’d stuffed into my suitcase to read through during my trip to Michigan. After a full month of working long hours on publicity, I’d convinced my publishing company to sponsor a \$2,500 contest. It was open to all twentysomethings who wanted to flee their cubicles for a “gutsy and worthwhile adventure.” The company had set up a website and called for entries. Every five minutes, another application blipped in from cyberspace, appealing for money to bike Thailand, to film Belize, to roam Rome. I’d start reading all thirteen hundred of them tomorrow to find a single winner.

“You look for ways to give yourself more work. To stay busy,” she continued.

I looked at the palm reader coyly, as if she had just chanced upon my hidden talent. I had a tic. This activity tic—unlike generosity or any other soft patch of my spirit—was something I’d never turn off. I couldn’t. Not without large doses of alcohol or a severe cold.

But the palm reader was not charmed.

“And why do you work? Because you don’t know what else to do in life.”

Her brow was scrunched; her head cocked right. She found this pitiable.

“You don’t know what to pull yourself away *for*.”

For?

“You *tire* yourself out this way. Look how tired you are!”

A new reflection overtook my mental mirror. This face was blanched with fatigue, dominated by gray eye rings. *Tired*. I wanted to curl up in the palm reader's lap for a nap.

Stepping into this woman's office, I hadn't worried about self-composure. I presumed that a palm reader could strike a fault line only if there was a fault line to strike. I had no recently deceased relative to channel, no mental demon to exorcize. I was vaguely unhappy, sure, but I figured that was part of young adulthood. The phase during which all expectation yields some disappointment.

But my palm reader wasn't having it.

"I look at your spirit and see no others surrounding it."

Why would I be in Michigan, alone, with her, if all was swell?

"There are friends you've grown apart from. Good friends. Was there an argument?"

We'd hopped from half-truths, to total bull, to nearer-truths, to things my own mother would say about me, verbatim. It was this cadence, more than anything, that was undoing me.

"You've done *something* to push people out. To keep them away from your life."

No one but a palm reader can say these things to you. Family members and close friends might dissect you among themselves, trading the scalpel, but not while you're sitting in the room with naked, red-rimmed ears.

"You've made yourself very alone."

A palm reader on the side of the road in Michigan is distinct for two reasons. One: She'll never see you again. Two: You're the one who knocked on the door, asking for a blind, cold read.

Why am I hearing the letter M?"

I stared at her blankly and shook my head.

"How about a D. Whose name starts with D?"

No D. I shook my head.

The palm reader was having an unlucky spell. Before trying the letters M and D, she had misfired with the state of Florida, followed by

California. Feeling stubborn, I wasn't about to lend a hand. My cheeks were still cooling back down to a room-temperature pink.

"I sense a problem with your father. What's going on with your father?"

"Nothing, actually." Pops and I got along great.

There's probably some mnemonic device all palm readers use to touch on the big life topics in a sentimental crescendo (**Linda Gave Polly Crackers For Talking: Lifespan God Personality Childhood Family Tragedy**). I could trace her methodology; she followed my flushes of reaction and abandoned all duds as soon as they fell.

"You lost a man you loved, didn't you?"

Oh no.

"Recently. You lost a man you love recently."

Linda Gave Polly Crackers For Talking LOUDLY. Love. Of course.

I had completely forgotten about Chris. Forgetting had been the intention, actually, after we broke up on January 1. I took our expiration date literally, like a New Year's resolution—to move on, with all of the closure and resolve that had been missing in the previous two years. I was ready to end the weepy drama and get back to work.

"You were with this man for three years . . ." the palm reader tested.

"Yeah. I guess it was like two and a half?"

She nodded as if this precision had been hers all along. The question mark was my doing.

"You broke up with him . . ."

I winced as if the palm reader were holding a sullen mug shot of Christopher H. Heaney across the desk.

"You didn't want to be with him because you wanted to work. You thought this man would hold you back. Just because he didn't have your, your—*drive*, you walked away from him."

It's one thing to tell a woman she works too hard. That she's tired. That she *looks* tired. All these things pinch. But tell a woman she has chosen work over love, and her blood will go cold with self-doubt.

“And this man loved you very deeply.”

Of course he did. Of course I did. But how had we flipped straight to the ofcourses when she was just fishing for Florida and bullshitting about my dad. *How*, in all unlikelihood, could she pin me here, walking away from a good man, when it could have been *him*, *his* workaholicism, or *his* infidelity, jealousy, a screaming spat heard for miles around? No. She'd heard the tic again. My curse: to do one more thing, to stay at the computer, to prefer my own company. What the palm reader said was everything I'd always known—loosely, in worry form—about the future. I would end up alone, a hermit with an unused womb and millions of words on floppy disks and hard drives and to-do lists in garbage cans, crossed off . . .

“Listen.” The palm reader's affected tone broke off. “I'm not trying to upset you.”

What?

I'm not trying to upset you?

This fit least of all. There had been a pretense between us: drama. The space to discount; the space to half believe. Now the palm reader was calling a time-out. Why? Because she *felt sorry for me*.

“I'm just trying to tell you that there's something gone wrong in your spirit that you gotta fix. You're sick with something. And I can't fix it for you.”

The palm reader looked fatigued by my case.

I, as a walk-in client, was fatiguing.

“I *can* tell you that you'll get what you're aspiring to get.” The palm reader uttered this prophecy as if its doom were self-evident. She pitied me still. “You'll have your success. Just know you'll pay the heaviest price.”

Then, with her head still cocked to the side and her brow fully pinched in concern, she concluded, “But I think you know this already.”

With that, she let my hands go.

I reached for my wallet—relieved to find both a twenty and a five—and I paid.

The palm reader handed me a white business card with an electric red compass logo. The red logo was tactile, lifting off the card stock, inviting a thumb's stroke.

Readings by Jacey. Helps Love, Marriage, and Business.

I walked back to my hotel along the bland American strip, where the sky had gone ahead and darkened. I flipped through my cell-phone index for a semi-appropriate person to call. Of course, there was no such person. What would I say?

Back in my hotel room, I took a hot bath, sitting in the scalding water until I could see a clear line on my skin, mid-drift, above and below the waterline. White skin, pink skin. And then: white skin, scarlet skin. I wondered if other people's skins changed like this, so distinctly, in bathtubs. And how deep the change could go.

In the months that followed, I tried to do many things differently. I tried morning bike rides. Greener groceries. Self-authored prayers. Slower eating. Concerted acts of kindness. Cloud appreciation. A second go with Chris. Tolstoy. CALL MOM written on my hand. Books with pink covers. A third go with Chris. Walks. Church from the very last pew.

In the tradition of resolutions, they all faded. The only lasting change was "what I do." I dropped out of the publicity sprint not long after selecting our champion "delayer of the real world." She had huge brown eyes, enough idealism to infect a small village, and came from Ann Arbor, of all places. With her winnings, she flew off to Ecuador to work with coffee farmers, and I was relieved, on many levels, to pass the baton. Afterward, I went back to the blank page to write again, beginning "along the shoulder of a quiet road in Michigan," where I'd been shaken enough to feel real.

I still have the palm reader's business card in my wallet. I never resolved to keep it; I just keep not throwing it away. Crammed between plastic credit and photo identification, the card reminds me that once, while walking down a nameless road, I looked for an excuse to change.