

The Florist

It was in the Summer of 2019 that I began offering “psychic services” for payments in cash out of a newly constructed condominium complex in West Cambridge, Massachusetts. My unit had a ground-level door that faced a park, in back of the building, rather than facing the street. This meant that clients could come in and out without drawing too much attention to themselves, making my unlicensed business difficult to police. I didn’t bother applying for a business license.

I’m not a psychic. Interpreted generously, the services I offered amounted to little more than a sympathetic ear. Better to think of me as a cut-rate shrink, but one who doesn’t have to kowtow the pharmaceutical industry for repeat business. And, despite my lacking a prescription pad, there was no shortage of sporting clientele. Soon, it was late autumn in the Boston metro – lots of drinking and thinning light through newly exposed branches, the latter causing the former at a downward trajectory. At the dying season, I felt compelled to tell people what they needed to hear.

Yes, your mother is a bitch

No, you shouldn’t get out of the market in 2020

This sounding-board quality to my work mitigated any moral qualms I might have had at the outset. It also made the mechanics of the job decidedly less than supernatural. Yet I had skills. Specifically, I’m good with people and can maintain a straight face, although I never took to poker. That’s about all you need to get by in the palm reading business. They – the client – needs to believe that you – the psychic – also believes. The rest is placebo and dumb luck. I gather that politics functions on similar basis.

So, I had my handful of weekly regulars and enough cash left over, after making rent, for a whiskey most afternoons. Mostly, I drank alone. One drink per client is what I budgeted myself, which is judicious, since many customers paid upwards of \$85 dollars for a single reading, so I could afford a lot more whiskey than I drank. In any case, it was there, across from the liquor store, that I first noticed *The Florist*.

There's a slat wood fence that separates the alley behind the liquor store from the residential side street where the Florist did business. If you happen to purchase, say, a half-pint of whiskey, you can slow your pace in the alley and sip without fear of being cited for violating open container laws. At that time, the discovery of this back-alley blind spot felt like a real breakthrough – a budding lush's double-helix moment. It took several such perambulations before I had the presence of mind to take in my surroundings or the possibility of other businesses in the bordering neighborhood.

II.

The first thing I noticed about the Florist's shop was that it seemed to operate with absolute impunity when it came to the matters related to commercial zoning. People were coming and going at all hours (although I saw few carrying flowers) even though the business was technically located on a residential street rather than a boulevard or the parallel main street nearby. Also, the façade didn't match the adjacent properties – despite being situated in a historic district - and ornate ironwork alongside the entryway and beneath the gutters reflected decrepit construction from a bygone era. I would be surprised if was up to the fire code, much less modern handicap standards.

But these were exactly the sort of special dispensations I knew would legitimize my own small business, so I took note and set about to investigate further. It only cost me the price of a single rose to learn the proprietors name: *Edmund Leach*. I didn't want to have to

lie to gain further information from him, despite my profession, so I began varying my floral purchases to include full arrangements, bouquets, and assorted houseplants of a tropical variety, the combination of which crowded every window in my small apartment.

The Florist didn't bat an eye at these mismatched botanical purchases, but my patrons soon came to delight in this new eccentricity, and business increased when word got around that a fortune teller in *old Cambridgetown* was soothsaying alongside bright floral arrangements. One especially dour patron went as far as asking whether we should reschedule, on account of what he took to be a death in my family. (I told him the flowers helped me commune with the thereafter, to which he gave a grim nod).

Eventually, Leach began to open up, in his own way, which is to say not much at all. He was friendly enough, as one has to be to build and maintain a small business for years and years in the same New England town. But he didn't seem interested in speaking about flowers or talking about the Sox, which I found surprising. We ended up bonding over the weather. Unlike many of my peers, Leach and I shared an ambivalence about smartphone technology and its terrifying ubiquity. But we were both quick to note and commend aspects of the same technology that could notify you with a buzz or beep if precipitation was expected as near as the next major intersection.

Light drizzle starting on Mass Ave., chirped my phone as I walked into his shop on one cold November morn.

III.

After climbing a baker's dozen cracked and uneven brick stairs to the Florist's narrow entryway, and chiming the old-fashioned bell to mark my arrival, I saw that the store's sole patron was intent on provoking a fight with Leach, possibly a violent one.

I'll get you, you son of a bitch, was all I caught from the end of a heated conversation. Leach appeared unphased. The only indication that anything was amiss, other than the hysterical shouting from his customer, was the presence of a stringy, black lock that had come loose from Leach's ponytail, which hung across his pale face like a scar.

He glanced at me and from beneath the counter, then proceeded to draw out a gloved hand gripping the stem of small flower. It was simple looking, like a weed, but of solid black, even the stem. It surprised and intrigued me that Leach had the patience to offer a beautiful gift to such a terrible customer while I had never witnessed him providing anything gratis to well-behaved patrons like myself. The customer was soon placated, or stunned, and the bell on the door soon resonated with the sound of rain drops. Then I asked him, the Florist: *How can you afford to give something for free to such a customer?*

Good customers always come back and bad ones never come back, Leach stated with only the barest inflection.

Great policy, I thought, sarcastically. Aloud, I followed up:

But Mr. Leach, why do you think he accepted your "gift"? alluding to the customer's obvious anger. *Has the rain begun, Tom*, he asked me in response? I took that as his attempt at discretion and dropped the subject.

We still hadn't gotten to the issue of business operations, and what sort of "in" he might be able to provide with the city council or chamber of commerce, where I assume he held sway, so I decided not to push. Yet I was intrigued by his unflappable manner, which had now been tested in my presence and had proved to be as hypnotic as his countenance.

As you can imagine, neither Leach's clientele nor my own were so easily disarmed. It wasn't even a week before I had an opportunity to test for myself the "gift method" for dealing with irate customers. I had plenty of flowers to give at that point, and if they weren't already close at hand I might have reached for a baseball bat instead, so the act

was meant to calm me as well as Vlad, who was yelling directly into my face: *What do you mean you can't see that far into the future; what the hell am I paying you for?*

Hot breath projected a fine, vodka-scented mist, liquifying my last frayed nerve. *A glimpse of a feeling, that's all I can offer*, I muttered weakly, trying desperately to keep up the act while I reached for a fading Chrysanthemum.

Vlad stopped shouting instantly and began to breath quickly through his mouth. I dreaded his next words. *You're not taking me seriously*, he hissed, grabbing and crushing the flower in his fist before letting the crumpled petals fall across the desk and the floor at his feet. His rage was impressive, but I had very little time to appreciate it before he executed another move: dropping the flower core and backhand slapping me across the cheek in a single fluid motion.

It didn't hurt, not really, but it scared me because I knew there were few options available to a back-alley psychic for legal recourse. Fortunately, he saved me the trouble by leaving immediately through the only door. Perhaps he saw something in my eye, or, more likely, he understood that neither of us were in a position to file a police report, given our respective professions.

IV.

Getting back to my business: I saw what I did – the services I provided - more as a hustle than a con, and Leach's customer service technique was unbearably nuanced. Was it the flower itself – was there something striking about seeing a novelty shade like black on a familiar object that interrupted his antagonist's thought processes? For Leach's part, was the action symbolic, self-affirming, or just a Floral *Fuck-you; what are you gonna do?* I pondered these questions at Paddy's Pub, where I drank when I was bored drinking alone or wanted to watch the Sox game with some guys.

You're short", said Dave, before any answers to these questions had a chance to surface. There was already a \$10 on the bar for Jameson and a west coast IPA. But there were 15 different bar tenders at Paddy's and they all lived in the neighborhood. They only took cash (some of which went into an antique, brass cash register and some of which went into unmarked white envelopes for the bookies) and each had their own price list. There was no menu to serve as an arbiter, so I threw down a couple more bucks, finished my whiskey in a gulp, and went to grab a smoke out back. Despite the ambiguous pricing, I enjoyed Paddy's – you could still smoke outside and they could open at 8am Saturday morning, my day off, so it was important to keep Dave and his colleagues happy.

Why were neighborhood businesses provided so many of these exceptions, I thought to myself, after lighting up a small cigar and settling into a lawn chair. Paddy's sold a dangerous and addictive drug, facilitated the inhalation of another, all in an aesthetically questionable setting; Leach sold inedible plant matter, of little objective value. Surely my equally ephemeral psychic services should command a premium.

Undoubtedly, such ruefulness was encouraged by my encounter with Vlad the Slapper earlier that afternoon, and I might have sucked down that first cigarillo in a single drag were it not for a flyer that caught my eye from atop the patio picnic table. The man I had seen leaving Leach's shop just the day before, after a heated confrontation, that same man's face was shown, in ¾ profile, as a banner image across the top of the flyer, beneath the all-caps words "MEMORIAL SCHEDULED".

He didn't look angry in the photo, but I recognized the shape of his face and his silver hair was cut short in both the photo and in my memory from the Florist's. The flyer concluded a solicitation for donations: *Support for the Family*, the text enjoined. It seems that Mr. Calloway, a beloved resident of West Cambridge, Neighborhood Nine, had suddenly passed away. The cause of death was not listed.

The man on the flyer, Calloway, and my memory of his uttered threat (all I had heard him say, before Leach handed over the black flower), all were infused with new meaning when viewed in the context of his untimely death. Since that had only been the day before that confrontation had occurred, and with Calloway himself appearing in fine health, I had decided to try reach out to his widow. We had technically met, the late Mr. Calloway and I, or at least we had shared each other's peripheral vision for a few seconds. That minuscule rationalization was all I needed, although it became exceedingly difficult to ignore the moral implications of my own business while I dialed the number.

Consumed, she shrieked, when I asked after Mr. Calloway, before delivering condolences and adeptly inquiring as to the circumstances of her husband's death. I must have interrupted her unvoiced thoughts, since she didn't seem to want to know who I was or what exactly my relationship with her might have been— good timing. Her family was a more circumspect though, and I hung up after hearing *Who is it?* ringing out in the background between sobs. Consumed is not a medical diagnosis, of course, but *consumption* is, or at least it was. So, I made my way to the library, earlier that afternoon, was the only public location I frequented in Cambridge with any regularity, besides Paddy's.

It was there, in the deepest, dustiest stacks, and in the chandelier-lit reading room afterwards, that the true nature of things – of evil - began to reveal themselves. From facsimiles of certain medieval grimoires, I was able to glean references to strange illnesses; maladies with symptoms resembling tuberculosis, which were believed to follow “hex magic” by witches who had knowledge of a small black flower known in the Nordic countries as *Mortuu*. The anthropological texts I were consulted when I had finished with the folklore section were second-hand field reports of shamanic ethnobotany – dry, in their language and delivery - but it was soon clear that there was a record of indigenous practices associated with poison black flowers. As it turns out, Leach wasn't a turn-the-other-cheek

Christian-type he had appeared to be, in his dealings with Calloway – he was instead a certified killer, and I intended to investigate his methods “in the field”.

V.

So, a few days after conducting my armchair research, I followed the killer himself, on the darkest country roads, as he left the city on what must have been the most depressing, snow-draggled day in the long, dark history of such in old New England. Alternating cascades of sticky flake and sleet hampered traffic in every direction, and I drifted from between 2 and 10 cars behind the Florist as we headed North.

Wind and rain and the sounds of pounding surf replaced silent snowfall as we approached the Atlantic. Ostensibly, it was another shitty Tuesday evening in early December, another work day rush-hour for most people, when I followed Leach about 12 miles northeast of Boston proper into Lovecraft country. It became more difficult to follow him unobtrusively on Cape Anne, as we veered first from interstates to state highways, and then to surface roads.

We ended up quite near the coast, just east of Salem Village, or so I estimated. By dusk, the scene was foggy, almost smoky, and there was enough residual precipitation to solidify vapor in the air near the ground when the sun went down, which meant frost. Phantasmagoria was the sum total of these atmospheric eccentricities, and then darkness. By 4pm, the sun was mostly set, and, when Leach parked, it was at the end of what I recognized as a western-style “two-track”, way out in the boonies.

Having planned for the possibility of a stake out, I had a bottle of water in a small backpack, a sighting scope, my trusty notebook, and my not so trusty cellphone, which wasn’t registering a signal that far off grid. Leach was still visible, barely, through the fog and gloom, little more than an apparition 100 yards in the distance. He stepped outside his

vehicle and I ducked down behind my own. He stretched and surveyed the scene, not looking backwards. Wrought iron, badly corroded, faced his vehicle at a short distance, terminating the roadway, such as it was. After leaving his vehicle, and weaving between broken fence line, he entered a lost cemetery on the Atlantic.

Fog and smears of dark green and atmospheric grey was all I could see from that distance, once the Florist was inside the cemetery gates, so I decided to move forward and track my quarry on foot. The ground was covered in dried leaves, now soaking wet with freezing rain and melted snow, so I stepped with great care not to crunch and my made my way to an actual entrance, which had devolved into little more than a game trail. Standing against a leaning column marked “1789”, and peering into the burying ground, I could see Leach hunched over a specific gravestone, a humble piece of granite that couldn’t have been more than a foot.

The monument was tilted drunkenly, worn clean, and I could make out a dark mass of moss and mold creeping up its surface from the dark Earth that had been deliberately exposed at its base. Growing all around the gravesite were black flowers, silhouetted by dying daylight. Their lusciousness seemed oddly out of place with the season.

There the Florist stopped and began to dig with a short trowel or some such gardening implement. He proceeded to harvest from the earth certain black blossoms, leaving others. I could see that they were same flower he had gifted to the late Mr. Calloway some days before. Then, his figure slackened, as if the puppet master had let out its strings. He still had the energy to make his way back to the car though, with a handful of blossoms, to bring back to the shop and foist upon unsuspecting clientele, to foment their quick demise, a method I intended to borrow.

This is what you have to understand, my darling: I did what I had to do, not just to secure my livelihood, but also to scour the earth of a terrible individual. The Florist was a sadist. You understand? I'm but a humble businessman. When I upgraded *Psychic Services Inc.* - first to brick and mortar and then to a franchise model - throughout everything, I knew that there would be a time that I would have to stop. Stop working with the flowers, that is - the *mortuu*. The Florist couldn't accept that discipline, so he had to be dealt with. It turns out, Vlad could do more than slap, if properly compensated, and when word got around that I was a death-dealing psychic, I became rich enough to buy a hit from the Russian mob. One touch is all it takes to kill. A single blossom, held by a client in an ungloved hand or wisped across the nape of an exposed neck, barely felt.

I realized, eventually, that the Florist had the right idea, given his profession. That horrible power, to inflict suffering and quick death; that power would be effectively hidden from any authority by the rest of his inventory. My small business, too, had a built-in excuse, but, unlike with the Florist, my murders have always been *business decisions*. Difficult decisions, at least at first, but never personal.

It was easy to decide who would get a flower, and I made sure to spread them out. Late-stage cancer patients were the easiest; I was doing them a favor, and vice versa. Then there were your everyday scumbags, assholes, and idiots. What they all had in common is that I knew wouldn't be missed, given their confessions to me in my role as a gifted interpreter of the great beyond. To hear confession and sometimes judge, that is to be your burden, as knowledge of the *mortuu* has been mine. Time would pass, and I would grow increasingly worried about being "found out", by a wife or girlfriend, or the cops, but then a bell would chime in my mind, coupled with an image of a black flower.

Every year or so, there would be an obvious candidate, and I would accurately predict their immanent death. And they would die, inevitably and horribly, after handling a

flower that I would pass to them with the same gravitas that another psychic might turn over a death card. I wouldn't advertise the accuracy of my predictions. I didn't have to. Even the most despicable client had drinking buddies, who unknowingly take on the role of grassroots marketers for our family business.

While the Florist kept tending the flower bed, I have let that garden fallow. Within your lifetime, those fragile black stems will sprout no more, choked out by weeds, starved for lack of attention and care. It's important that you hear my story now though, granddaughter, so you can decide for yourself if the cost is too high. To grow death is to grow a business like ours. Surely you understand?

