

No Refunds

By: Phyllis Eisenstein

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I'm sure Phyllis Eisenstein, living in Chicago as she does, has seen the leaflets. Solemn children hand them out on street corners or stick them into the advertisements tacked up on buses or rapid transit: Mrs. So and So, or Madame X, or Sister Y—"readers and advisers" to tell your future, solve your problems, stop your pain.

Or she's seen the Tarot readers sit in parks and in shabby-curtained rooms two floors up, visited by women (mostly) in suits out for an evening's fun, who giggle about rip offs as they wait to hand over their palms and their money for a peek into a magic they don't really believe in.

But maybe, just maybe, these readers have other clients, too, slipping in quietly. They believe—or they're desperate. And who knows what price they pay for their fortunes?

In many ways, "No Refunds" reminds me of O. Henry's "Gift of the Magi." Is it more blessed to give than to receive? As Phyllis Eisenstein shows, the blessing is never unmixed.

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She knew he was a junkie before he opened the door. She knew that he lived on the street, cadging change from strangers, eating out of garbage cans, shooting up with people who were his friends when they had the junk and his competition for returnable bottles the rest of the time. She knew because *knowing* was what she was, and what she purveyed—knowing what had been, what was, what would be. The small sign in the curtained plate glass window said reader and adviser, but that was only because the police would arrest anyone who bluntly claimed to tell fortunes.

The junkie opened the door, and the Utile bell above his head jangled to announce him.

"Madame Catherine?" he said in a hoarse, uncertain voice. He squinted toward the drapery of beads that half-obscured the rear two-thirds of the narrow room.

She waited a moment, letting him take in her carefully cultivated ambience—the floor covered with worn, grayed-out tiles; the walls and ceiling festooned with dusty silks and velvets; the small table draped with faded satin, the pitted crystal ball sitting on a brass pedestal at its center; the gypsy fortune-teller swathed in skirts and scarves and junk jewelry. This was the decor she kept going back to, far better than the wood-paneled high-rise office and the chic suit, or the black-and-white New Age studio and the designer jeans. Clients came most readily

to this shabby storefront, their basest carnival expectations confirmed by it. The right kinds of clients.

She raised a hand toward the junkie. “Come in, Steven,” she said.

He pushed a few strings of beads aside and leaned into the inner sanctum. “You know my name.”

“Of course.” Finding his name among the myriad voices he had heard in his life hardly took any effort at all. His mother had used it, his father, his friends, his wife, a vast, echoing chorus of *Steven*. Catherine gestured toward the overstuffed chair on the far side of the table. “Won’t you sit down?”

He hesitated another moment, then slipped sideways through the beads and slowly limped to the chair. He dropped to its worn cushions and sat there in silence, his head, his whole body, drooping. He was painfully thin, the skull visible behind the papery skin of his face, the cheeks deeply hollowed above a short straggling beard, the sunken eyes rimmed with dark circles. Multiple layers of clothing partly camouflaged his frailty, hanging slack at shoulder and hip, so that he looked a little like a child trying on an older brother’s discards; but above his shirt and sweater collars, every cord of his neck was visible, and his Adam’s apple stood out like a half-swallowed peach pit. And he stank of sweat and rotten teeth, with a sharp overtone of bleach.

He had cleaned a needle with that bleach an hour ago, she knew. Volunteers from the local settlement house had been showing the junkies how to do it, to protect themselves from AIDS. Too late for Steven, of course—she saw that the doctors had told him so weeks ago—but there was kindness in his doing it for others. He had not lost his humanity on the street, along with everything else.

She brushed a twinge of pity aside. Her business had nothing to do with pity or kindness. The kindly and the pitying died along with the wicked when the plagues came; that had always been the way of the world. Only the careful and the lucky survived. And Catherine.

When he had sat in the chair for a minute without speaking, she said, “What brings you to me, Steven?”

“Don’t you know that, too?” he muttered.

She made a sweeping gesture with her open palm. “I read events, not thoughts, Steven. There is a difference. You must tell me what you want.”

He looked up at her then, and there was despair in his bloodshot eyes. “I’m ill, Madame Catherine. I’ve been down to County Hospital, in and out, lately. They say there isn’t much they can do for me.”

She waited for him to go on.

He sighed again. "I've heard... that you can do things."

She stroked the pitted surface of the crystal ball. "I can't cure you," she said quietly. "I give people advice about their lives, nothing more."

"I've heard... that you tell people how to get money."

She inclined her head slightly. "Sometimes."

He took a deep breath, as if gathering courage to speak, then suddenly pressed his elbow against his side. He made tight fists of both his hands, and then slowly, slowly opened them, over the course of a long exhalation.

"Perhaps you should be back at the hospital," she said.

He shook his head. "I've heard about the price for the money. I'm willing to pay it."

She leaned forward, putting her elbows on the table and steepling her fingers under her chin. "And what do you think the price is, Steven?"

"Time," he said.

She said nothing.

"It's pretty obvious that if you can tell other people how to get money, you can get it for yourself, too. You don't need to collect it from your customers. But *time* ... that makes sense. You take years of life and give money in return. It's a bargain a lot of people would jump at."

"It is," Catherine said softly.

"Then you must be very old."

"I am." She watched him search her face for signs of that age, but she knew all he would see was a woman in her early forties, with crow's-feet crinkling her eyes and a touch of gray in her dark hair. A woman not much older than himself. She had looked that way for a very long time.

He eased forward in his chair. "Someone I know won the lottery. Not the big prize, but a good one. Good enough to get him off the street. You gave him the number, two months ago. His name was Charlie."

She thought back for a moment. A tall man, sallow with incipient jaundice, jobless, and without prospects. He had been living on gin, in a cardboard box, for quite some time before he found her. "I remember Charlie."

"He said he traded you six months for it."

She nodded.

“He got twenty thousand dollars.”

“Twenty-one thousand six hundred dollars, precisely.”

“And he’ll live six months less than he would have if he hadn’t come to you?”

She let her fingers interlace on the crystal ball. “It’s a little more complicated than that. If he stops drinking and starts taking proper care of himself, he could live quite a long time. Perhaps even the span he would have lived if he had never started drinking. Less the six months he traded to me. If he stays on the booze, his liver will kill him six months sooner than it would have if he’d never come to me. So this life span depends on his own behavior.”

“But you get that six months.”

“Yes.”

Steven’s knobby throat bobbed as he swallowed. “Is that your standing offer? Twenty grand for six months?”

“There are many offers, Steven,” she said.

“Tell me about them.”

“The basic rate is five dollars an hour. The number of hours involved is up to the client. For a day, a hundred and twenty dollars; for a year, forty-three thousand eight hundred; for twenty years, eight hundred and seventy-six thousand.”

He was staring at her. “Has anyone ever given you twenty years?”

“You might be surprised, Steven,” she said, thinking of one evening in the high-rise office, and a man who wanted to be rich more than he wanted to have an old age.

“And how much will you give me?” Steven asked.

She looked down into the crystal ball, as if there were something inside to see, but there was only glass, and the familiar effects of reflection and refraction. The surface was pitted and scratched from years of being knocked about, moved from city to city, country to country. Several times, she had dropped it, but it hadn’t smashed. Good quality glass, but still only glass. The answer to Steven’s question was inside Steven, waiting to be found.

The future was always harder to know than the present or the past. It was a changeable thing, and she herself had changed it for many a client, simply by giving away money via lotteries, racetracks, casinos, and the stock market. Catherine took almost a full minute to find Steven’s future.

“How much?” he repeated.

She looked up into his eyes. The whites were yellowing, the rims reddened and watery. She knew the doctors had asked him to stay in the hospital. But he had limped his way out and come to her. “Steven,” she said quietly, “I can’t give you anything.”

He straightened slowly in the chair.

“Not anything,” she said.

He opened his mouth, but for a moment no sound emerged, then in a strangled voice he said, “Are you telling me that I don’t have any time left?” He pressed his elbow against his side once more, and he clutched it with his other hand. “Am I going to die here, now?”

She shook her head. “You have a little time—a few days. But if I take them, what good will the money do you?”

“How many days?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yes!”

She hesitated for just a moment, and then she said, “Six.”

His throat bobbed again. “You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

He squeezed his eyes shut and covered his face with his hands.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly.

When he lowered his hands, they quivered. “Do you have a piece of paper and a pencil?” he whispered.

She drew a memo pad and a ballpoint pen from a pocket of her skirt and passed them over. Shakily, he scribbled a name and address.

“Take the six days and send the money to her,” he said.

Catherine looked at the name. “Your wife?”

He nodded.

She tore the sheet off and pushed it across the table toward him. “No. I won’t take the time you have left.”

“It’s all I have to give her,” said Steven.

She looked into him again and saw that three years had passed since he had last seen his wife. She saw their final moments together—Steven looking long at the

sleeping woman and then leaving without waking her. She saw farther back, to tears and poverty, to job loss and home loss. It was a familiar story: half the people who lived on the street could tell something like it.

“Listen to me, Steven,” she said. “I’m an Adviser as well as a Reader. Take my advice and call her. Tell her you love her. It will mean more to her than a few hundred dollars.”

He stood up. “You won’t give me the money?”

She shook her head.

“Damn you,” he muttered, but without force. Then he turned and limped out, leaving only the jangling bell to show that he had been there. In a moment, even that sound was gone.

Catherine closed her eyes and rested her forehead against the cool surface of the crystal ball. She was tired. Looking inside people was wearing, especially when there was no compensating gain of lifetime. Merely dealing with the kinds of clients who came to the storefront was wearing—the desperate, the destitute, the bottomed-out. Yet the high-rise office and the New Age studio were not better, just different—they delivered the debt-ridden rich who didn’t want to lose their lifestyles, the entrepreneurs who would rather pay her in time than pay interest to a bank or venture capital company, the embezzlers, the market manipulators, the wheeler-dealers temporarily out of the wherewithal to wheel and deal. They were fewer than the clients of the shabby storefront, but wearing, too, in their way. Sometimes she felt like chucking them all, top to bottom. But she couldn’t, because in all these long years, she had never stopped wanting to live.

Madame Catherine no longer remembered precisely when she was born, or where. It hadn’t been much of a time and place anyway—a winter between wars in some duchy or principality that was always changing hands. Her mother had been the village wisewoman, using her skill at *knowing* to help others sow and reap, endure storm and drought, and find lost lambs. She had been well-respected... until some of her neighbors decided it would be a good idea to burn her. The family had fled then, to become itinerant peddlers, wagon menders, tool sharpeners, any means her father could find to put bread in their mouths. Finally, in the great city of Genoa, where he had thought to find his fortune, he died of the plague, leaving Catherine and her mother to fend for themselves. Catherine did remember the gorgeous blue of the Mediterranean at Genoa, and the fish-stink of its docks. And she remembered the year as well, the first year whose number she had any awareness of—1348, the year of the Black Death.

Her mother had known, of course, that he would die. But knowing had not helped, because the plague could not be evaded like angry peasants, like some pillaging army. One third of the population of Europe was winnowed by plague that century. Catherine and her mother, though, were lucky and lived. But they had no

land, and no man. They had only the *knowing* to support them—in Catherine, too, by that time; and so they wandered through Europe, gypsy-like, telling fortunes wherever someone would listen, to earn their bread and bed, and sometimes a little silver.

Catherine's mother had only the *knowing*, no more, for she died of old age, a white-haired, bent-backed crone: half blind, half deaf, toothless. But shortly after that death, Catherine discovered that she herself had an additional skill—she could steal time.

She was beginning to go gray by then, and to find an ache in her back in the mornings. And one day as she told fortunes in an inn on the road from Trier to Koblenz, she found herself jealous of a customer. The customer was young, beautiful, a woman just-married and spending her merchant husband's money on the foolish fantasies, as she called them, of a fortuneteller. She tossed Catherine a gold coin for those fantasies, because they had been of beautiful children and long life and prosperity. And as Catherine caught the coin to her bosom, she yearned with all her heart to have a piece of the new bride's youth.

In the next moment, she realized that her prediction for the woman had not been exactly right, that her life would not be quite so long. That, in fact, it would be five years shorter than Catherine had first thought. But she didn't say anything about it, because the fortune was told and the gold paid. She only wondered why her skill had so betrayed her. The next morning, there was no ache in her back; nor did it return; and some weeks later she saw that her gray hair was growing out dark once more. At that, she knew what she had done, and she felt a little remorse—but only a little, because the woman had called her skill foolish. Afterward, though, she never stole as many as five years from a single person. Instead, she took a month here, a week there, whenever she needed them, her age bobbing up and down, from a few gray hairs to none at all.

A woman who never grew old could not stay in one place very long, but neither could a fortune-teller, so her gypsy life went on as before. The years passed, the decades, and the decades piled into centuries. Sometimes she found a lover, though she always left him. Sometimes she found a patron, though she always left him, too, or her. She grew familiar with many places, many customs, many languages. It was not a bad life, as long as she was young.

In the seventeenth century, she finally found a way to make her own fortune. Foreseeing the success of the Dutch East India Company, she saved up a few gold coins and went to Amsterdam to invest them in a ship that she knew would come home heavy-laden with spices. Within a few years, she no longer needed to ask coin or food for telling the future. The economics of the world had changed, money could breed money, and a woman who could see tomorrow could become rich.

That was when she stopped stealing time and started taking it as pay for *knowing*.

Now, nearly three hundred years and four thousand miles from that first investment, she had all the wealth she would ever need, in stocks, bonds, precious metals and stones, and bank accounts. For nearly three hundred years, she had found people willing to trade their time for the assurance of money. Not everyone would do it, of course. Ninety-nine percent would not. But Catherine had become very good at finding that other one percent, or at enabling them to find her.

READER AND ADVISER.

She raised her head from the crystal ball. It was still early, but she decided to go home, perhaps watch a few videotapes, listen to a Utile music. Just now, she lived in a condominium on the lake, a pleasant place she planned to keep for four or five more years, before she moved to another part of the city. She took a bus to the public garage where she had left her minivan, changed clothes in the van, and drove home, an ordinary-looking middle-aged woman, nothing like the gypsy of the shabby storefront.

The next day, when she arrived at the store, Steven's wife was waiting outside.

"Madame Catherine," she said. "I'd like to speak to you."

Beth was her name, the name that Steven had scribbled on the memo pad. She was thinner than his memories of her, and her face was tired around the eyes; Catherine knew she had not slept the previous night. And there was Steven, focused sharply within her life—Steven as he once had been, Steven as he was now. She had seen him eighteen hours ago.

"Come in, Beth," said Catherine, pushing the door open.

They settled on either side of the table, Beth with her hands folded in her lap, the gypsy fortune-teller behind her crystal ball.

"You know who I am?" said Beth.

Catherine nodded. "Your husband was here yesterday. I see that he followed my advice and called you."

Beth's folded hands tightened. "Thank you for getting him to do that. When he left, I tried to find him, but..." She shook her head. "So thank you. For giving him back to me."

Catherine waited, knowing there would be more.

Beth stared at the crystal ball. "He thinks you really can tell the future."

"I can," said Catherine.

"And he tells this... this really wild story about you giving away winning lottery numbers, in return for years of a person's life."

“I do that sometimes,” said Catherine. “Do you want a winning lottery number?”

Beth shook her head. “I want Steven.”

Catherine leaned back in her chair. “I don’t give away lives here. I give away money. If that would help you...”

“It won’t. I wish it could, but it won’t. He’s going to die. And I don’t want him to. I don’t want him to!” Her eyes squeezed shut, and tears started down her cheeks. Then she gulped and knuckled the wet streaks away with both hands.

“I’m sorry,” said Catherine, and she sighed. How many wives, she thought, had said those words, in plague after plague? Even her own mother, so very long ago.

“Look,” said Beth, and she was leaning forward now, touching the crystal ball with one hand, her voice tightly controlled. “What happens if somebody gives you the time and takes the money and then changes his mind. Can you give the time back?”

Catherine frowned slightly. “It’s not my policy to give refunds.”

“But *can* you? Are you *able* to do it?”

Catherine nodded.

“And does that mean that you could sell someone time. Extra time?”

“You mean for money?”

“For anything.”

“Why would I want to do that, Beth? I haven’t any desire to shorten my own life. Quite the contrary.”

“But *could* you?”

Catherine looked at her narrowly. “Do you mean, would I sell Steven time?”

“Yes. Yes.”

“I could,” said Catherine, “but I won’t. He doesn’t have anything that I would accept in exchange.”

“But I do,” said Beth. She gripped the edges of the table. “I’m young. I have a lot of life ahead of me. Take some of it—some for yourself and some for Steven.”

Catherine shook her head. “Think of what you’re saying, Beth.”

“Don’t I have a lot of life left?”

Almost unwillingly, Catherine looked into Beth's future. There was indeed a good deal of life left to her, on the ordinary human scale. "You're all right," Catherine told her. "You'll last into your eighties, as things stand."

"Then split it between him and me. And take a fee for yourself, a broker's fee. Isn't that a good deal? You gain something from it. We all gain."

"I don't think so, Beth."

"Yes, we do!"

"Beth..."

"Don't you see—that way, we can be together again."

"He has more troubles than AIDS, Beth. It wasn't AIDS that drove him away from you."

"We can do something about those troubles if he lives. But if he dies, we can't even try." The tears had started again, and this time she made no move to stop them. "Please, Madame Catherine. We don't have anyone else to turn to."

Catherine looked down at the satin-draped tabletop, at the corroded brass pedestal that held the crystal ball. From the corners of her eyes, she could see Beth's hands to either side, white-knuckled. "You're making a terrible choice, Beth. There's no guarantee that he'll come back to you."

Beth's voice shook. "There's a guarantee now. If you don't do something, he's going to die. Guaranteed."

Catherine reached out to her again, to look at her past, at the better times, to see Steven as she saw him. He had been handsome, once, forty or fifty pounds ago, and he had laughed easily. He had held Beth's hand a great deal, even after they had been married for a dozen years. His last gift, when he still had a job, was a gold pendant with their initials entwined; she was wearing it now.

"You must love him very much," Catherine said at last.

"Very much," said Beth.

Catherine met her eyes. "All right. I can offer you a compromise. In five years, there will be a cure for AIDS. I'll give him six, to make sure he has time to take it."

Beth's eyes were wide. "Will you?"

Catherine nodded.

"And... your fee?"

"There won't be any fee."

“No?”

“No. I think you’ll be paying enough as it is.”

“Oh, Madame Catherine...” She found some tissues in her purse and wiped her face and blew her nose. “I’m sorry to be like this in front of you, but... you can’t know how grateful I am.” She balled the tissues up and clutched them in one hand. “When can we...?”

“Can you bring him here at four o’clock?”

“Any time you say.”

“Four.” She waved toward the door. “Go on, now. Go back to him.”

Beth stood up. “This is so kind of you.”

Catherine looked up at her, thinking that in six hundred years she had never loved anyone as much as Beth loved Steven. Not anyone, except perhaps herself. “What will you tell him,” she said, “about this deal?”

“The truth. But only afterward. Until then, I’ll tell him you’ve agreed to give me a lottery ticket in return for the time he has left. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Will he believe you?”

“I think so. He... begged me to ask you for it.”

The bell jangled her departure.

When they came back at four, Steven seemed very calm and said very little, and Beth, too, was subdued. He had bathed and put on clean clothing; but he didn’t look better—the clothes, Catherine knew, were his own old ones, and they hung just as loose on him as his rags had. And she knew also that he had shot up less than two hours ago, coaxed the money out of his wife, making no secret that he was going to use it to buy junk. His argument had been that he would be dead soon, so it didn’t make any difference.

The transfer of time from Beth to Catherine and then to Steven took less than a minute, and only Catherine was aware of it. Afterward, she gave Beth a slip of paper, the supposed lottery number.

“You’re finished here,” she said. “Go home.”

Hand in hand, they left.

Occasionally, over the next few days, she wondered if Beth had finally told him the truth, or if she was just letting him discover it for himself as he lived on, day after day, feeling less and less sick, gaining weight, recoiling from the death that had almost claimed him. She also wondered how long Beth’s job at the supermarket

would support Steven's habit. But she put her curiosity aside. It had never been her policy to follow a client after striking a bargain.

Two weeks after their bargain, a week after he would otherwise have been dead, Steven came back to the shabby storefront. He waited outside for a few minutes because Catherine was with someone else, but when that client left, he slipped in before the door had even closed.

He thrust the beads aside roughly, and they clicked and clattered as they swung to behind him. "You shouldn't have done it," he said.

He looked better—anyone could have seen that. He had gained a little weight in his face, and the whites of his eyes had cleared. And his clothes were still clean. Catherine saw that he was living with Beth; she guessed that he had expected to die with her.

"You shouldn't have done it!" he said again, and his mouth twisted angrily.

"Sit down, Steven," she said softly.

Instead, he stood behind the chair, gripping its upholstered back. Then he pounded its cushioned arm with his fist. "How could you *do* that to her?"

Catherine saw that Beth had only told him the truth that morning. That they had had a fight over it, culminating in Steven storming out. Two weeks before, Catherine reflected, he wouldn't have had the strength to slam that door. "It was her choice, Steven," she said. "I gave her what she wanted."

"She tried to tell me you were wrong about the time I had left. She tried to tell me you were a fake. As if I didn't know better!" His fingers dug hard into the chair. "Give her back those years! I don't want them!"

Catherine shook her head. "Our bargain is done. I don't give refunds. I told her that."

Steven let go of the chair abruptly. "I never agreed to that bargain."

"Your agreement wasn't required," said Catherine. "The bargain was between Beth and me."

He pointed at her, jabbing the air with his rigid forefinger. "You stole those years from her. She didn't know what she was doing!"

"You know that isn't true, Steven."

"It *must* be!"

"Then you don't know her very well. And you don't know how much she loves you."

He lowered his hand slowly. Then his shoulders slumped, as if the act of pointing had drained his strength. He leaned on the chair, shaking his head. "I can't let this happen to her."

"She'll have a long life anyway," Catherine said. "Even without those few years."

He kept shaking his head. "You don't understand. I can't take those years from her."

Catherine looked at him long and hard, though only with her eyes. She didn't want to look at him any other way anymore. Finally, she said, "Steven, don't you want to live?"

He walked around the chair and sat down. He put one hand on the table, beside the crystal ball. "What will you give me for those years? In money."

"You can live till they find a cure, Steven," she said. "You have the time now."

"What will you give me?"

"Are you sure this is what you want?"

"How much!"

She did the calculations in her head, then looked into the near future for a match. She found one in Saturday's newspaper. "Friday's lottery has a four-digit jackpot for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars," she said. "That would leave you with three and a half months to spare."

He frowned. "I meant for everything."

She looked again. "The three-digit game can give you an extra ten thousand, with fifteen days left over. That's my best offer."

"It's a deal."

"Steven—"

"It's a deal!"

Catherine shrugged. "It's your life," she said, and she pulled out her memo pad and wrote the numbers down. "Don't buy the tickets in this neighborhood. Take the bus down Ashland a couple of miles; you'll find plenty of vendors." She drew a five-dollar bill from her blouse and passed it over with the sheet of paper. "Here's your seed money and bus fare."

He tucked the paper and the bill into his shirt pocket. "I'm ready now," he said. "For the other side of the bargain."

It took only a moment for Catherine to draw five years and fifty weeks from him. "Go on, now," she said when it was done. "You have traveling to do."

He hesitated. "Have you...?"

"Yes."

"I didn't feel anything."

"Do you ever feel time passing?"

He swallowed. "Sometimes." He pushed himself out of the chair. "Thanks, Madame Catherine."

"Don't come back," she said.

His lips made a thin white line. "I won't."

Catherine sat watching the beads sway after he had gone, listening to the echo of the bell. No, he wouldn't be back. She knew that even without reading him.

Three days later, Beth came.

She had been crying, crying till her eyes were swollen and discolored. She slammed the beads aside, stalked to the table, and threw something at Catherine. But that something was only a couple of pieces of paper, and instead of hitting their target, they fluttered wildly and sank to the floor. Lottery tickets.

"He's dead!" she choked, her voice roughened from the crying. "You killed him with these!"

"Sit down, Beth," Catherine said softly.

"Why did you do it? Why did you give them to him?"

"Please. Sit down."

Beth fell into the chair and stared at Catherine with her wide, raw eyes.

Catherine bent to pick up the tickets. She set them on Beth's side of the table. "He wanted you to have these," she said.

Beth shook her head. "It's blood money."

Catherine looked into her then and saw that the police had called at her apartment, had taken her down to the morgue to identify the body, had told her it was a case of overdose. And in the morning she had gotten an envelope in the mail, with these pieces of paper in it, and a note saying that he loved her.

"Yes, it's blood money," said Catherine. "It's always blood money. That's what I sell."

“How *can* you?” Beth moaned.

“He knew what he was asking for.”

Beth shook her head sharply. “I don’t want it. Take it back.”

Very quietly, Catherine said, “I told you, I don’t give refunds.”

“Then just keep it!” She got up abruptly, and one thigh struck the table so hard that the crystal ball rocked off its brass pedestal and, before Catherine could stop it, fell to the floor. It struck with a loud dull thud, which made Beth gasp and fall back into her chair. Then the ball rolled slowly across the tiles to the nearest wall, where it rebounded gently at an angle and went on rolling.

“I didn’t mean—” Beth began. “I didn’t...”

After a second rebound, the ball came to rest almost at Catherine’s feet. She scooped it up with both hands and set it back on its pedestal.

“It’s all right,” she said. “Glass is tougher than you might think.”

Beth looked at the scratched and pitted crystal ball, then she reached out a hand and touched it. “I wish I were made of glass,” she whispered. “I wish I were tough.”

Catherine picked up the lottery tickets, which had fallen to the floor again with the jostling of the table. She set them near Beth’s hand. “Take these,” she said. “They belong to you.”

Beth closed her reddened eyes, as if something shining in the glass hurt them, something more than just the usual complex of reflection and refraction. “They aren’t what I want,” she said.

“They’re the best he could do,” said Catherine.

Beth stood up at last, slowly this time, not hitting the table again, and she picked up the tickets, as Catherine had known she would. The bell over the door jangled as she took them away with her.

The next day, Madame Catherine closed her shabby storefront and moved to a spacious modern office in a downtown high-rise.