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# Smoking Pavement

By Tess Landon

The building was monotonous: modern and ugly, plastic siding and perfectly spaced windows. And right there, on the spotless lower left window, was a blinking red sign.

*Psychic Readings*, it read. \$50.

Fifty dollars could buy a lot of things. Groceries. One of those expensive scratchers, the ones they lock behind the plastic case. A New Yorker subscription.

West liked to enter the caption contest. They never picked his captions, though, because West's captions weren't funny. West knew they weren't funny, because he was self-aware enough to know that he wasn't a funny person.

The sign seemed to blink faster the longer West stared at it.

“Hi,” he said to the sign. “I’d like to buy a psychic reading.”

“You know you have to go inside, right?” a voice said.

West looked over. There was a woman sitting criss-cross applesauce on the pavement, leaning against the plastic siding of the building. She was wearing bright orange rainboots.

“Or do you think the sign can hear you?” the woman asked. “You crazy?”

“I’m not crazy,” West said, “I’m practicing.”

West had to practice, so that he wouldn’t walk in there and say, *hi, I’d like to buy a psychic reading, but I think you’re a fraud and this is a waste of my fifty dollars. Also, your sign is crooked.* He had opinions on psychics. He didn’t believe that someone could tell the future, and even if they could—which was impossible—they would charge a lot more than fifty dollars for it. But he was going to spend fifty dollars on a fake psychic anyway, because he was curious.

He wasn’t going to tell this woman any of that, though.

West pulled the handle of the frosted glass door. It wouldn’t open.

“You have to push,” the pavement woman said.

“Right,” West said, and pushed the door open.

There were black leather couches lining the walls of the waiting room, divided by square little tables holding racks of magazines. West sat down on the couch closest to the door.

He probably should have said *thank you*, instead of *right*. Too late now.

Last month’s issue of *The New Yorker* was hidden between rows of cooking magazines. West picked it up and flipped to the back page. Two cross-hatched penguins were falling from an airplane on a sunny day. One had its beak open, so it must have been talking.

*I wish I brought a parachute*, West thought, which wasn’t funny at all.

He would’ve given that penguin sunglasses, if he were the cartoonist.

The beaded curtain on the other side of the room swung open. An elderly woman walked out. She looked angry.

“I like your hair,” West told her as she shuffled past him. It was silvery-gray, pinned in a large swirl on the top of her head.

The woman smiled. “Thank you, dear.” When she got to the front door, she turned back and called, “Don’t waste your money.”

“Fuck you, Barbara,” the psychic said, shoving her middle finger toward the door, which had already clicked shut.

“Hey,” she said to West, still holding open the curtain. “She’s just bitter ‘cause I told her the truth. You have to be prepared for me to tell you the truth, okay?”

“Hi,” West said, like he had practiced. “I’d like to buy a psychic reading.”

The psychic blinked at him. “I figured,” she said. “Come inside.”

Her office was carpeted and bare. There were no string lights or shelves of crystals or psychedelic paintings, like West had expected. Only a large mahogany desk, with an armchair on either side.

The woman held out her hand. “Pay upfront,” she said. “No refunds.”

West gave her two crumpled twenties and ten single dollar bills, then sat down. Once on the other side of the desk, the woman grabbed his hands and stared into his eyes.

It was incredibly uncomfortable.

“Tell me about yourself,” she said.

“Isn’t that your job?” said West, immediately flinching. He shouldn’t have said that. Now this woman was going to kick him out and keep his fifty dollars, and fifty dollars could buy a lot of things.

She smiled at him. “You’re funny.”

A new blender, to replace the one Jacques broke. He was supposed to pay West back, but then he moved out, and then he told West “I’ll mail you a check tomorrow,” and then he never did. West could be drinking a smoothie right now, instead of listening to a fake psychic tell him fake things.

“You overthink things,” the psychic said.

Well. He didn’t need to pay fifty dollars to know that.

“Let’s start with your relationships,” she continued. “You have commitment issues. You hesitate to get close to others, and because of that, your relationships are often short-lived.”

“I think you’re a fraud.”

The psychic let go of his hands. “What?”

“Sorry,” West said, and grabbed her hands back. “Continue.”

“Maybe it’s not that you have commitment issues.” She leaned forward, manicured nails digging into his palms. “Maybe it’s that you’re a hostile person, so others hesitate to commit to *you*.”

This was not supposed to be a therapy session. And West was not a hostile person.

He said nothing, and she told him he would die in his late eighties, but it was going to be peaceful. The future is fixed, she said.

Fifty dollars could buy one-hundred packs of candy from the corner store. They were two for a dollar.

“You have a complicated relationship with your father,” she started, and West stood up, letting her hands fall.

“No,” he said, “I don’t. I have no relationship with my father, because I have two moms, and they made me in a test tube with some random guy’s sperm.”

Then he turned around and walked straight through the curtain, down past the couches, which were most likely fake leather, to see the pavement woman holding open the door.

“Thank you,” West said, and walked straight into her chest.

“I’ll tell your fortune for ten dollars,” pavement woman said.

“Are you...propositioning me?”

“Gross,” she said. “No. Why, do you want me to?”

“I don’t want you to tell my fortune,” said West, trying to shove past her. “I don’t believe in—”

“Okay, one dollar.” The woman grabbed his arm and pulled him outside. “Please.”

West stared at pavement woman’s hand, which was still holding West’s arm. “Why are you so strong?”

“What, you think ‘cause I’m a girl I can’t be strong?”

“I—that’s not—”

“I lift weights. I deadlift. Do you deadlift, noodle arms?”

West stared at her.

“Please,” the woman said. “You’re in danger.”

One dollar could buy a box of pasta, or a cheap scratcher, or two bags of candy from the corner store.

One dollar could buy another fake fortune.

“Okay,” West said. “But I’m not paying upfront.”

The woman smiled, and it was a genuine smile, not like the one the other psychic wore.

She dragged West to the other side of the building and pulled open another frosted glass door. “Follow me to my office.”

The walls were painted bright yellow, and there was a mattress in the corner, covered with a worn gray blanket. There was a hole in the ceiling with wires sticking out of it. He guessed it might have held a smoke detector at one point.

“Do you live here?” West asked.

“Yeah.” The woman unfolded a card table that had been leaning against the wall and dragged it over to the mattress.

West sat on the floor. “You’re not supposed to tell people where you live.”

“Okay,” pavement woman said, placing a large disco ball on the table. West hadn’t seen where it came from. “This is my office and I don’t live here.” She sat down on the mattress and pulled the blanket around her shoulders. “I’m Benji.”

West didn’t respond. You weren’t supposed to tell strangers your name, either.

“I’m Benji,” the woman repeated, wrapping her hands around the disco ball, “and I can smell the future.”

“No, you can’t,” said West, “but tell me anyway.” He was curious.

“I can,” Benji insisted. “Your next meal will be a Caesar salad.”

“No, it won’t.”

“Well, it’s changed now that I’ve told you.” She flicked a piece of lint off the disco ball, then slapped it. Nothing happened. “If I tell you what it is *now*, it’s gonna change again. People either wanna prove me wrong or prove me right.” She pointed at West. “You wanna prove me wrong, I can see it in your eyes.”

“You’re right,” West said.

“I wouldn’t call myself psychic,” said Benji, “But I can smell the future, I promise.”

“Prove it.”

Benji hit the disco ball again. It lit up. “Oh, I fixed it,” she said happily, then looked up at West. “I can’t really do that, is the thing.”

West was going to keep his dollar.

“It’s kind of a useless superpower,” Benji said. “I told a lady her husband was gonna get her flowers, and then she wanted a refund because her husband *did* buy flowers, but they weren’t for her, and how was I supposed to know that? I smelled flowers, not infidelity.”

“Why can’t you prove it?” West asked. He wished the floor was carpeted.

“I can smell the future,” Benji said, “but not the past, and that’s really the way psychics prove they’re legit—by telling the past.”

“I don’t believe in psychics,” West said.

“I know.”

“Because you’re psychic?”

Benji scoffed. “Of course not. I can smell the future, not read minds.”

“Smell mine, then.”

Benji pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders. “I can’t do it on command.”

She was not a real psychic. Not that West believed in psychics.

“It happens when it happens,” Benji told him. “We just have to wait.”

“I’m going to leave,” West said, standing up. “It was nice talking to you,” even though it wasn’t.

“Wait,” Benji said, and she was holding his arm again. He hadn’t even seen her stand up.

“You can’t leave.”

West tried to wrench his arm free, but Benji was strong, impossibly strong, just like before.

“Please let the *fuck* go,” he said, voice unsteady, “or I’ll—I’ll—”

“You’ll die,” Benji said suddenly.

West stopped struggling. “What?”

Benji nodded, staring at him. Her eyes were brown, he noticed. They seemed to glow, now, with her sudden seriousness. Rimmed with red and cradled with gray, like she hadn’t been sleeping. “I smelled it. When I saw you outside. That’s your future—death.”

“Everyone dies,” West said, trying to keep his breathing even. Maybe she didn’t mean the *near* future. Maybe the psychic next door wasn’t actually a fraud; maybe he would die peacefully in sixty years and that’s what Benji was talking about. Maybe—

“Today,” Benji said. “It will happen today. Or maybe tomorrow.”

“How do you—what did you...smell...exactly?”

“Death,” Benji said, “has a very particular smell. And people have very unique smells.” She tightened her grip on his arm, then released it. “So I smelled you, same as you smell now—which is how I know it’ll happen soon—and I smelled your decay. Your absence from the world. You, fading away, intertwined with death until it replaces you completely.”

“I don’t believe you,” West said. And he opened the door, and he stepped outside, and as soon as his feet left the sidewalk he was met with torrential rain.

It was the sort of rain that soaked through your clothes, your shoes, your very being until your soul felt drenched in something earthy and wonderful.



West looked back toward Benji's office. He could see her through the window, sitting criss-cross applesauce on the mattress, still wearing her rainboots. The umbrella was propped beside her.

West liked to check the weather every morning. All three of his sources had reported blue skies and bright sun, all day long.

Also, they were in the middle of a fucking drought.

He stood there for a moment, face tilted up toward the sky, which now looked quite dark and ominous, until his vision was too blurred by water to see much of anything. Then West turned around, walked back inside, and sat down on the mattress beside Benji.

He didn't believe her. He didn't believe her. He didn't believe her. He didn't believe in psychics, and so he didn't believe her.

"You're getting water all over my bed," Benji said.

West ignored her and pulled out his phone. Jaime picked up on the first ring.

"Am I a hostile person?" West demanded.

There was a long pause, and then Jaime said, in a very low and confused voice, which reminded West that it was very early on the East Coast, "Wes?"

"Did you delete my contact?" he asked. "You didn't know it was me?"

"I—dude, it's one am. And yeah, I deleted your number. I don't keep shit like that after a breakup."

"Is that why you broke up with me?"

"Is what why I—" She paused. "Wait, I didn't break up with you. We broke up with each other."

This was not how West remembered it. West remembered a very clear conversation, starting with “we need to talk” and ending with “goodbye,” but he wasn’t going to argue about it now. “Okay, is that why we broke up with each other?”

“Is *what* why we broke up with each other?”

“Because I’m a hostile person.”

“Wes,” she said. “I don’t think you’re a hostile person. At least, I didn’t until now.”

“Okay,” West said. “Well.” He wanted to tell her that he loved her, that he was not in love with her, not anymore, but that he loved her as a person, existing in the world. He wanted to tell her that he would miss her. He wanted to tell her that he hoped she was happy and pretend he was, too.

He didn’t tell her any of this. Instead, he told her “goodbye,” and hung up. After a moment, he dialed Jacques’ number.

“Jacques,” he said, when he heard him pick up, “It’s West. Do you think I’m a hostile person?”

Benji took the phone out of his hand and tossed it on the floor, then dropped the disco ball on top of it. West could see the cracks splinter out on his phone screen beneath the mirrored squares of plastic.

“Are you seriously calling your exes?” Benji asked.

West gestured toward his phone, which meant he was really gesturing toward the disco ball, since it covered most of his phone. “Not anymore.”

“We don’t have time for this.”

“Okay,” West said. “Okay. What do we do now, then?”

He was trying not to panic.

“We change the future,” Benji said softly, which meant it wasn’t working out very well, because Benji was not the type of person to say anything softly. “Whatever happens to you, we’ll stop it. But you need to trust me.” She held out her hand.

West did not trust her. But West did not want to die, and so he took her outstretched hand and squeezed it tight.

Benji closed her eyes.

“What—”

“Shut up,” she murmured. “Something’s happening.”

“I smell smoke,” she said, after a long silence, during which West might’ve fallen asleep had he not just been told of his imminent death, “and something in the air, sizzling, like it’s alive...electric. Burning. Hot pavement cooling by the second.” She opened her eyes. “West.”

“Yes.”

“I think you get struck by lightning.”

West looked out the window at the storm outside. “That does seem plausible.”

He was starting to get that feeling he often felt, that feeling of having just run a marathon without moving at all, of sweaty palms and pounding heart and significantly decreased lung capacity.

“West,” Benji said. She looked a bit blurry.

“I don’t believe you,” West said. He leaned forward until his arms were resting on his knees. His breathing was shallow.

He was not afraid.

He was not afraid, because he didn’t believe her.

“I think you do,” Benji said. “You just don’t want to.”

“I don’t want to die,” West told her, voice muffled by his arms. And it was true:

West did not live a very interesting life. He designed logos and websites for startup companies, and in his spare time he drew wordless cartoons, figures and backgrounds without direction or story. He spent money on stupid things like scratchers and candy and psychics. His relationships were often short-lived, perhaps because he was a hostile person.

But still, West wanted to live.

He wanted to continue to live his boring existence, unbothered by the future.

“The future wants to end me,” West said, standing up.

“That’s one way to put it.”

“I won’t let it.”

Benji smiled. “Good,” she said, and stood up beside him, so that their shoulders were touching. “Let’s go.”

A car, Benji said, was the safest place during a thunderstorm.

West thought this was something told to anxious children by their parents, and not advice to live by, but then he considered the exposed wiring in Benji’s office and decided to follow her anyway.

West drove a small sedan with leather seats and four-wheel drive. It was named absolutely nothing, because West was not a funny person, and so he did not name things like cars.

Benji, however, drove a bright pink minivan with tinted windows, which she called “Tabitha.”

“It’s not very professional,” West said as he got in.

“Why do you worry so much about what other people think?” Benji asked, drumming her fingers against the steering wheel.

You were supposed to worry about what other people thought, because if you didn’t, you’d lose control of yourself, and people could think whatever they wanted about you.

This was West’s philosophy.

“I don’t want people to think I’m strange,” West said, “but people often do.”

“They think you’re strange because you are strange, West.” Benji started the car. “I think you’re strange. So why try not to be? You’ve already failed. There’s really nothing you can do.”

West wondered if this was supposed to be a comforting statement, because it wasn’t comforting at all.

“My car doesn’t have to be professional,” Benji said, “Because I’m not a professional.”

“You have an office,” West said, although calling it an office was quite generous.

They drove in silence for a few minutes before Benji spoke again. West didn’t know where they were going, and he didn’t ask, because he was supposed to be trusting her.

“I used to rent Melissa’s office,” she said.

West didn’t know who Melissa was.

Benji, inexplicably, knew this without him having to say a thing. “That psychic you saw.”

“Right.”

He should’ve asked for her name. It would’ve been the polite thing to do.

“But then she bought the property,” Benji continued. “Raised the rent, pushed me out, took the space. She doesn’t even need the psychic business. She’s loaded; it’s just a hobby for her.” She grinned at him. “So now I steal her customers, sit outside and offer them a real reading after they get sick of her bullshit.”

“I thought you couldn’t do it on command,” West said without thinking.

“I’m saving your life, asshole,” Benji said. “I never said I didn’t feed ‘em bullshit too. Difference is, sometimes I actually smell the future, and then I tell the truth.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are you saving my life?” West asked. “Do you do this often? Like some sort of superhero?”

“No,” Benji said, stopping the car, “No, I don’t really save people at all. I decided maybe I should start.”

They were in a large lot, surrounded by warehouses. Benji got out of the car, walked around to the passenger side door, and opened it. West got out. It was still raining, but he hadn’t seen lightning yet.

“So when I smelled my future,” she said, “I decided to do something about it.” She pulled out a gun.

Wait.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. This was the sort of thing that happened in detective shows and action movies, to characters who were nothing like West, who led exciting lives and did exciting things.

“You were never supposed to die, West. That future was mine. And it was you.”

West didn’t understand. He didn’t even know her before today. “What are you doing?” he asked. It was a stupid question. She was pointing a gun at him.

She was going to kill him.

“Surviving,” she said, and time seemed to stop for a moment, and when it resumed, everything was sideways.

The pavement felt rough against West’s cheek.

Benji stood above him and held out a hand.

West grabbed it, his hand slick with blood. His cheek left the pavement.

His chest hurt. He stopped himself from looking down, afraid of what he might see. He reached for her. “You have something I need,” he said, although he didn’t really know why he said it.

She looked like she was crying, but perhaps that was just the rain. “I don’t know what you mean.” She shoved the gun into her pocket and knelt beside him.

He grabbed her face with both hands and pulled it close. “You’re psychic,” he whispered, but he knew there was much more to it than that.

Benji’s face was rippling, like the surface of a lake. “Yes,” she said, “I am. I smelled the future. And I’m changing it.”

*it’s changed, now that I’ve told you*

West shook his head. “It doesn’t. It can’t.”

*the future is fixed*

West keeled forward and wrapped his arms around her. The world stopped spinning, just for a moment, and when they broke apart, pain bloomed in his chest, like a flower made of fire spreading out into his fingers, his toes, sending smoke into his lungs and spilling out onto the pavement around him.

He had taken what he needed. He had taken the gun.

These were two separate things.

“You can’t,” West said gently, weight of the gun heavy in his hands. He pulled the trigger. “This was supposed to happen.” There was an overwhelming cracking sound, and then he saw the world tilting sideways, and then he saw nothing at all.

Jacques was sitting on a plastic chair beside him, holding a large cardboard box with an image of a blender on the front.

“Hello,” West said.

Jacques didn’t return the greeting. “I’m still your emergency contact,” he said.

West nodded. “I suppose this is an emergency.” The bullet had lodged itself in his left shoulder. He was not going to die. He was, however, in an incredible amount of pain, even considering the incredible amount of drugs that were being pumped into his system.

This was supposed to happen. Benji was right. He was supposed to kill her.

She was wrong. It couldn’t be changed.

He didn’t have a choice. The future was fixed.

The future was fixed. This was supposed to happen.

“I brought you something from the cafeteria.” Jacques pointed to the small table next to West’s hospital bed, which held a depressing looking Caesar salad and a sandwich covered in cellophane.

West stared at the salad, then slowly reached over and picked up the sandwich. He slowly unwrapped it and took a bit. It was ham.

The future wasn’t fixed.



Jacques picked up the magazine on West's bed. It was a copy of *The New Yorker*, open to the last page, where there was a drawing of three birds sitting around a kitchen table. West couldn't remember what he had written.

Jacques stared at it for a moment, then started laughing. "That's funny," he said. "That's actually really funny."

And it was.