

The Soothsayer

By Greg Wolff

The city made me sick. Concrete everywhere. It was starving, its blackened asphalt mouth always open, swallowing up the trees, the grass. And I was there like a crumb in its tumbling stomach.

I walked down South 2nd Street towards Main Street. The sidewalk was stained and buckled in parts. My left shoe had begun scratching painfully against the back of my heel, which felt red. When I thought of my mother my head wailed like a Les Paul being burned alive.

My eyes hurt. Something about this place made me feel like I was burning on a grill. I could feel myself turning dark, stiffening. I made sure to keep my legs moving, though all I wanted to do was fall.

I thought about my mother and looked down. I wondered if she would search for me. A thick, rotting odor swept past me like wind. I turned my face away from it. The back door of some Italian restaurant had been opened and the steam seethed out, smothering me. I walked faster.

I could see the library. The cherry blossom tree that grew against its front wall might have looked pretty anywhere else. Here, it looked as though it were dying against the off-white paint.

As I crossed South 2nd I could see a few of the usuals through the long rectangular window. They were sitting at the tables, reading. It is strange sharing your house with strangers. But then again, the institution got me used to that.

I walked inside. The air was cold. Patrick was at the front desk, checking some books out for a silver-haired man whose pants sat awkwardly high above his crocodile shoes. Patrick looked at me, nodded his head and entered something into his cream-colored terminal. I nodded back. I wondered if he minded my being there. I was sure that I reeked. I didn't think they could kick you out of a public library for that, though.

I took a collection of short stories by George Orwell off the dark-mahogany shelf. The day before I had read a book about General DeGaulle and the French Resistance. Someone, I forget who, had recommended it, though I found it to be pointless.

I had been living in the library for two weeks. I would scour the bookshelves for whatever caught my interest. I always liked Orwell.

I wasn't really living in the library. I spent most of the day there but I ate and slept at the Greek restaurant a ten-minute's walk away on Coal Street. The owner was my dad's old roommate, Angelo, and he said he'd help me out any way he could. He told me that he knew what I was going through. He said his brother, Gus, had the same problem and that he ended up killing himself. Gus always had trouble, he said. Flunked out of college—stopped going to his classes, wouldn't talk to anyone. Medicines are better these days though, Angelo told me—I was lucky.

I slept in a sleeping bag on the second floor. I tried to eat only one meal a day. The rest of the time I spent in the library. Already I felt wretched though I was becoming numb to my smell. I wished I had brought some medicine.

Through the crack on the top of the shelf, I could see a black haired girl reading a thick, red hardback. She must have been around twenty. I hoped that she'd turn around so I could see her face. I watched for a little while but then gave up.

Sometimes when I read I would think about being back home. I would think of the damp three-room apartment, the rust colored wallpaper, the blotchy carpeting.

I could hear my mother's heavy voice in my head, "You aren't well, honey." I felt ill.

There was a round fake-wood table with two chairs on each side that was placed on the other end of the library in a clearing by the theology section. A small man was sitting there. I had seen him at that table for the last four days. Different people would walk over and sit across from him. He'd speak in a faint voice. He'd stare at them and lean forward. Sometimes people left the table with wet eyes. A few of them gave him money. Today he was wearing black pants and a black sweater. He had a gray scarf wrapped around his thin neck. His light blonde hair was thinning, although he seemed not much older than me. He looked soft, but there was something desperate about him. He looked like he might shatter.

When the sun went down the library emptied out and the gray-scarfed man left. I hated it when it got empty.

A firm shove against my back woke me from my dream. The book of short stories was lying on its back.

"We're closing, buddy," I heard Patrick say. It seemed like he was trying to sound gentle, but as always, his tone was brash. He had brown hair cut like he was in the army and was wearing a navy blue and purple plaid collared shirt that framed his wide, pale neck. He was tall.

I had dreamed that I was back in the institution.

I told Patrick that I was sorry and returned the book to the shelf. I walked out the front door into the blur of lights outside. I felt tired as I crossed the street. I didn't see the old black Chevrolet that was racing down the right lane. It's hard to see the cars round the bend by the

library. It slammed on its brakes and the driver, a middle-aged woman, blared her horn. I just looked away.

It was cool outside but the air was thick. The street-lamps drew fuzzy criss-crosses in my eyes and the movement of my legs felt contrived—unsteady. I knew if I just hung in there a few more days things would get better. I wished I had brought my medicine; my head pulsed—withdrawal.

When I reached Coal Street I could see Angelo's restaurant. My stomach ached. I turned the corner and walked towards it. The air was now clammy and beads of water crouched in the black pores of the street. There was a brown-green bush that grew in the sidewalk, caged from the cement by a black metal fence. A fence for a bush.

I always tried to be quick and quiet when I entered the restaurant. Even though Angelo never said it, I think he worried that having me around might hurt business—some dirty college-aged kid whisking subtly into the back of the place. What if they thought I worked there? I'm sure he thought about that.

Nick, the thick-haired nephew of Angelo, looked disgusted as I walked by. I went into the back and Angelo told me to help myself to some extra orzo. I ate quickly and then went upstairs and squeezed into the dull-orange sleeping bag.

Lying down, I felt like a living thing. It was quiet up there and I could hear my breathing. Everything else was still—the ugly yellow-brown portrait hanging on the wall, the cheap plastic Socrates bust that stood by the stairway. Up here my eyes felt frantic. I looked at the splintered wood ceiling that met at an angle forming a triangle. It was more like an attic up here than a second floor. I didn't mind it at all though. I made sure not to do anything that would make Angelo regret his kind gesture.

When I woke up the next morning, I tried to ignore the lingering scent of food from the night before as well as the full-length mirror that hung against the brown wall beside the sculpture. I knew there was no benefit in feeling hungry or seeing my reflection. I didn't look like myself anymore. I was growing a beard and my long hair was greasy and tangled. Better to just ignore it, I thought.

Angelo had left a note by the stairs. On it was a key to the backdoor. He told me to use this from now on. I walked down the creaky stairs and let myself out, locking the door behind me.

I guess it made more sense—more secretive.

The sky was bright and forced my eyes shut. I stared at the ground as I walked down Coal Street. A mother pulled her young son close to her side as she passed me. Her eyes averted immediately from my path.

I felt better than I had in a few days. The streets were teeming with life. Like disoriented insects, people crawled around the buildings, their eyes focused and their legs moving to some collective, mechanical rhythm. The warm air felt good against my face. There was so much that I could do that day. I wanted to read, to learn.

As I walked down South 2nd Street I decided to turn around and go down Guilford Avenue. I walked towards "Bill's Guitar Shop." It had been such a long time since I played.

A black and white cartoon face was drawn on the red sign. It was a smiling older man with short spiky hair and fat cheeks. Yellow colored guitar silhouettes floated around his face. I pushed open the door and walked inside. One kid had cranked some vintage Marshall amp and was alternating recklessly between two barre chords. Another scratched some distorted notes over the top. They were laughing as they played.

I walked into the acoustic room and picked up a Martin D-28 that was hanging against the far wall. The spruce top glimmered in the cheap, fluorescent light like a curved wooden mirror. As I lifted it towards my lap I caught my reflection in the wood. I looked awful.

When I began playing I looked up to see a middle-aged man with a tight-face standing in front of me. He had small, young features and his voice sounded constricted. His rectangular nametag fell unevenly against his white button-down shirt. His eyes shifted behind his silver glasses.

"Excuse me, but you can't play that," he spoke flatly. "Can't play unless you intend to buy, it's policy." His eyebrows descended and he leaned forward.

I looked at him questioningly.

"Gonna have to put that back," he said, louder now.

I had just begun to play. "I'm just checking out some guitars," I explained.

"You're going to have to leave, Sir." The way he said "Sir" it sounded like an insult.

I got the point and left the store, handing him the guitar on my way out.

The library was busy that day. There was a small line at the front counter and Patrick looked hurried. I picked up a collection of Shakespeare's plays and walked over to the pale yellow chair I always sat in. It felt good to sit, though I knew I'd get sick of it soon enough.

I had been reading Twelfth Night for about an hour when I saw the black-haired girl from the day before. I thought she glanced over at me. She walked over to the soft-looking man who was again sitting at the table on the other side.

As I read, I couldn't help but look over at the two of them talking. The girl had her elbows on the table and was resting her chin in her hand. The man in all black stared forward and

said something. She lifted up her hands and wiped one across her eye. She handed him some money and stood up. She walked funereally towards the door, which shut loudly behind her.

When Patrick came and told me they were closing up, I walked outside and back to the restaurant. Angelo fed me as always and I crawled into the sleeping bag. I had checked out the Shakespeare book and I read some of Macbeth before falling asleep.

I dreamt that I was back at LockHaven psychiatric. When I woke up my eyes were wide and my throat felt cold. I looked around at the shadows dropped throughout the attic. My chest felt too full and was painful. I stayed up that night. It was worse than usual.

When I left the restaurant the next morning the sky was gray and the wind licked the side of my face. The flurry of passersby looked more morose than usual, and I got the usual strange looks. My facial hair was getting quite long and itched. I thought about getting a razor, but then I'd have to look into a mirror. Better just ignore it.

The city looked grotesque. Crumbling brick apartments, cracked cement—decay looks much nicer in nature. The air was thin and smelled like smoke. Grays, blacks and dirty whites everywhere I looked. Everyone was marching somewhere. The same places every day. I saw them every day. Better to be living in a library, I thought.

When I crossed South 2nd Street I felt some comfort. I entered the library. The quiet was welcoming. Patrick was twirling a pencil carefully in his hand as he stared out of the window. He gave me the expected nod, and I returned it.

I picked up *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. I walked over to my chair. The black-haired girl was sitting in it. She looked up at me. She had dark eyes that were outlined in black and a small nose. She was wearing a light-blue sweater and tan pants.

"Hi," she said calmly, lifting her chin.

"Hi," I said back, unable to force a smile. The skin on my face felt stiff. I was dirty and I knew I smelled. I could only imagine what I looked like to her.

"I see you here a lot," she said, moving a strand of hair away from her face. "You just like libraries?"

"This is sort of my home," I told her. "I like reading."

"Well, you're at the right place I guess." She smiled slightly—she looked more awkward now.

"You are here a lot too," I said. In the last two weeks I had gone out of my way to grant people the convenience of not having to talk to me; some disheveled guy who smelled like Greek food and the city. She had started the conversation though, so I didn't think the usual rules applied. "What are you doing here?"

"Well I meet with Seth," she said.

I looked at her questioningly.

"He's a soothsayer. He usually sits over there," She pointed to the fake-wood table where the man who wore black sat.

"A soothsayer?"

"Yeah. You know. . .a sage, an oracle," she spoke seriously, crossing her legs in her chair.

"I know what a soothsayer is," I said, itching the overgrown hair on my chin. "I didn't know they were still around."

"Oh yeah, they definitely are," she nodded emphatically. "He's for real. He sees and hears things. He's been incredible for me."

"Why would he hang out in a library?" I asked.

"Oh," she spoke as though she were letting me in on a secret. "He just needs somewhere to work, to meet people."

I nodded and walked past her. I didn't want to talk to her for too long and weird her out.

It was strange sitting in a different place. Occasionally, I glanced over at the girl and watched her peacefully reading the red book from before. When the black-clothed man walked inside, she came over and stood eagerly in front of him. He led her over to the table and they stayed there talking and staring.

When I next raised my head from my book I saw the black haired girl and the soft looking man walking towards me. As he came closer I could see the glimmer of his silver jewelry. He had bracelets on each arm, long and short necklaces and earrings, three in one ear, two in the other. From one of the necklaces hung a small, glossy chunk of obsidian. The girl looked at me and smiled excitedly. The man had a distant look in his eyes.

"I thought you might want to meet him," she said, nodding gently.

The man reached his hand out. I met it with mine. His hands were soft and his grip felt vague.

"What's your name?" he asked. His voice sounded as though it came from the top of his throat, it lacked the chaos that comes from deeper parts. His light gray eyes did not shift as he looked at me.

"Paul," I told him.

"Paul, would you like to come speak with me at my table? I may be able to help," his eyes gleamed delicately.

There was something about him that made me uncomfortable. "Help?" I said.

He nodded, softly smiling.

"How could you help me?"

"I don't know that yet. Once I know you, then I can see."

The black-haired girl was nodding.

I couldn't keep myself from looking at the thin chains draped around his neck. I wondered if his visitors had bought them all for him.

"Why do you want to help me?" I asked, slightly bothered.

"We all need help, Paul. I see you here every day. You look like you are living in the dark. I have a gift—sagacity. I foresee." He smiled now fully. The softness seemed for a moment to leave his flaccid face. "I know it might sound crazy, but I can help."

The girl was nodding again.

"Everyone who talks to him is better for it," she said looking at the soothsayer and smiling. She reached out her arms and wrapped them around his torso. His arms looked limp as he embraced her. His jewelry rattled noisily.

"Okay, I'm going to go now." She waved to both of us and walked towards the door.

The soothsayer looked at me. He walked over to his table and nodded sympathetically, as if to let me know that I could join him, if ever I decided that I wanted to.

I could no longer read. I felt his presence like heat.

Whenever I got through a few pages, I'd glance over and see him there, sitting on his chair, his hands resting together on his lap, his head facing forward. I couldn't concentrate—the words wouldn't fit together.

I made sure to remember the page number as I closed *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and placed it back on the shelf. Some dust puffed up into my face. It itched.

I began walking over to his table. The soothsayer was still stuck in his pose, his thin blonde strands of hair sat lifelessly on his head. My legs moved imperfectly, but I felt alive—like

I was on the second floor of Angelo's restaurant, lying in the sleeping bag amidst the unmoving objects.

I stood beside the yellow-brown lacquered table. It looked awkward standing upon the old beige rug.

The soothsayer looked up, his eyes narrowed. He gestured for me to take a seat. I sat down. The hair on my left cheek bothered me.

"Why are you at this library, Paul?" He asked me. His hands were still interlocked on his lap.

"Why?" I asked.

He nodded.

"I like to read," I said flatly. I looked to my side—Patrick was organizing some books on the shelf. I was sure I looked just like all of the other lunatics who spent their time at this table.

"No." His eyes looked as though he were squinting. "Why are you here instead of where you were? Why aren't you home?"

"I had to leave."

"Why's that?"

"I don't know. I couldn't stay." My temples began to ache, I could feel sweat on my face. "She thought I should go back to the institution."

"She? Who is 'she'?" His voice sounded melodic, like muted notes on a piano. His arms were now on the table, his hands cupping his head. His eyes were intent.

"My mother," I said.

The soothsayer went silent. His hands slid up his face past his eyes, he gripped his hair and looked downwards.

"Your mother . . ." He spoke to himself. He concentrated for a moment. "What institution?"

"LockHaven Psychiatric Health Center," I said painfully. A feeling like a cold breath flashed through my body. The words alone made me sick. The awful smell, the colors, the medicine.

He lifted his head. His hair stood up slightly at parts. "So you left because she wanted you to go back there?"

"Yeah. I wasn't going back. Aren't you supposed to be able to conjure up all of this?" I asked crossly. My head felt light.

"I cannot relive your life in my mind, Paul. I can help you see things, though."

He looked at me, prodding me forward. "Why did your mother think you should be there?"

"She said I couldn't live at home. I was too sick."

He began to speak.

"She wouldn't listen to me," I cut him off. I felt like I was stuck. My heart raced.

"So you came here?" His jaw was clenched; I could see the muscles oscillating below his ear.

My head swelled. I turned away from him, my face damp with sweat.

"Yeah, that's why I'm fucking here," I said, expelling the pressure that had been building behind my eyes. "Thanks, you've been a lot of help." I said sarcastically, standing up.

I could see Patrick looking over at me. Even though it was not yet dark, I left the library. I walked down Guilford Avenue to the park and sat outside. When the sun went down, I returned to the restaurant, ate and went to sleep.

The next morning I waited a while before going to read. I knew I had until noon to get out of Angelo's way; that's when he came in to start setting up. I was in no hurry to get to the library. I didn't feel like seeing the girl. Or the soothsayer.

When I finally left the restaurant, it was cool outside and the sun was forcing its way through small openings in the clouds. I walked slowly down South 2nd Street. I hoped the soothsayer wouldn't be there that day.

When I walked into the library I was pleased to see that my chair was vacant. I picked up the Oscar Wilde that I hadn't finished the day before. I looked around and did not see the soothsayer. I was glad that I could focus on my reading, although the library felt lacking, lifeless. Glancing at my wrist, I saw how much weight I had lost since I left home—I wondered if my face looked different. Angelo told me that I could come to his house and shower on the weekends. I could shave then too.

At times, I stopped reading, realizing that my mind had been drifting. I was thinking about the institution, the stale air, the decaying odor, the pale walls. It was the right thing to have left. It was better here.

When I finished reading the book, I found its place on the shelf and put it back. I was tired. I'd had trouble sleeping the night before and my eyes burned.

As I was searching through the books on the adjacent ledge, I saw the soothsayer walk in. His silver jewelry glimmered over his black sweater. He looked like an Egyptian king, weighted down by the spoils of war. The silver looked as though it had been mastered by him—like a wild horse tamed by the soft hand of its rider. He walked lightly in small steps; he looked fragile. He saw me and smiled.

I lifted Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason off of a nearby table and went to my seat. I crossed my legs and paged through the sections. The soothsayer walked up to me.

"Paul," he said. "How are you feeling?"

I looked at him blankly.

"Mind if I sit down with you?"

I shook my head. I didn't really care anymore.

"I'm sorry if I upset you yesterday. I just want to help," he spoke just above a whisper. His words were like breaths.

"You just want to help?" I paused. "You just want money from me like you do from the rest of them. Money for your bullshit insights. Or maybe you want more of those," I pointed to the silver adorning his neck. The obsidian stone was resting on its side against his faint skin.

"They give me money because they want to. I help them, so they help me." He seemed not angry but disappointed by my accusation.

"You manipulate them," I said firmly. I felt more awake now and uncrossed my legs.

"I don't manipulate them in anyway they don't want, Paul. You know that."

"Why do you want to help me? I really don't have any money." I was calmer now and lowered my voice.

"I want to help you because you see things. You know, my mother still thinks I am crazy as well."

"You are crazy."

"Yeah, maybe, Paul," he smiled.

"What do you do anyway," I asked, putting the book down in my lap. "A 'soothsayer'? Do you communicate with the gods?" I laughed, moving a strand of hair that was scratching the side of my face.

"I think of it as reading between the lines," he said. His bracelets jingled as he moved his hand onto his leg. "There is what we see, and there is what is unseen. There is what is spoken, and what is unsaid but meant. I am a mirror—I show the reflection. Bits of the future and past reveal themselves in this way, and for that I have been called a sage, a soothsayer."

"Like the Oracle at Delphi, huh?" I said, letting out a concealed laugh. For a moment I felt bad—he put up no defense.

"Yes, very similar to that, actually," he said.

"There's something very natural about libraries, isn't there Paul?" His glance turned from me as he looked at the rows of hardbacks that surrounded us. It felt colder as he looked away, like a blanket had been lifted off of my body.

"Yeah, they are overwhelming."

"Overwhelming," He nodded. "Overwhelming in the best of ways. Libraries lack necessity—pure possibility. There can be no truth here with so many truths under the same roof." He pointed at the book in my lap. "You can breathe in here."

I nodded.

"How old were you when your father left, Paul?" He refocused his eyes towards me. His voice was soothing.

"What?"

"How old were you then?" he repeated. His face was still.

"How did you know that? Don't play mind games with me," I leaned back, separating from his serene gaze.

"Between the lines, Paul."

"Look, don't fucking try to manipulate me. I'm not like all of your dim visitors who willingly eat up your 'foresight.'"

My voice felt coarse. I had become comfortable hearing him speak, and my throat seemed imperfect, my words unwieldy. Breaking through a strong current, I turned away from his stare and got out of the chair. I checked out the book and walked outside. I spent the rest of the day in the park reading.

The next morning Angelo came into the restaurant and called my name. He startled me and my sudden movement ripped the end of the sleeping bag near the zipper. I hoped he wouldn't notice. I threw on my filthy khakis and walked downstairs. Funny, they used to be my good pants.

"Hey Paul," he said, sitting at one of the round tables in the dining area. He handed me a blueberry muffin. "I picked this up for you."

I thanked him and began eating. I was starving.

"I was thinking you could come back with me today and shower. You look horrible."

Angelo's thick black eyebrows tensed into straight lines. His tan face wrinkled like burnt parchment.

I told him that I would love to shower and appreciated the offer. I followed him out of the store and into his silver Lexus SUV.

"You got quite a smell to ya, Paul," he said turning towards me as we drove. He looked out the driver-side window at some kids who were running on the sidewalk. "We'll get ya cleaned up so you look like your father again. A good-looking man your dad was. Miss 'im." He looked at me and smiled as though he were paying me a compliment.

Angelo lived in a large white Victorian house. There were three floors and the grass was cleanly cut. Three neatly-trimmed bushes lined his driveway, and a large oak grew in the middle of the lawn. I felt like a barbarian visiting a Greek palace.

Angelo took me inside and handed me a green towel. He showed me where the bathroom was and told me to enjoy; he'd be sitting in the family room watching the football game and he'd drive me back afterwards. I thanked him and went into the bathroom.

I felt too bad to ask him for a razor. I saw a small pair of silver scissors sitting on the sink. I looked into the mirror. My face was dark with dirt, and patches of dry skin crusted beneath my nose. I picked up the scissors and trimmed the hair on my face as close to my skin as I could. I looked a little better—but still awful. My cheekbones were more pronounced than they ever had been and my jaw was sharp; I had lost so much weight.

When I got back to the restaurant I went upstairs and read. I did not feel like heading over to the library and talking to the soothsayer. I did not need another person manipulating me, telling me what I was. I wasn't as stupid as he thought, though I couldn't figure out what it was that he wanted from me.

From upstairs I could hear the chefs preparing the food. The hiss of water against steaming iron sounded quietly through the floor. I could make out cooking orders being urgently shouted.

A few hours later I guessed it to be dinnertime because I could hear a rising chatter from below. At times, laughter would burst up like a slow scream. I fell asleep while reading.

I was glad when I awoke to the statue and the ugly portrait. In my sleep I had dreamt of the institution, the stern nurses, the medicine. Although I was still wearing my dirty clothes, I felt clean. I would have loved a blueberry muffin like the day before, but I knew I'd wait until much later to eat.

When I stepped outside the sky was dull-white. The air was heavy with humidity, my skin felt sticky. I walked down Guilford Avenue and over to Bill's Music Shop. I stared through the window at the guitars hanging comatose on black hooks stuck into the wall. I saw a blonde Fender Telecaster like the one I had before my mother sold it while I was away at the psychiatric institute. They wouldn't let me bring the guitar in with me. They said it would only get me more lost in myself.

I thought about going inside, but I did not know if the salesman from before was there, and my clothes were still unclean.

When I got to the library I saw the girl talking to the soothsayer. This way, at least, I could read unnoticed by the both of them. I picked up a collection of short stories that someone had left lying on a soft, maroon colored chair that was situated by the entrance. I never sat there because it was too close to the window, and I hated to look at the city—rotting and gray like a skeleton.

Between the short stories I would look over to the soothsayer's off-yellow table. After about an hour the black-haired girl had left and an overweight middle-aged woman began talking to him. As he spoke, she held her hand gently against her mouth. She leaned back in her chair and stared at him lovingly. Before she left, she handed him what looked like a ring and a check. She gave him a hug. He looked delicate in her big arms.

As she walked away, he slid the ring onto his thumb and put the money in his left pocket. I walked over to him.

"Nicely done," I said. "You do what you do well."

"And what's that?" He asked. He seemed somewhat upset as he spoke, his eyes looked past me.

"Taking from people."

"I take only what they give, and I give more back to them," he said. "You take from the man who is nice enough to let you stay with him, don't you?" For the first time he looked impatient.

"I didn't tell you I was staying with anyone," I said.

"I know," he answered, smiling. He put his hand against his chin, his mouth closed tightly.

"Are you getting over the medicine, Paul?" he asked, smiling again. He looked as though he were engaging me in some game—it was a challenge.

"Getting over the medicine? Don't try and fuck with my mind. Medicine. . . you know I had to have been on medicine . . . I told you I was at the institution. And yeah, I am getting over it." My voice felt unbalanced, shaking upon my breath.

He smiled, staring calmly forward.

"Does the city still make you sick?" he let out a small laugh.

"Ok, yeah, it makes me sick." A dull pain pulsed in my skull. "Okay, how about you, Seth." He looked at me surprised, he smiled.

"So the girl told you?" He asked.

I nodded. "How old were you when your father left you? Why don't you talk to your mother?" I felt alive; I gripped the sides of the table with my hands, I straightened my back.

"Very good," he said nodding. "You can see more, what's beyond that?"

I looked down, I covered my head with my hands.

"Why do you live by yourself?" I spoke loudly. Patrick looked over disapprovingly.

The soothsayer reached out his hand and softly patted my arm. His pale eyes were still, like water.

"It's all there," he said. "It's all there." He looked at me silently, like a ghost, a pale corpse bejeweled in silver lace.

The black-haired girl came up to the side of the table. She looked excited.

"Sorry to interrupt, Seth, can you talk?"

"Always," he said, rotating his body towards her.

"I'm glad you two are talking." She looked at me, grinning. I felt like I had some power over her, like him. I stood up and motioned for her to take the seat. The soothsayer looked at me.

"We'll talk another time," he said, turning back towards the girl.

I read the rest of the short stories, ate some cold leftovers at the restaurant and went to sleep.

The next morning my stomach cramped with hunger. I picked up a collection of coins I had found littered throughout the attic and dropped them into the back pocket of my pants. I left through the back door, walking into a warm fog. The streetlamps looked like huge fireflies in the opaque air. The sky had swallowed the city.

I walked over to a pretzel stand and handed the short man standing behind the counter my seventy-five cents. He counted it and handed me one. I put some mustard on it and ate it quickly. I asked if he had any water to spare but he said it would cost another seventy-five. I made my way slowly down South 2nd Street, being careful not to trip on the uneven pavement. I could hear cars flying by, their headlights breaking the fog.

When I arrived at the library Patrick was sitting in the soft-chair, looking tiredly out the window. I went inside and began walking towards my seat. As I rounded the periodical section I heard Patrick's voice.

"Hey," he called out forcefully. His head pivoted on his wide neck. He waved his hand towards his body. "C'mere for a sec."

I walked over and stood in front of his chair. I did not step too close; I didn't want him to know I smelled so poorly.

"You were friends with that guy, right? The 'soothsayer'?" he asked casually. He was still looking out of the window. In his hand he was rotating a partially eaten apple.

"I know him," I answered dully.

"Well then I guess I should tell you. He died today." He looked at me and nodded. "Got hit by a car on South 2nd Street on his way over. Anyway, thought I'd let you know."

My breathing felt numb. He was the only person I knew here. A pressure built behind my eyes. I thanked Patrick and walked away.

I stepped over to my chair and looked blankly at the bookshelf. I traced the contours of the reddened wood frame with my eye. I didn't feel like reading. I couldn't imagine the soothsayer dead.

A young woman with red curly hair obstructed my line of sight. She had on a white sweater and was wearing tortoise shell glasses that curved upwards at the sides. She looked at me anxiously for a moment, made like she was about to speak, and then paused. Finally she opened her mouth.

"Are you the soothsayer?" She asked bashfully. "My friend told me. . .my friend said I could find you here."

I sat there and stared past her. A calm overtook my body.

"Yes." I said flatly. "I am"