

ADVICE

Harney was nervous. Looking side to side, over his shoulder, up, down, back and forth. Third time down by the docks and it was worse than the first two. Dark. A sliver of moon, but mostly hidden by clouds and some fog. Wet.

The damp soaked through, all the way down to his skin. Into it. Through his red sweater (from that trip to Newport), through his wool shirt (from the outlets), through his tee (Go Panthers!). It wasn't that cold, but he shivered. And the smell.

He walked past the dank mouth of an alley, a thin scar between two run-down multi-families (if anyone had ever been brave enough to live there with a family). He risked a quick glance to his right (What if he had seen something? What would you do anyway, Harney?) Nothing there, but Oh! The reek! It might have been some decaying fish guts from one of the boats, some homeless vagrant's toilet, or the odor of malingering guilt, but it oozed from the crevice. He put his head down, and quickened his pace a step to get by.

Why had she chosen a spot here in The Port of all locations? Why not some strip mall out by the interstate? Tara's Tarot. Palms Read. Fortunes Told. Predict a few things for a lonely housewife or an anguished teenager (with a fat wallet from Mom and Dad). She could have made a bundle.

But not really. It wouldn't have been authentic. You want real. You want mysterious. Come down by the sea. Come find the dark, the fetid, the underbelly of the city at night.

At night! She wouldn't even meet him in the daytime. Said it hurt her ability. Had to be black. And not just any time at night. First time, 10:00. Second time, 11. This time, midnight. Of course. Midnight. Couldn't be anything except midnight.

But then again, hadn't he found the courage to come down here twice already. He'd survived. Hadn't been attacked. Hadn't been mugged. No one had been hurt. Well - that wasn't exactly true was it?

Of course, he'd been smart about it. Only carried her \$75 fee that she wanted. Not \$25 a visit. No, \$75 for three visits. He'd carried that in his socks - \$40 in the left and \$35 in the right

(Unbalanced he thought. Better be careful. Might make me lean to one side. Ha Ha.)

Probably would have been more at the mall, but then again, you wanted authentic. This neighborhood was part of the price, he supposed. You want the best, Harney? You got to pay for it. Not just in money. Got to walk through a scummy hell hole or two.

He heard a scratching in the doorway of the big brick warehouse that he was passing, and he jumped. Just a rat, and a small one, but my, they were ugly. Hairs on its long nose twitching. Disappeared.

It was classic. You had to jump at a rat in the dark down by the docks. Had to.

It reminded him of that time he'd heard the coyote. One of the benefits of living out in the sticks a little. Wildlife. He'd been in the garage, putting the trash together to get it out by the curb for Thursday morning pickup. He'd heard the howl, shot across the front of the Honda and dove for the garage door opener (or garage door closer, Ha Ha). Stood shaking against the wall as the three panels slowly dropped.

Not really scary, after all. Not after. But sometimes the body just reacts. How Harriet had laughed at him for that.

"Big brave Harney. Turned to a quivering lump by a little dog."

Scorn. Condescension. Contempt. All Harriet.

But it wasn't a dog. It was a coyote. And those things could kill. Well...a cat maybe, but still, it could take a life. Or maybe scratch at you or bite you and give you rabies.

She'd been partially right of course. Hadn't been that brave. Just reacted. Coyote howls. You lunge for the garage door opener. Rat skritch out from a doorway, you jump.

He saw a musty brown bottle blocking his path and weaved around it. First trip he hadn't. No. First time, he was the boss. Had kicked the sucker. Mistake. Some liquid, presumably beer, had soaked one sock, \$35, and the bottom cuff of a trouser leg, and then spun tinkling into the gutter. Then he'd smelled it. Definitely beer. Old beer, but beer.

He couldn't figure that one out. Guy comes down to The Port. Drinks too much. You'd think he'd want every last drop. Based

on the drunks he'd seen hanging by the parking lot, or back at the corner of Maple, they'd had every last drop. Nope. Had to leave a little something to ruin somebody's pants.

Ruined pants. That reminded him of Harriet again.

Big dinner for the firm. Every woman in a long gown, and every man in black tie, except for Harney. How they'd argued about that one. Which was really how he'd ended up down here in the first place.

Harriet had gone out and bought a \$600 gown. For one damn night! That's \$150 an hour for Chrissake. Had to admit she'd looked stunning in it. But there was no way that he was going to shell out a couple of hundred bucks for a tux when she'd blown three times that on a dress that would sit in a closet for the next ten years.

So he'd grabbed the darkest suit that he had, a little frayed at the cuffs, but not bad (and not soaked in stale beer). Had put an almost white shirt with it (antique white is white, isn't it?). Dug out his departed Dad's old cufflinks, and found a sharp-looking tie. He'd spent \$30 on that. That's something. But

he could wear it again. Every other week for three months and you're down to \$5 a time. A lot better than \$150 an hour!

He was standing, admiring himself in the mirror, and here came Harriet. Harriet the Harridan. Harriet the Horrible. Harriet the Hater. "You are not wearing that piece of trash. You will make me look just awful, like I don't know how to dress my husband." As if he couldn't dress himself.

They'd arrived an hour late after yelling and screaming (now the gown was up to \$200 an hour!). In the end she'd relented - said if he looked bad she'd look better - but he'd known from her eyes how much resentment there'd been under the surface.

It didn't linger buried for long. She'd complained about how dirty his car was. "Harney, I could ruin my gown brushing against it." He'd had to drape a blanket over the door while she got in.

"Harney, this thing's a pigsty." He threw out a diet Coke bottle and an empty M&Ms bag, and tossed his books in the back.

Finally, at the party, not even at their table yet, and she's pulling him to the side.

"Harney, you sat in something and it looks like you messed your pants." Sure enough, into the men's room, and there are M&Ms melted right into the seam (Melt in your darkest suit, not in your hands, Ha Ha). He got some paper towels, wet them in the sink, was cleaning up as best he could, and in walks Dan Doyle from Sales. Took a look at Harney, laughed, used the urinal, laughed again, and walked out without washing his hands (without washing his hands!). Harney could still hear him through the door as he walked down the hall, chuckling.

When Harney came out, Harriet was fuming. "We're not even inside and you've already embarrassed me! Turn around." He did. "You've got a big wet spot. Get back in there and take care of it."

So - fifteen more minutes, twisted out of shape in front of the hand dryer. Back out into the hallway again. No Harriet.

He found his way to the reception table, now empty except for his place card, and those of Mr. and Mrs. John Futterlieb (I wonder what kept them? Nestle's chocolate bar problems? Reese's Pieces meltdown? Ha Ha). He turned it over, found he was at Table 13 (of course), and opened the door to the ballroom.

Found himself at the front of the room near the stage, closed the door as every head seemed to turn to look at him, made his way to the back door, pried it open, peeked in, and snuck to the back where the A/V guys stood. Surveyed the room, finally finding Harriet and Table 13, snaked his way between arms and legs and chairs butted together, and arrived to find Harriet seated between Doyle and his wife Susan (never "Sue," and also in a \$600 gown, maybe \$800). Harney had to sit opposite, in a chair that didn't even face the stage, with no one to talk to as everyone else was already engaged in conversation of their own, including Harriet, who seemed to be cackling at every other word from Dan.

He'd missed the salad and the stuffed chicken breast, but made it in time for a lop-sided piece of cheesecake with a little "M" (also tilted) spelled out in raspberry syrup on its top. Sat and ate, dragged through an awards ceremony chaired by Fred, Dan's boss, who droned on about "Most Revenue, Atlantic Coast Region," and "Best Helping Hand in the Home Office." Finally, it ended. The lights dropped, a band with hair and style left over from the 80s opened with some number that he kind of recognized but couldn't remember the name to, and he yawned. Harriet shot him the evil eye, and got up to dance with Dan as Susan (never Sue)

moved to Table 12 to chat up a friend. Dan's arm draped around Harriet's bare shoulder, and he tossed Harney a wink as they walked away.

That's when Harney knew - knew - that he had to do something. And within five minutes, he'd figured it out.

Went back out into the hall where he could hear himself, once more navigating through arms and legs (though this time they were limbs fueled by frenzied 80s nostalgia), and found himself staring at the bulletin board by the coatroom.

He saw it. A single card. Black, with silver lettering. A little tattered, with a message on it that seemed written expressly for him.

"Unhappy?" Uncertain about your future? Readings. Advice. Call Tara. Appointment Only. 12B Harbor Lane." And a number underneath.

So he had. Called her maybe twenty times that week. No receptionist. No answering machine. Just rang and rang. But he kept trying.

Finally, Friday night, the office had cleared out, he'd dialed, and someone had picked up.

Smoky voice. Slight European accent, but not much.

"Yes?"

Not "Madam Tara speaking. How may I help you?" Not "Hello." Just "Yes?"

Only that wasn't right. Not "Yes?" like a question. Not "Yes?" as in "What do you want?"

More like "Yes." Like "Yes, you've finally reached someone who can help you if you let me. Yes. I know what you need. Yes. I can help. Yes you can talk to me about it. Yes I have the answers. Yes."

"Hello?" Tentative from Harney.

Again "Yes."

"Uh...Tara?"

"Madame Tara. Yes."

"Umm...You give advice?"

"Yes."

"Well, I need some, I guess."

A pause.

"You see, I've got this situation with my wife."

"Stop!"

"What?"

"You have my card." A little "k" before "have," and again, not a question. A statement.

"You khav my khard."

"Yes?" Harney's was a question.

"It says 'Appointment Only.'"

"Yes?"

"Then you will come by tomorrow night at 10:00. Bring \$75. Good night."

And Harney had sat there staring at the phone, had hung it up and gone home, wondering what had happened. But it turned out not to be that difficult.

"Harney! I'm going out with the girls, tomorrow" Harriet had screeched at dinner that night. Perfect. Easy. Everything fit.

So on Saturday, half past nine (better to be early), there he was. Had wheeled out the Honda, taken it over to The Port, and found an old gravel lot where some Indian guy waved him down for \$8 even though he was the only car in sight. He'd made his way across town, half-fearing for his life, half in a daze, until he'd kicked a bottle and doused his pants leg.

He'd shaken it a couple of times, and kept on ahead. Had checked his watch. Twenty minutes to go. Had wondered if it would dry by the time he got there. And that brought him back to tonight. Wouldn't have dried tonight. Not with this fog. Not enough

time. Twenty minutes or twenty days. Nothing would dry in it. It wasn't thick to look at. No visible signs but a few crawling tendrils that wound their way in - through clothes, skin, organs, psyche. Like Harriet's comments. She didn't always come straight at you. Not always in your face. But she worked her way in, incessantly, unceasingly. In deep, and there was no way to shrug it off. Some things never dry, and some stinks you can't get rid of.

But that night had been clearer. By the time he'd reached 12B Harbor, his cuffs were mostly dry (he did seem to have a recurring problem with liquids and his pants, but they always seemed to dry, Ha Ha). Lower level, down some old stone steps, with deep bowls in their centers, as if pilgrims had walked up and down them by the thousands for centuries. Nondescript façade. No sign. No name plate. Just "12B" on the door, with an old silver knocker with a little moon and a star on it.

He waited a second. Breathed. Knocked twice. Silence.

Checked his watch again. Five minutes early. Waited. Knocked again. Was ready to knock a third time when he heard shuffling inside. A bolt sliding. The door opened a crack.

"Come in."

She was younger than he had thought. Or ageless maybe. Hair like coal, in ebon ringlets (he didn't know why he thought "ebon" but that's what it was). Black as a starling. A night with no moon. The fur on Lucifer's cat. The bottom of an endless hole.

Eyes to match. Deep, intense, penetrating.

"Come in," she repeated. Harney did.

She'd steered him into a front sitting room, tatted lace and a couple of old cushion chairs made of mahogany or teak or wormwood or something.

"Sit." Harney sat.

No crystal ball. No table. No tarot deck.

"Now. Tell me."

He talked. Told her everything. How he'd fallen into love, and how he'd fallen out. About anger, resentment, jealousy,

indifference, mistreatment, disgust, boredom, exhaustion,
resignation.

She listened. Didn't speak as Harney told his tale. Didn't have
to. She'd known it anyway.

"Stop!"

Again. It was time.

"Here is what you must do."

Harney waited.

"If you have pain that is bothering you, and the pain will not
stop, and the pain can not stop, and you want the pain to stop,
then there is only one solution. You must remove yourself from
the cause of the pain."

Harney knew. He knew what he must do.

A few nights later on a Wednesday (trash night - got to put the
trash out - Ha Ha!) he'd headed home from work, loosened one of
the stone masonry bricks out of the front stoop, and called

Harriet outside. Had left a half-empty Hefty bag on the lawn by the lamp post. One look and she'd started turning bright red, stomped toward the bag, and stood stewing over it.

Harney crept out from the alcove where he'd been hiding, lifted the masonry stone, and brained her a good one as she'd started to turn around toward him.

Had positioned the body and the stone to look like she'd slipped and hit her head. Even took off one of her shoes, scuffed it, and left it near her. Cleaned up the trash, put it out, went to bed.

Woke up in the morning. Called 9-1-1. Police came. Took a statement. Harney had gone to bed early (easy to believe), hadn't realized until he'd been brushing his teeth the next morning that Harriet wasn't there, went to look for her car in the driveway, and found her sprawled across the sidewalk.

He'd been devastated. Cried. Gave a convincing performance. Not that it needed much. Who'd have believed that Harney could have stood up to his wife, never mind killed her. No. Just more bad luck for a guy whose life was filled with it.

Had put on a brave face at the services, though hadn't really needed to. Most of the visitors that showed up were from Harriet's side of the family. A few came from the firm, including Dan and Susan. But everybody more or less ignored him. Just a quick "Sorry" under their breath as they looked at the casket or at Harney's shoes, and then they were out as quickly as possible, though they did seem to gather outside the home laughing.

Very small group at the cemetery in the rain, and then it was done. Problem solved. Pain removed. Ha Ha.

Only it wasn't.

It took three days before she came back. He was opening the refrigerator door to grab a leftover bowl of oatmeal and some milk to put on it after he'd heated it up in the mike, closed it, and there she was. Wearing her \$600 ball gown, a scowl as unpleasant as any he'd ever seen, and a matted bloody dent on her left temple.

And just like that, she'd started in. "You don't even have the guts to kill someone to their face. Had to sneak up behind me.

And look at the mess you've made of my hair. I'll never get this blood out. And you ruined the front stairs."

"Oh, and what kind of a wake and funeral service was that? You should have held it at Feeney's, not at Madison's. You put me in the wrong dress, you ordered the wrong flowers, you forgot my cousin Edna. "

"As if that wasn't enough, what kind of person plays an acoustic version of Santana's *Black Magic Woman* at a funeral? A simple, tasteful *Ave Maria* would have been nice. Maybe *Without You*, or some Mozart."

"Oh. Oh. I forgot the *piece de resistance*! Pigs in a blanket at the reception lunch. Pigs in a blanket! At least hardly anyone was there. Even dead, you tried to embarrass me."

That first time the nagging had been easy compared to what came after. She wasn't there all the time. You'd think that would make it better, but it made it worse. She had a habit of popping up at odd times. You thought you'd gotten rid of her, that she'd gone away to wherever ghosts go. Then - walk around the corner at work, and "I can't believe that you're wearing that shirt with those pants. No wonder they won't promote you."

Or driving home. "This car is still a pigsty. You've got insurance money. Pay somebody to clean it up, will you."

Or sitting at dinner. "Two frozen pizzas? No wonder you're gut's hanging out over your belt."

He had run out of the house, grabbed for his car keys, and watched a black piece of cardboard float to the ground along with a couple of crumpled bills and an appointment card for the dentist. Turned it over. Tara's card.

Ahh. She'd gotten him into this mess. Had given him the courage to kill (even if a small animal. Ha Ha.). She could get him out.

This time, only one call. One ring.

"Yes. Tonight. 11"

So, he'd done it again. Paid the Indian guy \$8, skirted beer bottles, shivered in the fog, and found his way back to 12B.

Sat in the old chair. Told the story. Waited.

"Stop!"

"You did not listen. I say you must remove yourself from the cause of the pain. I did not say to remove the pain. I mean for you to leave your wife, not to kill her. I do not tell people to kill another."

"Oh."

Silence.

"What do I do now?"

"No different. You must remove yourself from the cause of the pain. Go away. Forever."

And so he had.

He'd gotten home, had drunk a whole bottle of Cutty Sark (not like Harney at all), and taken a package and a half of sleeping pills. And died. It was finally over.

Wrong again.

He'd stood there by the side of the bed, looking at his own corpse, and he heard her.

"You don't even leave a good-looking body. Look at that. Your pizza belly's hanging out from under your tee shirt." (Go Panthers!) "You still have your socks on in bed. You left the cap off the whiskey bottle and it's going to leave a stain on the nightstand."

He'd put his hands to his ears. Had closed his eyes. It hadn't worked. She just lit into him for it.

"Poor little Harney, want to run away and hide?"

So here he was again. Had walked, or glided, or whatever the dead do to move from one place to another since they can't drive in their pigsty of a car (saved \$8 by not having to park though, Ha Ha). Stood now outside Tara's door (Madam Tara's door), staring at a little silver moon and stars.

Didn't even have to knock. The door creased open and she beckoned him inside.

"Sit. Tell me."

He did.

"Once more, you did not listen. I mean for you to leave this town. Go somewhere far away. Ghosts stay near where they die. I don't know why, but they can't travel far. You could have escaped her forever."

"Oh."

Harney hung his head.

"So, what do I do now? How do I get away from her?"

Silence.

Again. "How?"

"Your card says 'Advice.' Tell me. Advise me."

She waited for what seemed like forever. Stared at him. Shook her head.

Harney pleaded. "How?"

"Stop!" And she shook her head again.

And he understood. Understood completely that he could do nothing.

Harney wept.