

Peregrines

by Suzy McKee Charnas

Mary Anne said, "I'm really sorry, Edie, but here it is the end of June and we only have two people signed up for your session."

I thought, *God damn it all to hell; so what else is new?* I said, "Oh."

She sighed sympathetically over the phone. "I don't know what to tell you. We have lots of takers for Bill Ballingham and Susan MacCain's classes, but somehow . . . Look, I'm being interviewed tomorrow on local radio about the workshop. I'll take the opportunity to talk you up. But unless there is a last-minute flurry of sign-ups, I'm afraid you're just not on this year."

We chatted awhile longer, me feeling my usual urge to scream in protest while simultaneously apologizing for the failure of my name to attract business. There went my autumn respite in Ashland, plus the fifteen hundred dollars the playwriting workshop paid for a two-week teaching stint. I'd even gotten my interstate travel permit from the Homesecc office down at Battery Park.

The deal has always been (and that's forty-seven years' worth of always) that people respond well to me, with enthusiasm even, *as long as I'm in the room*. As soon as I'm out of their sight, it's as if I had never been there. Any effect I've had goes up in smoke and I am erased from living memory, so any goodies on offer naturally get handed to someone else.

I started tracking this when I was in my twenties, about the thousandth time that a friend—a *friend*—said to me in a baffled voice, "Edie, I'm really sorry—I don't know why I didn't think of you for this project, you'd have been perfect, but your name just didn't come up." Or, "Gee, how in the world did we forget to call you about going to the shore with us? I *know* we all talked about it." Or my excellent comment, greatly appreciated at the moment of utterance, comes back to me later as a clever quote—attributed to somebody else. My voice, speaking those same deathless words, is simply replaced in the hearers' memories by someone else's voice. Anybody else's, it doesn't seem to matter whose.

Without constantly treading water hard, I would sink without a trace, apart from a few copies of my Tarot chapbook, *Master Packs: Personal Vision and Tarot*, and maybe a script of my first play, *Sleight of Heart*, moldering away on some obscure theatre bookshelf.

I know, it sounds like whining. It *is* whining, but that doesn't make it untrue, or even an exaggeration. This cloak of invisibility has been a major factor in my life, sometimes *the* major factor. I don't talk about it much for fear of people tagging me as a loser and running like hell, the way folks very sensibly do when they encounter a Jonah. I run myself when I catch the smell of bad luck on someone else. I've got more than enough of my own.

Doesn't all this make you want to read on? I didn't think so. Well, force yourself; it's only a story. It doesn't take long, and then you'll forget it anyway.

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I threw out the dregs of my tea and rinsed the grinning-cat mug Ted had drunk his coffee from for the nine years of our marriage. Then I clumped downstairs to the street, carrying my writing pad in a worn leather case with my Tarot deck. John's bookstore, Second Sight, was ten minutes and a few blocks up along Christopher Street toward Sixth Avenue.

I read Tarot cards there every morning and some afternoons as well at twenty-five dollars a head; as in all bad times, people were looking for reassurance anyplace they could. A good month of readings would make up for the lost gig in Oregon, as well as giving me material for the column on divination that I was supposed to start writing for the *New York Post* in the fall.

Last time I traded readings at a psychic fair I was once again struck by this about the Tarot: No matter how apposite the reading, no matter how deeply it strikes into the heart of your concerns, as soon as you walk away from the reader's table you forget nearly everything she told you. The few outstanding bits that stick are inevitably distorted by your memory; nothing really stays. Reading Tarot is perfectly ephemeral work for a perfectly ephemeral person—disappearing readings from a disappearing woman.

John—dark, slender, and upright as a clipper's mast—was humming to himself as he checked the buy-sell and catalog sites on the net with his requests-list at hand. Everything about John was elegant. His face was a long oval of polished teak that always made my fingers tingle with a longing to touch. I couldn't look at him without thinking of those whip-lean African runners who win marathons.

He turned toward me and smiled so that the corners of his eyelids crinkled up into the lineaments of kindness and humor; irresistible. "Edie! Guess what we got a request for this morning? A kid walked in here and asked me for a book by Ernest Hemingway—*The Old Man in the Suit!*"

So we started the morning trading reminders of some of the more outrageously ignorant and silly requests he's had, like *How to Kill a Mockingbird*. *The Catchup and the Rye*, though, must have been somebody pulling John's leg.

I greeted Gene and Mike, two retired sailors who were already ensconced in the Tibetan Esoterica corner over their perennial chess game. I sat down at my own beat-up but still pretty marquetry table beside the store window and laid out a practice spread. The colorful images sometimes attracted a passerby to come in and even to sit down in the battered tin folding chair across from me for a reading. John said I should find a more comfortable chair for them, like the one I sat in myself. But I didn't want to encourage a querant to park across from me asking repetitious questions for an hour while other potential clients gave up and drifted away.

That morning the demonstration spread I'd dealt startled me. There were more Major Arcana—the cards for concepts too big to be contained in any of the four suits—than should have shown up in a casual layout.

The Fool—inner impulses, positive and negative—and Judgment, which is about the gaining of insight; and Death, which is either about dying *or* about the closing of one significant phase of your life and the opening of another, take your pick (that's the tricky part). The six of Cups: memory, children, nostalgia. And The Magician, which is power through knowledge.

Oh, and The Tower, a castle struck by lightning. That means catastrophe.

So let's see, I thought: If I obey an impulse (The Fool) and write a different play (Death of the play I've been working on), using insight gained through reading cards in John's store (Judgment) and also pandering to the persistent American fixation on youth and childhood (six of Cups), I could

at last become successful and in control of my life (The Magician)—and then (The Tower) get hit by a bus.

Or—

"Customer, Edie," Gene growled, looking up from the chessboard with a knowing glance. He thought card readings were bunk (which of course they often are, except for mine and a few other readers' I've come across).

Bella Salazar came barreling in all smiles and sparkle, demanding to know what the cards had to say about meeting a man on her summer vacation (she rented a place at Montauk with a slew of friends every August). Some other reader had apparently mentioned a tall, dark stranger to her. Like all my clients, she went to the competition over at The Crystal Wolf or even Madame Lela, Advisor, as often as to me. She'd come to me just to hear it all again.

"Bella," I told her over a new layout, "see this ten of Swords next to these Pentacles? Are you considering some kind of business partnership?" I tapped the two of Cups. "Because if you are, you need to be careful. The other person in this business situation—that's the Pentacles—isn't trustworthy."

Bella started talking fast, trying to steer the reading toward her desires instead of what the cards were pointing out. I stuck to my guns, partly on principle and partly because I was really worried about her. And, in one of the darker corners of my heart, I think I wanted to make her focus on the possibility of her own luck turning sour for a change.

One of the less attractive aspects of sailing your life's journey under a curse is that sometimes you can't help resenting other people's good luck. Actually, there are no *attractive* attributes, unless you count an impetuosity that is often mistaken for courage. It's really recklessness: why worry when you know things will go badly no matter what you do?

Bella had drawn an astrological chart for me years ago, when I sold the house after Ted's death and moved back into the city. She said my assessment of my life experience was dead right. "Saturn," she said, "opposes your natal Sun. So Old Man Saturn—that's authority, limitation, discipline, denial, and frustration—blocks the desires of your heart. Your Sun is the expansive, hopeful impulse of your spirit, the will and energy to succeed. A natal Saturn opposition is a real challenge; it's a shadow. It means always being obscured by others, always checked and obstructed in what you attempt."

For this I'd had to pay her a consultation fee, though it was worth it for the entertainment value alone. She showed me one of her source books, which advised propitiating Saturn by tossing bread to crows or ravens, which are Saturn's birds, or giving charity to an old, sick, black man on a Saturday night. Honestly, that's what it said, and what's more I couldn't give him anything but something sour or bitter or salty. I could just imagine how well that would go down: "Here's a nice pickle for you, sir, and have a good weekend."

"Just watch out, Bella," I insisted now over the cards. "This spread advises vigilance, not daydreaming about Mister Right on the beach."

She tossed back her long dark hair—Bella liked to affect a gypsy look—and launched a new chapter in her perennial argument with the cards. In the midst of her I-shall-not-be-crucified-on-a-cross-of-cards speech, I noticed a boy standing close to the window glass and looking in at me. I wish I could have seen myself at that moment, doing an absolutely classic double take: I recognized him from a very vivid dream I'd had over the weekend, a dream forgotten until just now.

I used to write down my dreams. It hadn't seemed worth doing in a long time—sufficient unto the day is

you-know-what—but after you journal your dreams for a while, your memory stays trained.

I'd dreamed that three dark-skinned people in grubby-looking sheepskin coats had brought me a quiet boy, about ten or so, and asked me to hide him for a while from his enemies. They showed me a miniature building, a sort of gingerbread-trimmed Parthenon brightly painted in scarlet, white, and gold, set inside a deep wooden box. The box was steadily filling with red liquid, as if the model temple were drowning in blood.

So, in the dream, I knew it was serious. This little boy had a mystical destiny *and* bitter enemies determined to keep him from it. He was something like a young but very important Tibetan lama with the Chinese after him, or at least that was pattern in which my dreaming mind had cast the story.

With some misgivings, I'd agreed to help. The dream people had told me the boy's name, but I couldn't pronounce it.

Looking at this real kid outside John's store window, I felt very uneasy.

He was a short, square-built child of about eight or ten with thick, dusty-looking black hair trimmed off below the ears. Brown-skinned and solemn-faced, he had an Asian curve to his eyelids; he would have looked perfect in one of those Peruvian wool hats with the ear flaps, too. He wore a yellow T-shirt, grubby jeans, and sandals made of tire-rubber with thick plastic cross-straps.

He looked at me and I looked back.

Bella came clanging to her conclusion like a runaway trolley hitting the end of the line: "Two of Cups means a love affair, you've told me so yourself!"

"Yes," I said, looking at the cards again. "Sometimes it does, but not in this layout. Here it's a business partnership—those Pentacles. Bella, listen to me: It looks like a bad idea."

"This *reading* was a bad idea." She slapped a twenty down on the table so hard that two cards sailed off onto the floor. Then she flounced out.

Ah, the glory and influence of the mighty seer! As I stooped down to retrieve the stray cards, someone tapped on the frame of the open street door.

The boy stood there with another, taller kid, this one a rawboned adolescent with a nervous smile pasted on his sharp-planed face. He too was dark-skinned and black-haired, but they didn't look related; their builds were too different.

The tall one stepped hesitantly into the store and softly addressed not John but me. "Please, missis—to working? Strong, cheap working."

I would have said no, but John at once stepped from behind the register to greet them. Listening to whatever hard-luck story the tall one told him, John began nodding and murmuring sympathetically. I knew he'd be feeding them lunch, at least.

John, second son of an African diplomat and a Swiss biochem heiress, had spent his youth bumming around the world in search of enlightenment, as he would tell you nostalgically at the drop of a hat. He said he'd met a few holy men who really were holy, so he'd come home a firm believer in generosity toward strangers lest you find that you'd been entertaining angels unawares.

This meant that I would occasionally find he'd let in a street person to sleep in the stock room on a wet night. Sometimes they stole books, or our supply of instant coffee. One gouty old creature of

indeterminate sex left a tip behind in the morning.

Now he set these two kids to work on the sidewalk outside the store with a wide push broom and a plastic trash bag. And sure enough, John sent out for pizza for all of us (could I read the man or not?), which left the store reeking of cheese and tomato sauce for hours afterward. That was John: a grownup who somehow retained a kind of youthful generosity, staying sweet and hopeful.

When Mike and Gene left late that afternoon, the two strangers were working on the tall oak counter that John had salvaged from a failed haberdashery on Seventh. They rubbed the hulking thing down lovingly with stinky furniture oil, which the dry old wood drank up greedily. They were obviously dragging the job out; I wanted them to wind it up and take off. They made me nervous.

Even in the comparative anonymity of lower Manhattan it wasn't smart to take in strangers, particularly dark-complexioned strangers who spoke broken English. People have been known to report their friends and neighbors to Homesecc for less, ever since the Statue of Liberty bombing.

And then there was my dream, which I couldn't quite shake off and which had—metaphorically, at least—suggested danger. Who were these two, anyway? I kept expecting them to wrap themselves in colorful blankets, whip out a nose flute and guitar, and start tootling a version of "El Condor."

At last they were done, reluctantly surrendering the rags John had found for them to work with. While he was paying off the older one for their day's work, and I was stuffing my cards back into their carved case, I glanced out the front window and saw the younger boy do something impossible.

He was squatting on the curb, and as I looked he reached down with both hands and stood up again, holding something at about his chest height with both hands, face bent close over it.

I knew what it had to be. For two weeks I'd been stepping over a flattened bird corpse in that gutter, bone and feathers ironed thin by the tires of cars pulling in and out. It was too black for a pigeon, probably a starling or a grackle; I'd been careful not to look closely enough to find out.

The boy hunched over this grisly remnant for a moment, and then suddenly he threw his arms high with his stubby fingers spread. The tattered, misshapen thing arced up, dropped, spread its wings, and flew away toward West Fourth Street.

The older boy gave John a final heartfelt thank-you, collected the younger kid, and walked off down the street with him in the soft summer evening.

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I didn't mean to bring any of this up with Alec over dinner that night; it wasn't political enough for him. My cousin was a graduate student in journalism who wrote for what remained of the *Village Voice*. He was full, as usual, of outrageous news—a breach in the Israeli Wall, the bombing of some embassy in Australia, and another gray whale die-off in the Pacific. It wasn't easy to catch his attention with anything less than an atrocity, with pictures.

I did manage to get him to look at the freshest draft of my new play, several pages of which acquired yellow curry spots in the process. It was about a couple of orphans of the First Southwest Water War.

Alec said, "I don't know, it just seems a little—cluttered, you know? Like you're trying to cover too much ground at once, but ground you're not really involved in personally. Which you aren't, Edie, you've never been west of Pennsylvania. Your first one was better."

He meant *Sleight of Heart*, which had been extravagantly praised in its opening production. It had even won a contest, giving me the forlorn hope that I might actually write successfully for the stage. In fact, *Sleight* was currently scheduled for a new production in a little upstairs theater in Chelsea in October. This was nice, but hardly thrilling. *Sleight* is your typical American playwright's first play, basically "How My Family Fucked Me Up." No politics, lots of psychology and bad interpersonal behavior; very unthreatening to the closed mind or the public peace.

"I've done my 'first play,'" I said. "I just came to it late. I need to move on."

"Well, you're trying, I'll give you that," he said, dipping up runny mango chutney on a shrimp cracker. "Maybe you should switch to something set right here; a play about the next SARS mutation, for instance."

"SARS is your bailiwick," I said. "You cover the damned thing every time a new version blows into town."

"Yeah," he said, "but there's no *news* in it any more. Which means it's ready to be turned into art, right?"

I didn't want to get into an argument; I changed the subject.

"Two kids came looking for work at the store today, too old to be urchins, too young to be bums. Hispanics, I think."

"That's old news, too," he said, "unless you know how they got across the shiver-river." He meant the stun-barrier along the US-Mexican border, on which he had done a story that had gotten him a month of detention by Homesecc. They never said that was who they were, but everybody knew. Alec said afterward that spending a few weeks with his head in a black bag had sharpened his political eyesight mightily.

His languid, know-it-all attitude (much worse since his return from jail) annoyed me. Just to needle him, I said casually, "I saw the younger one bring a dead bird back to life today."

Alec laughed with his mouth full. "Come on, Edie!" he crowed. "You know better than that, you of all people!"

Me, of all people: My mother's family had owned a theatrical supply business with a specialty in magicians' paraphernalia, and my dad had been a gambler and small-time card sharp; all eons away now, as illusory as a magic trick itself, but very educational in a basic and persistent way.

"So," I said, "where were the wires, the springs, the misdirect, the switch? Where was the *audience*? This kid, 'Hollith' or something like that his name is, he pulled off a miracle right there on the sidewalk and nobody paid any attention!"

"You were there."

"I don't believe in miracles." I scowled down at my chicken curry; they'd been out of their special lamb dish, just for me. "But when I went and looked, the bird was gone."

"Then the kid took it," Alec said with a shrug.

"Don't be ridiculous! What for? Jesus, Alec, you could smell that thing from inside the store!"

"So what did he say when you asked him about it?"

"I didn't get to ask," I admitted. "The older one hustled him away right afterward. Serchio; he's the sharp one of the pair."

Alec dabbed at a drip of chutney on his shirt with his napkin. "Some cultures use animal parts as charms. This boy had his back to you, right? Somebody on a bike or blades must have zipped by in front of him, and you caught the motion over the kid's shoulder and thought the bird was moving."

"Don't strain yourself trying to be inventive," I retorted. "I know what I saw."

He flushed and looked away. Alec had been struggling to write a novel for years, in brave defiance of the slow death of print fiction (except for the established brand-authors, of course, or the ghosts writing interminably in their names). It wasn't nice of me to jab him like that. Ted used to tell me, "If you don't watch it, Edie, you're going to turn into a mean, bitter old woman." He was a smart man.

"Sorry, Alec," I said.

He left me the bill; fair enough.

On the way home I remembered another scrap of my dream: the visitors had told me, very delicately for fear of pushing me and my good intentions too far, that the fugitive boy came from a society that was primitive by our standards. They said he might act in ways upsetting to me (although normal in his own country), particularly regarding the treatment of animals.

Living animals or dead ones, they hadn't specified.

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Next morning the boys were back, this time working a noisy, dented machine that John had rented to shampoo the ancient carpeting throughout the store. They did a very thorough job, unloading and moving bookshelves to get at places that hadn't seen the light of day since the first postponement of elections.

At midmorning they turned off the machine (thank God) and relaxed for a bit. Hollith wandered over to me. He gave me an inquiring glance and picked up my Tarot deck. I winced, remembering the dead bird in those small brown hands; but I was curious, too, about how he would react to the images.

He studied the card on the bottom, then set the deck carefully down on the table again and stood waiting.

I am not sentimental about children. Ted and I had managed two miscarriages, nothing more (it's not just that good things don't come my way, but that I'll get *promised* something good—and then Saturn cancels the delivery). Since my sister Janet's son was killed in a high-school shooting, I've tried to ignore children altogether. Dylan's death is what led to my taking the early retirement package that got me out of the classroom. I'm not made of stone.

So I would have ignored this boy, but he looked me calmly in the eye and said, "Please you teaching

cards, missis. I to learn."

So much for my assumption that Serchio spoke for both of them. Hollith had a low voice, slightly hoarse. Maybe he was asthmatic. Up close, there was a tang of tobacco smoke about him.

I picked up the deck and dealt the bottom card. "That's The Magician. It's a good card. It means having all the skill and power you need for the challenges that come to you."

The boy studied the image. "Mishishan," he said.

When he'd gone back to work, John, reshelving books close by, said, "I think he likes you, Edie."

The envious undertone in his voice was very unlike him. His expression softened as he looked at Hollith, who squatted, bent nearly double, to help Serchio make an adjustment to the carpet-cleaning machine.

John added, "I searched for years, and now that I'm done traveling, the people I was looking for come to me."

I wanted to hug him, but we weren't on a hugging footing with each other. So I began to worry instead.

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The next day, John was downtown attending to the endless official paperwork it took to keep any business free of harassment by Homesec. Ingrid, his current girlfriend, minded the store. I don't think she even noticed when I took advantage of John's absence to approach the older boy.

"Come on, Serchio," I said briskly. "I'll buy you guys lunch."

"Yes, for me," he said. "Thank."

"What about him?" I tilted my head toward the younger boy.

Serchio shook his head. "Not eat today," he said.

"What?" I said.

"Special day," he said, and shut his mouth, watching me. Something ethnic or religious, probably; *let it alone*, I thought.

We left Hollith napping on the old green corduroy couch, with a copy of *Stella Luna*, from the kid-book section, tucked under his cheek like a pillow.

Serchio followed me obediently over to the T-Square Cafe. I chose seats at a low coffee table in the back, as far as we could get from the audio speakers.

"Serchio," I said, "is that your real name?"

"Good name," he said hopefully, "no?"

"Do you have papers, you and Hollith? Do you have a Green Card, a legal right to be here?"

"Hol-*luth*," he corrected. He riffled through a beat-up issue of *Self* magazine someone had left on the smeared tabletop.

"Look," I said, "John is a good man. I will not see him get into trouble for taking you two in. Where do you come from, Serchio?"

"Nildai," he said promptly. "Aldai, Rundai."

"Where is that, India? South America?"

"Also Kanikatal," he said, looking up from the magazine. "Many place."

"Hollith—*Holluth* isn't your kid brother, is he?" God knows stray kids get nabbed by predators all the time, and it wouldn't have surprised me much in this case. There was something secretive and cold about Serchio.

He closed the magazine and looked at me. His eyes weren't dark, as I had thought, but a tawny hazel.

In a confidential tone he said, "I guard to Holluth."

A plump girl with iridescent feather inserts where her eyebrows used to be served us coffee and cake. When she'd gone, Serchio added softly: "Holluth to be high man, his country. Some bad ones hunt; hunt him. I guard."

My dream, goddamn it; I saw the brightly painted model of the temple, drowning in blood.

"Is it something about religion?" I said warily. Good grief, what if they were Muslims?

Unconcerned, Serchio licked white lemon icing off his fingers. "Many danger to traveler, yes?" he observed blandly. "Many land, many danger, far to home. Holluth just only boy. Later, changing; become—strong, so strong soul. Spirit leader. Now, just kid. I guard. Him." He grinned, proud of having negotiated all that and come up with the right pronoun, too. "Also, learning. Holluth to study here."

"But you can't just hang around John's store," I hissed. "You're *illegals*, I know you are!"

Serchio reached forward and tapped my wrist delicately with the bent knuckle of his forefinger.

"Not to stay long," he murmured. "Go away soon. No worry."

"What about—look, I saw him *do* something. I thought he made something dead come back to life. A dead bird, and they don't come any deader. Don't shake your head, I saw him. What *was* that?"

He took a breath, his face smooth with cunning. I was a teacher once, and I know that look.

"Don't think up a story!" I said sharply. "Just tell me."

"Trick." He twitched one shoulder in something not even a shrug.

"What do you mean, what kind of trick?"

"Little trick. No worry."

I folded my arms. "Damn it. That's not good enough. Explain."

He fixed me with a measuring stare. Then he said, "Watch Holluth close. Then *you* explain. Good gift, you hand," and he touched the back of my hand again. "You eye." A flick of his fingers toward my eyes

made me flinch. "Holluth watch you; you watch Holluth. Both to learn."

He reached for the remaining piece of cake on my plate: "Take back for him, later? Small boy, like sweet."

And he padded out into the spring haze.

Well, of course, a trick. But *what* trick?

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When someone (like John, say) offers me support, a platform of friendship or trust to work from, it generally collapses sooner or later: Saturn's influence. Then I feel guilty for having seduced them into being injured, along with me, by my bad stars. It doesn't make for easy friendships.

But sometimes the slow-moving train wreck that is my life falls behind a bit. Then I can pretend, for a while, that things run along as normally for me as they do for other people.

Like during that summer.

John's bookstore was in a good location. He'd had the space air-conditioned, too, and so far enough people were getting their cards read to make my hours there worth it. Between readings, I could work on the new play.

John didn't care about a steady clientele; he had a trust fund. Second Sight was his pastime and his passion, not his livelihood. He owned the whole building and lived very literally above the store, on the two upper floors.

As for me, I didn't give much of a damn about books any more, but I did give a damn about tall John Balem with his lean, greyhound limbs; John who had the wide, warm eyes of a Mediterranean tomb painting, John whom I loved.

He did not love me. He was ten years my junior and unlikely to fall for a retired middle-school teacher with a sweet tooth and hair that had never quite recovered from my first bout of SARS (or maybe from the treatment that had saved me). Besides, if he were ever to fall in love with me, you could practically guarantee that the store would catch fire or some prick from Homesecc would shut him down just for the hell of it. With a Saturn Affliction (another charming term the astrologers use), love tends to be a lot more trouble than it's worth.

Ask my first husband, whom I hadn't the heart to try to hold onto once he realized what was blocking his tenure at Columbia: my Saturn shadow, of course. Not to mention how it ruined poor Ted, who never would have started smuggling cheap drugs in from Canada if not for his slow decline as a textbook rep. The shadow had gotten him, too.

According to Bella, Saturn was supposed to start working *for* me (and, presumably, mine) in the latter part of my life; which was now. Maybe the old bastard couldn't keep me in mind long enough to remember to flip the switch from "stop" to "go," per the usual human schedule, at midlife.

Did I really believe any of that stuff? Of course not.

And absolutely. My life proved it to me every day. Between my upbringing and my weird little talent with the cards, I suppose you could call me a skeptic, which is not the same as an unbeliever. There's a ton of bunkum out there, and a handful of people who can handle spiritual tools with talent that goes beyond mere manipulation. It's mostly not real, but that doesn't mean it never is.

And believe me, there *is* such a thing as bad luck.

"But Edie," John had said, commiserating about my canceled workshop, "it's not as if you're one of these poor wannabes, writing your heart out year after year and never getting a production!"

In fact, the sale of *Sleight of Heart* to the movies, plus Ted's insurance money and my teacher's pension, allowed me to scrape by in Manhattan while I worked on my new play. The movie was never released, but Alec had invested the money for me, and not badly, either. Mustn't grumble, as my English grandma used to say; meaning, take your lumps in silence since nothing you say can divert the inexorable rain of lumps. She didn't say the silence had to be happy.

I can't deny it; I was not generally a jolly person. Check out Francisco Goya's "black paintings," in particular the nightmare image titled *Saturn Eating his Children*. The gnawed torso that the mad old monster clutches in his fists isn't smiling.

I wasn't even writing, really, just reworking the same few scenes over and over, because what was the point? *Sleight of Heart* had filled a theater in Seattle pretty well, right up until a more prestigious play by a radical European intellectual had been brought in to follow it. Since then, new stagings had been few and far between. None of my subsequent scripts did even that well. *Portia Faces Death* had never even had a staged reading.

I was angry a lot of the time, on a low, background simmer, which I considered a cut above the norm I saw around me (depressed, all of the time). But I slept well, maybe because my anger wore me out.

John, sweet John, slept badly. He had insomnia, and I liked to think that it was because of an unacknowledged yen for me nagging at his drowsy mind. No harm in imagining.

That Wednesday night, he was just too excited to sleep, too full of plans. I met him for coffee at a tatty old Starbucks that stayed open late. To my consternation, he told me that he had decided to invite the foreign boys to camp in the basement of his building. They had nowhere to sleep, he said, and were living behind a dumpster in back of a closed-up midtown hotel. The city shelters were out of the question, of course. Homesecc regularly checked there for illegals, fugitives, and suspects of all kinds.

"Don't do that, John," I said, glaring after our waitperson. I'd been brought the wrong order—a decaf cappuccino instead of an espresso with cream. For some reason the Saturn influence is particularly virulent in restaurant situations (plausible explanations could often be found, as in, "We just don't know what happened to your dinner order, ma'am—we found it in the fried-noodle basket."). The sheer *pettiness* of it grated.

"Look," I said, "you don't know these guys. What if they're drug runners or worse? What if they steal from you?"

"Edie," he said earnestly, "I don't want you to worry, all right? I had a long talk with Serchio this afternoon. Believe me, those boys are harmless." He smiled, with a nostalgic distance in his gaze. "I want to return the many kindnesses shown to me when I was a spoiled kid bopping around the world with too much money in my jeans and not enough sense in my head. These two remind me so much of tribal people I met then, people living a simpler life, a more numinous life."

Numinous. Sometimes I despaired of my fine John, cushioned by his family wealth against the rougher edges of ordinary life in our faltering wreck of a nation. Yet I could hardly refrain from grabbing his slender, generous hand and kissing it right there in public view.

"All right, what language do they speak to each other?" I said, attacking instead. "It might be some form of Arabic."

He looked alarmed. "No, no; one of the Andean dialects, more likely."

"How about learning English, though?" I persisted. "Holluth, at least, should be in school."

"I know. You let me talk to Serchio about that. Traditional people tend to take advice better from a man."

I let that by without comment. It was merely the truth.

My espresso came at last, without the cream I'd asked for. I know when I'm licked; I slugged it down, black and bitter, from the small white cup. "I think you should give them a little extra money, say thanks, and send them on their way."

"Eddie," he explained patiently, "they need help. Somebody's after them. Serchio told me—things are shifting, where they come from. It's too dangerous there; that's why they're on the road like this. They were persecuted at home. In Holluth's tribal group, community rituals that used to be open to all have been replaced by individual treatments, for pay. Only the rich get help now. A caste of priests are taking over and telling people what they can and can't do. Holluth is supposed to bring back the virtues of the old ways, egalitarian ways, respectful ways; if he survives to go home. "

"That's Serchio's story. If you ask me, he's full of crap."

John turned his cup in his long, thin fingers. Then he leaned nearer, his head very close to mine so that I could smell the bite of his aftershave. "Someone was waiting for them in the alley tonight, after closing. Eddie, I saw—"

"A performance," I interrupted. "Whatever you saw, it was some kind of an act put on for your benefit. They've picked up on how receptive you are, John. They're playing to your susceptibilities." I felt this conversation spiraling outward, beyond control.

"No, no, I was watching, I would have seen if there was some kind of setup."

"Watching?" I said.

"Holluth hasn't eaten for the past two days; that tipped me off. It's what people do when they're preparing to encounter spirit-beings."

I couldn't help it; I snorted with derision.

"Just listen," he said. "They were smoking in the alley by the store. The phone rang, and I looked away for a minute to answer it, and when I hung up I heard a scuffling sound outside. I opened the door a crack and looked—I was worried that maybe La Migra had them out there. But it was just Holluth, jumping around and trying to kick away something tangled around his feet. For a minute I thought it was the two boys fighting; except how could this little kid have knocked Serchio down on the ground?"

"Then Holluth shouted in their language, and something came whipping down between the walls of the alley. I couldn't see exactly, but it grabbed the attacker off the boy and shot back upward, carrying

the—the thing away with it."

I stared, my heart stamping hard. "A *thing* came down from the sky and hauled away another *thing*? John—"

He shook his head. "A hawk; it was a hawk. Maybe an eagle, even. Edie—the creature it dragged away—I heard it smacking against the alley walls as it was carried up, still struggling. It was a snake. A big, writhing snake."

He sat staring and blinking with amazement at what his mind's eye was seeing.

"I thought you couldn't see that well in the dark," I said, disbelieving. But believing, too. And if something like that *were* real, naturally it would happen before John's eyes, not mine. Sometimes it wasn't John I wanted, not really, but rather to *be* John, seeing with his dark, kind eyes before which true mysteries would display themselves, feeling with his warm heart, thinking with his eager and accepting mind that never aged.

"I couldn't see," he whispered. He closed his eyes. "But I did, Edie. Not just with my eyes. For the first time, truly, not just with my eyes."

"And where was Serchio while this magical ascension was occurring?" I inquired tartly.

He shook his head again, mute.

"It was a flashback." I tried for a softer tone. "A visit from the ghost of the rain forest, John. One of your ayahuasca trips from the old days came back to haunt you, that's all. Those two remind you of those times, you said so yourself."

He sighed. "Sometimes you are so right, Edie. But not this time."

My cream came, much too late. I glared at it and said, "Magic Realism is so passé."

John smiled sadly. "I'm not wise myself, or gifted. I just sell books and mystical paraphernalia, so I give someone like you, someone with a real psychic talent, a place to use it. I'm shackled to the physical myself, but I recognize spiritual power in others."

"Tarot is just a game," I said. This was a lie; sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't. "I don't know how to explain it, but that doesn't mean I can be played for a sucker by a couple of con artists."

He looked at me with such pained concern that I wanted to slap him awake. "Edie. The cards really speak to you. Why do you think your clients come back for more?" He stopped, and then went on in a lower tone, "Besides, you saw. I watched you watching Holluth reanimate that dead bird. And tonight I saw him fight off some kind of a demon, with the aid of—" He gestured upward. "Spirit help." His eyes glittered.

"Illusion," I snapped. "He's a kid, traveling with an older, smarter operator. Holluth, the wizard-boy, doesn't know to flush the damn toilet if you don't remind him. And Serchio is a con-artist if ever I've ever seen one, and believe me, I've seen plenty."

John stared past me at the rain-drizzled window, his whole body taut with longing. "So have I. These guys aren't like that. They're real. I want to learn from them."

He wanted to keep them with him, he meant. He wanted to tame them.

.

I went looking for Serchio early, before the store opened, next day. He and Holluth were standing in the side alley, smoking sweet-spiced bidis and waiting for John to come downstairs and unlock the door for them.

"Morning, missis," Serchio said, politely putting out his smoke. Holluth tucked his own quenched fag over his ear. He looked pretty perky, demon serpents and magical hawks notwithstanding.

"Serchio," I said, "John is going to ask you and Holluth to bed down here in the store basement at night. I want you to say no. Tell him you already have a place."

"But don't having," Serchio said, smiling. "John is kind."

"Well, I'm not," I said. "And I know it if you don't: if anybody asks questions about you two, John will be screwed."

"John is kind," Serchio repeated, "and raining tonight."

I hooked my thumb at Holluth. "Serchio, you sleep somewhere besides this store or so help me, I'll call Children's Services on you myself."

I must have sounded convincing. Holluth pulled his hand out of the slash pocket of his yellow plastic windbreaker and pointed at me. He held a gray feather, the rounded tip aimed at my chest, and he uttered an indescribable sound. I felt the air ripple heavily, like a wake of ocean water pouring invisibly in my direction, a sensation that made the hair stand up on my scalp. The vibration rolled past on either side of me, and something thumped and clattered loudly behind my back.

Serchio grabbed the boy's shoulder, barking a command. Holluth ignored him, frowning down at the feather in his hand the way a movie gunman glares at his pistol when it has jammed. He twisted out of Serchio's grip and turned his back on both of us.

"Jesus," I breathed. I felt cold.

Slowly, I turned my head to look back over my shoulder. The old delivery van parked in front of the Korean grocery across the street had dropped its driver-side door onto the tarmac. I thought, with a thrill, of the title of a book John had lent me once about a magical murder in Australia: *A Bone is Pointed*.

Holluth had pointed a feather at me, expecting it to do something. Which it had, apparently.

"Bad guys chase last night," Serchio said calmly to me, making no effort to deny what had just happened. "Little bit nerves now. Say sorry, Holluth." He repeated more loudly, "Holluth, say sorry."

"Sorry, missis," Holluth said in his husky voice, and began kicking at the base of the alley wall with the toe of his sneaker.

The latch to the side door clicked and John let us all in. As soon as we stepped inside, I told him that Serchio and Holluth would be sleeping on the roof of my four-story walkup.

I had a sort of greenhouse up there, over an abandoned apartment with nobody in it to complain about leakage. I had rigged a sizable waterproof tarpaulin over my small store of tools and supplies. The boys were not likely to be seen if they were careful, and there were other roofs nearby to run over and rusty fire escapes to rattle down if they did have to make a run for it, which was better than being cornered in John's basement.

I wasn't going to let them spend any more time with him than I could help. They weren't good for him. He was too experienced to be chasing New Age rainbows like some teenaged airhead.

Of course he protested my *fait accompli*. Serchio stood nodding and smiling while we argued, as if he didn't understand any of it, just wanted to please. But he stood a little behind me, holding Holluth's hand in his, demonstrating his choice.

I'd never known John to be a fighter. He advanced by persisting, his voice only getting softer, more persuasive. When he still couldn't move forward, he bent around the obstacle to reach what he wanted.

"All right, then," he said at last, "but, Serchio, I want you and Holluth to keep coming to the store daytimes. I still have work for you, paid work. You can't expect Edie to carry the costs of your food, and you'll need cash for other expenses."

On the spot, I think, he came up with the additional work he had in mind: he wanted them to shift all the cartons and shelving in the stockroom so that they could patch and paint the walls and ceiling and refinish the floor in there. If he couldn't have them all to himself, he at least wanted them under his eye during store hours.

The stockroom, where nobody went but us.

I thought about it later—why I was so dead set against John's view of the visitors. I'd been so whipsawed about this kind of thing—learning to see through tricks and traps as a kid, and then finding my own small talent that was *not* a trick. Yet all the spells and mumbo-jumbo of Bella Salazar and people like her hadn't been able to stop the fundies from turning the country into the biggest banana republic in the Western hemisphere. So what did "magic" boil down to?

Now here was this little kid and his keeper, and the boy's ability was gigantic, life-and-death, and, so far as I could see, untroubled by any ripples of doubt. Maybe I was just envious; Ted would have said so, and he would have laughed and made horrible puns until I laughed, too.

But Ted was gone and John, with his sentimental yearning for the "numinous," was there instead, entranced by these kids, who could turn out to be dangerous in several different ways. I meant to protect him, even if it meant taking them home with me instead of seeing them move into John's basement.

Getting up the stairs at home kept me in reasonable shape, though I cursed and swore the whole way (going down, you could hear my knee-joints grinding from out in the street). Serchio and Holluth trotted home ahead of me that evening, lugging my bags of supplies, taking the stairs like two gazelles.

The old brownstone tenement had been empty for two years except for me, up top, and Mrs. Minetta who lived in back on the ground floor. She was very deaf and nearly blind. Together and without ever speaking of it, we were waiting for the next round of luxury-tower construction to stamp our decrepit block out of existence. The most recent building boom had been choked to a halt by yet another war-driven economic crunch. We were safe in our squalor for the time being.

I didn't let the boys into my apartment but showed them up onto the rooftop, with its sun-bubbled tar and guano-streaked parapets. They had blankets to sleep in and a covered plastic bucket for a toilet which

they would have to empty down in the basement, where the super had once lived. They seemed to find this arrangement entirely satisfactory, being clearly used to much rougher conditions.

Like in my dream, except there had only been one foreigner entrusted to me. Though frankly I didn't think of Serchio as in my charge, so "entrusted" didn't exactly apply. But I had them diverted, at least part of the time, from John's store.

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Alec came by Second Sight next morning.

"Hey," he said, "look what I found on one of those vendor's tables on Fourteenth Street." He handed me a beat-up copy of my book, *Master Packs*, to put on John's used bookshelves. I was glad to see it there again; someone had shoplifted the previous copy, which I suppose was flattery of a kind. Some card readers have told me that they swear by my book, although it went out of print three months after publication. Used copies go fast.

"Nice present," I said, stretching up to give him a peck on the cheek. "I can use a little pick-me-up. I got a phone call this morning; the revival of *Sleight* is off. Bad code violations in the theatre; they've been closed down indefinitely."

He grimaced in sympathy. "The whole city's falling apart, isn't it? Look, let me take you to lunch, cuz."

He was peering past me at the two boys in the stockroom while we talked out in front. They'd brought a pizza for their own lunch, and today Holluth was digging in with gusto. Apparently no hawks or snakes were due in that night.

Over vegetarian sandwiches at Patel's, Alec said, "They are interesting, your boys—unusually calm and self-contained. Did you see? They had a radio in there, but they weren't listening to it."

"John thinks they're some kind of specially authentic primitives," I growled. My mood was, as you might expect, pretty foul. "Witch doctors; medicine men. He's regressed to the naivete of his twenties, all gullible and starry-eyed. He's let them bewitch him, Alec."

"I've got a couple of ideas about them, some research I can do." Alec patted my hand. "Don't be jealous, Edie."

Alec's an arrogant bastard sometimes, but he's never been stupid.

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They camped on my roof all that summer. At least they escaped the bugs up there; a rare visit from the exterminator occurred while I was out, and Mrs. Minetta of course forgot to send him up to my

apartment.

I had never had tomatoes like the ones grown on my roof that year, such succulent green beans, such sweetly perfumed squash. If I could have expanded the dirt boxes to cover the whole roof, I'd have made a fortune at the farmers' market in Union Square. Holluth had an astoundingly green thumb. Serchio displayed an unexpected gift for numbers, so John started teaching him bookkeeping at the store. He told people that Serchio was an exchange student from India studying small business techniques, and that Holluth was his visiting kid brother.

On days that Holluth stayed home I would call him down to my apartment and try to teach him to read, using books borrowed from the store. In the privacy of my little yellow kitchen he would lean quite unselfconsciously against my side and study the illustrations intently. The small-boy scent of him was much like the remembered scent of my nephew, but overlain with smoke and pizza smells.

Holluth had more old scars on his solid little body than Dylan had ever had, confirming a rougher, earthier, and more routinely dangerous background. Most visibly, a thin weal of raised flesh divided the black hair just over Holluth's right ear. I didn't ask about it, or about the faded blue tattoos on his thin arms.

Curiously, I found that his attempt to put a hex on me with that feather warmed me toward him. A person who is distressed when his black magic malfunctions is basically serious, and I respected that. I certainly liked his impetuous act of aggressive self-defense better than Serchio's duplicity, and I appreciated how, without missing a beat, the smaller boy had switched from wanting me to teach him the Tarot to seeing me as expendable when I made a threat. Those are the kind of reflexes you needed to keep you up and running in this world.

We'd had a muffling distance between us, like any teacher and pupil, mediated always by the watchful, controlling presence of Serchio. From that point on Holluth and I interacted more naturally, on a basis of guarded, mutual respect. Coming from a different culture he wasn't easy to read, but our little contretemps seemed to reset both of us to a live connection.

As a student, he was a challenge. I kept trying; I liked unpacking and applying some of my old skills, and I did have some encouragement. Once I found him lying in the shade of the roof awning chanting to himself snatches of a text we had gone over recently—"Twelve liddel girrs in two straight line." So he memorized what I read to him, though I don't think he ever connected print on paper with spoken words. He was satisfied to sing the story after me, mimicking my voice without a trace of mockery.

At one point I thought he might be retarded. But he looked at me with those dark, sober eyes, and I remembered how American Indian children were called stupid when they were only retreating from a competitive style of education that was completely alien to them.

I tried changing the orphans in my Water Wars play into two Hispanic boys. It didn't help.

Remarkably, there was no trouble. After the first week, I stopped listening for van doors slamming in the street and cops banging up the stairs like on the night Homesec had taken a family of Algerians from the third floor. Serchio and his charge were apparently good at keeping their profiles low, despite the fact that some nights I heard what sounded like dancing up on the roof, quick steps in a regular rhythm. Then there would be quiet punctuated by whistling sounds, like some kind of signals.

I ignored it all and minded my own business. Serchio's knuckle tapping my wrist, his fingers flicking at my face, had wakened caution in me. And what I really cared about was insulating John from them.

Sometimes I would wait till I knew they'd gone out and go upstairs for a peek. I never found anything but

their meager belongings stowed under the tarp in an old wooden crate. I often didn't hear them come back upstairs during the night, but there they would be after sunrise, pouring hot tea from their red plastic thermos bottle. They loved lapsang souchong. I indulged them in this one expensive taste. It was a small thing, an easy thing and safe, like tossing meat scraps to captive leopards.

John never really forgave me for stealing them out from under his nose. Whenever I came to the store he asked about them, their lives on my rooftop, their habits and routines pursued out of his sight. I was noncommittal and tried to avoid his reproachful looks.

He had long conversations with Serchio at lunchtime or at the end of the business day, while I selected books with Holluth (*Ferdand de Boll*) or went over card spreads with him. I thought Serchio had more sense than to tell John anything important, like why the birds didn't strip my roof garden plants that summer, as usual.

The falcon kept them away.

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One predawn in July I was roused by a staccato piping sound drifting down past my bedroom window. I shrugged on my bathrobe and huffed up the stairs.

Holluth stood silhouetted against the pale sky, bare feet planted apart on the parapet; Serchio wasn't around. As I watched, the boy made the whistling call again with his hands cupped around his mouth. For a minute nothing happened. Then a bird flew up from below the parapet and settled, fluttering, in his outstretched palm.

It was a small bird, indistinct in that early light, very black; I thought I knew exactly what bird it was. I'd have believed myself still asleep and dreaming except for how the cool summer dawn softened the air, damp with the breath of the Hudson River. And my feet were cold.

Holluth raised both hands over his head, the bird quiet in the cage of his fingers. He threw back his head and sent a high, harsh call up into the sky.

Almost at once, something dark and compact plummeted down at incredible speed, banking at the last minute but still striking hard enough to knock Holluth's raised hands aside. I flinched back into the shelter of the doorway housing. Wings dug loudly into the air, *whup, whup*, and the hawk surged upward again with the little bird twitching in its talons. I saw dark dappling on the hawk's under parts, and then it swooped away toward a clutch of tall condos and office buildings to the north.

Holluth turned to look at me then, while he licked at a thin line of blood that ran down from his palm along his forearm.

I scurried back downstairs, shivering.

Peregrines have nested for years in the upper ledges of Manhattan skyscrapers; I may have seen them myself from time to time without knowing it. They're migratory up and down the east coast, which is why they're called "peregrine"—the word means "wanderer" or "pilgrim." They build their springtime nests in the most inaccessible heights of human constructions now that the forests are gone and the cliffs are

covered with high-rise condos.

I don't think anyone has ever seen a wild hawk take prey offered in the naked hands of a human being. It was almost as good a trick as John's huge serpent being carried away into the sky. I didn't understand it, and I didn't know how to think about what I had seen, so I pushed it to the back of my mind and said nothing about it, particularly to John.

That was the day that the cooler, wetter weather arrived.

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During quiet hours at the bookstore, Holluth sat across from me in the querant's chair, his chin braced on his square small hands, studying the cards. He didn't learn the meanings particularly fast, but his attention span was remarkable for a child and once he learned he did not forget. Sometimes he'd pick out a card and hold it against the side of his head, with his eyes closed. I asked him why.

He looked at me as if it were a trick question. "To learn song."

"What song?" I said. "Can you sing it for me?"

"My song for me, missis," he whispered, dropping his gaze. "Other song for you."

I mentioned this, lightly, to John, doling out what I had that he wanted, to draw the light of his attention. He gave me that sorrowful look that meant I was treating casually something precious that he wished had been offered to him instead of to me.

"Spirit beings train a young shaman by teaching him songs of power," he said. "Those cards tell you the future. He wants them to tell him things, too."

Good luck, laddie, I thought; so far as I could tell, whatever it is that makes a person more than just a fake with the cards, Holluth didn't have it. What I think about the Tarot is that it's a way of disconnecting the rational mind so that you can reach out with your naked intuition and pick up some of the thought patterns of your querant; if you're any good, that is. Holluth was clearly coming to it from another direction, stolid as an engineering student.

Reader or not, though, Holluth's presence had a strong effect on my own card-reading business. Lots of people came in, often just to get out of the rain (it had turned into quite a wet summer), and then requested readings. Some clients asked Holluth to sit in, which Bella explained to me one morning.

In consolation for the business deal that had, as I had foretold, gone wrong, I gave in and did a three-card spread for her on a particular question. It was about the Montauk vacation again, now only a week away.

"I want the little boy here for this," she said, craning her neck to look around for Holluth. "Where is he?"

He was out buying shoes with Serchio, or so they'd said; who knew? More likely sneaking in to see a movie, I told her. John said Holluth loved movies.

Bella sighed. "I'd rather wait till he's here, Edie."

"Why?" It took something major to divert her when she was hot on the trail of a better future than the one she saw coming for herself. She pouted her lips, holding out (sometimes when you predict bad things and they happen, you catch a little of the blame just as if you had caused the black events instead of just getting a sniff of them in the wind).

I shuffled the deck; Bella primed to talk was Bella talking, sooner or later.

Sure enough, after about twenty seconds she flopped forward with her elbows on the table and said in an urgent whisper, "The guy you did a reading for last week—Richie, from the magazine store on Greenwich? He's been sick for almost a year, something he was exposed to in the army he thinks. He's not sick now, not since you read the cards for him while that kid watched. He says the boy has healing powers."

I hooted. This was over the edge, even for Bella.

"No, really, Edie." She glanced around to make sure no one could overhear. "Richie only came for that reading because of what happened to Luanne after you read for her with the kid looking over your shoulder."

"Who's Luanne?"

"Nature's Foods, the weekend clerk. She's had a lump in her breast for months, scaring the life out of her. She just saw the doctor again, and the lump is gone." Bella hitched closer, pleading. "I have a spot on my lung, Edie. Sometimes it's hard to breathe. Another SARS outbreak could kill me. When will Holluth be here again?"

Well, I couldn't keep that to myself. I told John about it as we closed up that evening. "Can you believe it?" I scoffed. "Next thing you know they'll be lighting shrine candles outside the store. I *told* you those boys would be a problem!"

John let me rant on. He got a far-off look, though, and out in the alley, holding the bin open for me to dump in some store trash, he said at last, "The boys won't let anything bad happen to us on their account, Edie. Don't head home yet, come back inside for a minute; I need to explain something."

He pulled the shade, sat me down at my card table, and brought me a can of soda from the half-fridge in back. "Let's lay our cards on the table, here." A quick smile, shy and complicit at the same time, and then gravity again. "Serchio has finally admitted to me that Holluth is a shaman. He can heal because the peregrine falcon is his ally."

"Shamans are crooks who pretend to dig tumors out of people with their fingers. For pay, of course. You know better than this, John."

He ignored this and went on, speaking with an annoying calmness. "The true shaman gets his call sometime in childhood or adolescence. He attracts power animals that take him on spirit journeys to other worlds and teach him to master different kinds of power; a wolf, a whale—a hawk."

"So what about Serchio?" I said, trying to break the spell (*but I saw that dead bird fly, and I saw the falcon strike*). "Is he a shaman, too?"

"He's the shaman's helper, the one who tends the fire and beats the drum."

"Serchio? That guy wouldn't stand around beating a drum for anybody."

John smiled serenely. I could have kicked him. "What do you think, then? What is Holluth?"

"Dangerous, that's what he is; they both are." Sexy, I thought, surprising myself with the thought, about Serchio. He was, too, in a slinky, rawboned way. I didn't like the thought and wished I could unthink it.

John sighed. "I shouldn't have said anything. You get so upset about these kids! What is it, were you brought up too Christian to tolerate a few small pagan miracles?"

"I was brought up by people who sold professional fakers their stage setups. My dad played a lot of poker. He only won when he cheated, which was a lot of the time. You're naive, John, in ways that I'm not." *But the boy pointed that feather, the boy gave the hawk a sacrifice ...*

Folding his arms across his chest, John replied, "You won't have to put up with them much longer. Serchio says their enemies are closing in, so they can't stay. They'll be gone soon."

Serchio had told me weeks ago that they'd be moving on. Confirmation now brought no relief. I read in John's face that when they did finally leave, he meant to go with them.

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Alec invited himself over. He said he had some news, but strung me along all through spaghetti and salad. We talked about a Caryl Churchill revival we had both seen, a wild, almost choral piece that struck home as a conversation among the newly dead. I had thrown my own new play away afterward, and then had to fish the crumpled pages out of the trash again. Not that I told Alec that.

Leaving the dirty dishes on the table, I went down to sit on the stoop with him in the mild, dewy night. He reached over lazily and poked my knee. "Hey, guess what? I've solved it. I know what pattern your magic boy fits."

I tucked an old sports section of the Sunday Times between my behind and the wet stone step and muttered gloomily, "He's a baby medicine man, according to John."

"Oh, it's more than that," Alec said. He sounded very pleased with himself. "I was thinking about the woman you mentioned, the one with the vanishing lump, and I asked myself: Who cures the lame and the halt and, in this case, the lumpy? For that matter, who raises the dead, even if it's only a dead bird? Actually, revivifying a dead bird is a perfectly appropriate miracle for a Messiah-in-training from some remote tribe of hunter-gatherers."

I snorted. "Oh, stop it, Alec."

"He even has his first disciple—Serchio. His second, too, if John is as smitten as you think." He chortled. "John the Baptist, maybe?"

"You're crazy," I said. But I was thinking, *The dead bird flew away, and came back to be offered up to the peregrine.*

"Also you say he has enemies, which is par for this particular course even if his aren't priests or kings but mysterious pursuers who can turn into flying snakes. Sounds more like magical rivals who want to shut the kid up."

"Oh, baloney, Alec! He can barely speak English; he's not saying anything."

"Not yet." Alec raised an admonitory finger. "Serchio is trying to make sure the kid grows up enough to be listened to when he does talk, back where people are primed to hear what he has to say. The two of them are only hiding out here till their local prophecies start coming true. Then the triumphant return, amazement, revelation!"

"Sure," I scoffed. "Holluth will amaze a bunch of savages by showing them how to tie a napkin around their hawk's neck before feeding it a live bird."

"Lots of people from hunter-gatherer tribes converted really fast to Christianity, you know." Alec loved an argument. "And all the ayahuasqueros in South America claim to be Christian; they include prayers to Jesus in their ceremonies. I'm just saying, there doesn't have to be a conflict between a Judeo-Christian religion and a hunting society with a leaning toward shamanism. There are good ways and bad ways to do any spiritual practice; according to the anthropologists, sorcerers and witches are shamans gone bad, so why couldn't they have an exalted type of shaman at the opposite end of the spectrum? Anyway, who says you can't have a messiah unless you've got cities and some priest-ridden religion all written out in a book?"

I said, "Alec, Holluth picks his *nose*. Are you telling me that little Jesus picked his *nose*?"

He laughed. "What do you think? There are Gospels telling us that Jesus raised hell as a little boy, changing the neighbors' kids into bushes and rocks and things for teasing him. That's why those particular Gospels got axed. The early Church fathers couldn't stand the idea of their messiah bullying his little playmates."

"Holluth is no Jesus Christ!" I protested.

"Well, no, not exactly." Alec gazed up thoughtfully at the dim night sky. "He couldn't return as actual *Jesus*. There's controversy over what Jesus looked like. A lot of folks wouldn't go for a little brown kid built like a dump truck."

"So Holluth is the Second Coming of Somebody Else?"

"I'm just saying he seems to be following in some very famous footsteps, however crudely."

"Crudely! He pointed a goddamned feather at me, Alec, with destructive intentions. He's a savage little primitive."

"So?" he retorted. "Who says there weren't other messiahs before Jesus, rougher models cut to suit Paleolithic societies? People like Jesus could have turned up among the cavemen, teaching that they should share the hunting grounds and flint mines instead of killing each other over them. We wouldn't know, because nobody could write yet."

"You don't really believe that."

He yawned largely, like a sleepy lion. "I'm no more religious than you are, Edie. But if there's really a new messiah due—and candidates have been popping up all over the world for decades now—well, the kid could fit the pattern, albeit a little crudely."

I stood up. "Journalism is making you crazy; you need another line of work. In any case, our *visitation* by little Jesus of the Raptors is almost over. John says they're leaving soon, on the run from bad guys like that snake-thing John says he saw."

Alec laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back on the upper steps, eyes closed. "The flight into Egypt," he murmured. "Except for the snake part."

"Whatever you've been using today, Alec," I said, "you're not sleeping it off here. Thanks for the theory. Now go home. I want to get some sleep myself."

But, for a change, I didn't, not right away. I couldn't stop thinking about that hawk.

.....

A high, cold cry woke me very early. I pulled on a robe and hustled myself up the stairs, still half asleep. The boys were gone. So were their blankets, and their beloved red plastic thermos. The old crate they'd stored their things in was placed neatly under the tarp, with nothing in it now but my gardening tools.

Oh, no, I thought. They've run out on us.

But above the Hudson I saw a hawk circling. Its call came down to me again, sharp and hectoring, and I thought, *If you're still hanging around, maybe they're still here, too.* I went back down to dress and walked fast over to the bookstore. The streets were full of the peculiar moist tenderness of the city's air at dawn. I didn't see another soul.

At Second Sight the blind was still down, but the side door was unlocked. As I let myself in, Serchio reached past me and shut the door again, quickly but quietly. All the lights were on inside. I saw blood crusted across his wrist, like claw marks that had just scabbed over. His shirt was stained, and he smelled hot and unwashed.

Holluth crouched at the foot of the tall wooden counter with his arms over his head, making little sounds. I pushed past Serchio and squatted down to give the little boy a tentative hug. Holluth rolled into my arms and sobbed on my shoulder with his thin arms tight around my neck, which left me leaning clumsily into his warm weight to keep from falling over backward.

"Holluth, what—?"

Serchio said in a weary tone, "He still cries for his mother when something goes wrong."

I glared up at him, my arms around the weeping boy, my knees pinging like tight-drawn rubber bands. "What happened to your accent, Serchio? You goddamned fraud, I knew it!"

He shrugged. "I have a gift for languages; otherwise what good would I be to Holluth on his journey? John keeps first-aid things here somewhere, doesn't he?"

He did, and I used them on Holluth, who had a cut on his cheek and some other scrapes; as far as I was concerned, Serchio could look after himself. The boy didn't say anything while I doctored him, keeping silent except for some subdued snuffling and coughing. I didn't ask him any questions. By the time I finished being artful with the band-aids to make them cover all his scratches, he had fallen into a doze. I lugged him over to the sofa, where he curled up at once, asleep or passed out.

In the stockroom, Serchio was sitting on a stack of book cartons, eating a bagel and a chunk of old cheese from the fridge. I perched on the third step of the paint-crusted stepladder, facing him.

"Talk," I said, "or I'll have the cops here in five minutes, and no pointed feathers are going to stop me, either."

He tossed back water from a paper cup. "Holluth met the witches and drove them away. They marked us both this time, but still we won. I was right to bring him here. He's grown stronger."

"He's all scratched up. I thought you were guarding him."

He crumpled the damp paper cup in his fingers and studied its twisted shape. "His people believe that each soul plans its life before being born. They believe he chose to be what he is now, and also what he will become. Sometimes helping him means standing back and letting events draw out his strengths."

I wiped my hands on my shirt. "Tough love, right? You fake!" But fake *what*, exactly? It was driving me crazy.

"Try not be angry with us," he said. I could see his focus change—snap!—just like that, from Holluth and his accomplishments to me and what Serchio thought he could wheedle out of me. "Let him sleep there until John comes. We'll leave for good before noon."

"Taking what with you?" I saw that they had a backpack and an ancient L.L. Bean duffle, one end reinforced with gray duct tape, stacked against the counter's end. *Blankets*, I thought, *spare clothes*. "What do you want from John?"

"What he gives us. Money for work, to buy food."

"Why him?" I demanded. "Why this bookstore?"

Serchio's lips curled in a grin. "You. Holluth saw you through the window. He came here to find power. You showed him power in your cards."

Tarot's just a trick, I thought automatically, the comforting lie again. Out loud I said angrily, "This isn't the land of the spirits." I said coldly, "There are no magic animals here to help the kid out."

"But there are; and not only animals."

He shot me an odd, secretive glance, and this opened the dusty air between us somehow so that for a split second I saw a deep red shine in his hair; also a flash, a glimpse, of a sharp, velvety muzzle, a narrow pink tongue licking cheese crumbs off dark lips.

"*Fox!*" I gasped. Coyote, trickster, here in John's store? "Liar!" I said, with a breathless laugh: Gotcha! "Holluth already has his power animal, the hawk."

"A great shaman finds many helpers." Again the keen stare, interrogative this time; assessing. "Are you one?"

"No."

No? How could I say so, how could I be sure? Everything was changed. He was Fox, and Holluth was a boy-shaman; I felt something at my core bend, crack, and accept it. Chilly sweat broke out on my face. "Why should I help you take Holluth away? People here say he can cure them."

"Holluth didn't come here to stay. He came to find power to take home to his own people."

"We're people, too," I protested. "How about using whatever he's found here to help the people who *live* here?"

Serchio looked at me with sympathy now, maybe; hard to tell, with those tawny eyes. "It is true," he said, "you do have lots of witches, educated and rich and rotten in the heart. But, Edie—for Holluth's own

people it's worse. All they know is spells and curses and fear of the night and of each other, a dark, hard, frightening world. They haven't had their *first* coming yet."

I thought, *God damn it, Alec was right.*

He tossed the crumpled cup lightly, overhand, into the wastebasket in the corner. "It was foretold, a long time since: Holluth will bring changes. He'll come home transformed by his spirit journey, and also transform the people around him. People are waiting for that day."

Furiously, I blinked back hot and sudden tears. "We're waiting, too!"

He seemed nonplussed for the first time. "Not for Holluth. Didn't your cards tell you? You have new messengers, too, already born and growing."

"Sure, sure, everybody's been expecting Jesus for generations, and a lot of good it's done them." I slapped my thighs in frustration. "Look around you, look at us! You've been here long enough to see that what a mess we're in. It just gets worse, and nobody turns up to fix any of it!"

Stretching out his long legs in their tight jeans, Serchio shook his head. "Oh, Edie; you think someone like Holluth comes and fixes things? Is that what happened after your Christ showed himself? The person cures, teaches, points a better way to the people near him. By the time the rest of your world learns about it, he's dead, usually in some ugly way. Then the lies start, and the wars over what that person really said or didn't say."

Two thousand years and more of human history, thrown in my face by a fox-man; what could I say to this summary of the life and times of Christ, Buddha, Gandhi, who knew how many others who never made it even as far as they had? Poor Holluth, curled up on the couch: the boy from my dream, the Expected One, the Magic Boy—but not *our* Magic Boy. Somebody else's.

I let out a breath, defeated. "What do you need?"

"You'll know."

"How?"

He smiled slyly. "We'll tell you."

I frowned at him. "You'll draw attention to yourself, moving. You could stay on my roof awhile longer." That, at least, was a risk I was familiar with.

He shook his head. "Holluth needs his education. We have people to see out in your deserts and forests."

"Deserts, yes," I said. "Forests? What planet do you think you're on?"

His silence was sudden and absolute, and it said, *Not our own.*

Some greener place, then, still in the grip of ancient demons of land, sea, and sky. *Your world.* Words he had spoken moments before came back to me, ringing hard, like a steel bell. It hadn't been mistaken English, and he'd been speaking literally.

"Oh, shit," I groaned. I yanked at my own hair with both hands to wake myself up and get out of this insane conversation. "Shit, shit, shit!"

Serchio put his paw—hand, paw, my vision shifted maddeningly—on my arm. It rested there, warm and

light. "Just let us stay for now," he said. "No police. John is bringing his car from where he keeps it, in some uptown garage. He said he would drive us."

Everything became very clear: the quiet, mote-dancing air of the bookstore, the lingering bite of the furniture oil they had rubbed into the tall wooden counter, Holluth's snuffly child-snores. My thoughts followed each other as calmly and simply as sentences in one of the children's books Holluth loved so much: these two would take John away with them. John would leave me behind with no more than a backward glance, however kind that one glance might be. He would get what he'd been wanting for years, ever since he'd put down roots in this building: to leave, cut loose, to close his store and follow a holy man.

"Serchio," I said, "but there's something I want, too. I want a cure."

He looked at me, puzzled. "You're not sick."

"No," I said. "Not in my body. In my life. There's this, this shadow over my whole life, Serchio, like a curse—"

He said, "The raven, yes. It covers you."

I gawked, mouth open. Then I whispered, "You can see it?"

He nodded, watching me curiously.

I breathed deeply. "Holluth has to get rid of it. I want him to point his damned feather or do whatever it takes to open my Saturn cage and let me out."

"But there is no cage," he said. "You chose the shadow, as Holluth chose all this."

My throat closed, choking my voice into an angry hiss. "Chose, my ass! What are you talking about? Bella showed me on my chart—it's the stars, not me! And you owe me, Serchio, you both owe me!"

He came and took my hand in both of his. "Edie," he said anxiously, "don't you understand? The shadow belongs to you. It's part of you."

My throat hurt with the effort not to yell, but I didn't pull away. As long as he held my hand like that there was a chance that he would stop this horrible nonsense and do as I asked, now, before the two of them left for good. I leaned closer toward him, vibrating with anger and need.

"Holluth cured a woman," I said, "a stranger who did nothing for him. He cured her of breast cancer! What about me? How much would it take just to roll this boulder off my life? I hid you, I protected you!"

As I said this, I understood why Serchio had agreed to hide out on my roof instead of in John's basement. He'd wanted the shield of my Saturn shroud over himself and Holluth. What hid me from the sunlight of my heart's desire also hid me from spite and persecution—while I slowly suffocated in the dark.

I sat appalled and silent. Serchio bent nearer, patting my hand. He gave off a shocking amount of heat, or maybe I was just turning to cold stone where I sat.

"Ah, no, Edie," he coaxed, his head so close to mine that his coarse hair brushed my temple, "it's impossible. Even if Holluth could do what you ask, Old Shadow Man would tear your heart out with his talons as he left."

"You're afraid," I spat. "You're afraid my damned curse would attach itself to you instead—or to Holluth, your precious Holluth!"

Now he let me go, straightened up, and stood back from me. "That could happen," he said gravely. "You know more about these things than you realize. Think, and you'll see that it's wrong for Holluth to try to drive away the darkness that you've chosen to give shape to your light."

I got up and walked dully out of the stockroom to go sit at my Tarot table, watching the street outside brighten. A red pulse shook in my head with each beat of my heart. If I'd seen a way to turn the two of them in to Homesecc without getting John arrested, too—and me with him—I would have taken it.

.....

Years later—a matter of ten minutes, perhaps—John ducked in swiftly at the side door, carrying a bulging plastic shopping bag which he set down on the counter. His face looked gray, and his voice came strained and breathless. "I don't think I can drive you boys. I know I said I would do it, but you have to understand—everything's changed."

Serchio slumped against the front door, his forearm across his eyes. Holluth sat up on the old couch, looking fearfully at John.

I watched all of them from the center of exhausted anger, unable to care at all, while my voice said mechanically, "What's happened, John? What's wrong?"

He crossed to the window with his long, loose stride and stood to the side, carefully easing the edges of two blind-slats apart so he could look outside without being seen. "They'll be watching us," he said lowly. "I'm sure of it; the street, the whole block. Richie told me, over at Nature's Gifts. I stopped there for some snacks to take in the car, and he said the Homesecc came and took away the Koreans across the street last night. That's why their store is closed this morning. You can see that their front door's been sealed, over there."

He turned back to all of us, his eyes glaring wide. "Four this morning, right across the street there; I was awake upstairs, reading, but I never heard a thing. There's some new uproar with Korea, it's in the papers, so they're rounding people up again. They'll have left watchers, in case they missed anybody. So it's impossible now: three men of color piling into a car with luggage—they'll see us, they'll stop us."

Nobody spoke for a minute. Then Serchio said softly, "You are rich, John. Would they really trouble you?"

John laughed angrily, the first trace of spirit he had shown since he'd come in. "Yes, I'm rich compared to most people. But I'm not white. It can make a hell of a difference, Serchio, as I'm sure you know yourself just from your time here."

Serchio said softly, insistently. "We can't stay any longer. We must go."

John said helplessly, "Then go, Serchio." He gestured limply at the white plastic bag, lumpy with bags of chips and cans of soda from Richie's store. "Take that. It's for you. I'm sorry."

"Help us," Serchio said. "You said you would help us."

My anger vanished. I sat frozen with dread that he would change John's mind, even use magic on him somehow to make John do as he had promised. I couldn't think of anything to say to prevent it. I watched John, wavering, open his mouth to speak, shake his lowered head, and rub both hands across his close-cropped scalp so that I heard the whisper of his hair against his palms.

He turned suddenly to Holluth. "Can you do something, Holluth? A spell, a protection? Something to give us an edge?"

Holluth glanced anxiously at Serchio. "Try," he husked. "You trust? Must be trust."

Serchio nodded, his eyes intent on John. "Trust," he echoed. "You've seen things before, John. You know things can be done."

Sweat gleamed on John's forehead. "Sometimes, yes. But sometimes the shirts the shamans said were made bulletproof at the Ghost Dance can turn out to be ordinary shirts, against ordinary bullets."

"Cards," I croaked, spinning the deck through my hands, searching desperately for the cards I needed, cards I could palm, rig somehow—The Tower, where was The Tower? I held the cards so that I could see them, just, with my peripheral vision even though my gaze was fixed on John. "I'll do a reading for you. Then you'll know how it will come out if you go with them."

John stared at me for a moment—I didn't dare look at Serchio—and then he sat down across from me, reaching for the deck. I kept out only two cards, one palmed and one pinned under my elbow where my wide sleeve masked it. John shuffled the rest, quickly and thoroughly.

As I was about to take the deck back from him, Holluth was suddenly there, reaching between us. He said hoarsely, "Let me listen cards, missis. Practice."

And John handed the boy my Tarot deck.

I couldn't just grab it back. I sat there, not breathing, while Holluth fanned out my dog-eared cards and presented them so John could pick a Significator, a card to stand for himself as querant. John licked his lips and chose true: The Hermit, the card of the spiritual seeker, which Holluth laid down carefully, squarely in the middle of the inlaid tabletop.

"Past," he said, dealing a card off the top, face down, and setting it to the left of The Hermit. "Future." One to the right. "Later." Another card to the right. "Finish." A third card again to the right. A simple timeline layout, four cards in a horizontal row, I noted as I frantically fought to clear my mind so that I could invent a threatening interpretation no matter what cards Holluth turned up.

I needn't have worried.

The "past" card, turned over by Holluth's stubby fingers, was The Magician; but the image was changed. The figure of the robed alchemist had a feature that I had never seen in any deck. On his shoulder perched a falcon, head turned so that one fierce yellow eye looked out at the beholder. The grimy card, worn at the corners, looked as if it had been in my deck for years.

"Future" was the six of Swords, reversed, followed by The Tower. Holluth's "finish" was blank, a pale smear inside the delicate line meant to frame an image.

There are no blank cards in the Tarot deck.

John's breathing was faint and rapid as his gaze flickered from card to card and back again and again to the empty one in the last place.

Holluth squared up the rest of the deck into a neat rectangle with both hands (the outsized cards were still hard for him to handle). He put it down and waited in silence. So the reading itself was up to me. It was no test; the meaning could hardly have been plainer.

I cleared my throat. "The Magician in this placement means that Holluth's visit is now in the past, or passing, as he travels onward. Here, centrally, are you, John—the spiritual pilgrim. Next, six of Swords, reversed; you may travel if you wish, but the journey is ill-omened. Then, The Tower: It all goes to Hell. Catastrophe; ruin. The final outcome—something, I'm not sure what it means."

But I did I know what it meant. I made myself say it. "Erasure. The end."

"The end," John whispered. He pushed the tin chair back, not rising though, as if his long legs had no strength. He sat back slackly, a man with all his strings cut. Then he put his face in his hands and wept.

Serchio pushed away from the door frame and headed for the stockroom, nudging Holluth on ahead of him. At the door, he glanced over his shoulder at me. Oh, those topaz eyes, knowing eyes! His yellow stare carried a challenge: We gave you the cards you needed to keep John safe; now you give us what we need. That's how it works.

I left the palmed cards on the table with the others (how had my deck acquired two Tower cards and that damned blank?) and followed them. Holluth shut the door quietly behind us.

"I can't drive you," I said immediately. "I only drive automatic. John's car is stick shift."

Serchio stood casually among the neatly stacked cartons of books packed up for return, hipshot and graceful. "John is right, a car is too noticeable now," he observed, cool and deliberate. "We'll go another way."

"What other way?" I said.

"A shaman's way," Serchio said.

Holluth touched my elbow discreetly. "Please, missis," he said. "You to hide us. No, not house again—hide in you shadow." He spread his arms outward from his sides, like the wings of a bird. "Tell raven, come cover us down his wings. Then, enemy don't to see."

My mind translated sluggishly, and I almost laughed. He thought my Saturn shadow was mine to command.

"I can't," I said. "It isn't like that, Holluth. I don't know how."

His sudden, sweet grin made me blink. "He with you always," he said cheerfully. "Just you walk along, I sing him to help us."

Looking down at his bright, round face, I surrendered. I breathed out my anger, my fear, and my well-aged resentment in one long breath. "Yes, all right. Let's try it." My voice came out faint and squeaky, but I meant it.

Holluth dug paper and tobacco out of his jeans pocket and began to roll a smoke, singing softly in his own language. We each took a puff, and then Holluth sang some more, blowing smoke into the four corners of the room. I don't remember the rest clearly, just the taste of the sweetened tobacco, the light,

rapid drumming of Serchio's palms on his thighs, and that high, slightly stuffy-nosed child-voice calling and chanting as my vision cooled and dimmed.

.....

At seven a.m. we left for the Port Authority bus terminal, shielded by the curse that had blighted my life for as long as I could remember. Looking back at John from the street doorway, I felt my heart twist hard. He sat staring blindly at the icons on his computer screen while Gene and Mike, who had shown up while we were in the back, settled down over their chess game in the Eastern Esoterica corner, oblivious as always.

Enveloped in a dimness like the moving shadow of a cloud, we paused outside on the sunny sidewalk. The sharp call of the falcon dropped straight down on us from the top of the sky beyond the buildings, piercing through the veil that sheltered us.

We walked up Eighth Avenue, me in the middle with one of them on either side, holding my hands and swinging them. Holluth sang softly and chirped and occasionally skipped along beside me, looking very young. This gave his work of sorcery an appearance of childish play, like any young boy lost in the magic of his own imagination as he walked uptown with his family.

The shadow traveled with us, large enough to embrace all three of us in the darkness under its outstretched wings. Where its soft edge slid silently over the pavement, pedestrians just stepped aside with barely a glance at us. Most of them had their faces buried in newspapers, reading about the new Korean crisis.

I squinted upward once, and what I thought I saw was the peregrine falcon, gliding high above us where a raven should have flown: one bird casting another's shadow.

The shadow went with us into the terminal, or at least the dimming of my sight did. None of the Homesec cops on duty turned our way, and there were a lot of Homesec cops (the crisis, of course). Well, we were nothing much to look at, I imagine: two boys with battered baggage and a middle-aged woman in jeans and a sweater with a dazzled expression (I probably looked zonked out on dope). The cops' flat, impersonal glances fled over us like water over stone, catching on nothing, deflected by my darkness.

We bought tickets, magazines, and gum, and went to wait at one of the gates. I watched Holluth, who slumped down in a pink plastic seat three chairs over, absorbed in one of the picture books he had chosen from the store shelves. A bus was already waiting to carry the two of them as far as Raleigh-Durham, the first leg of their journey south. From time to time a passenger climbed in and settled down to await departure.

Serchio, sitting beside me, touched my wrist for the last time. "Thank you, Edie. I didn't tell you, but if we hadn't left there our enemies would have come into John's store after us, and believe me, they're worse than your police. But now we have disappeared." Up close his breath was rank, but I didn't rub his light kiss off my cheek. "Abracadabra!" he said.

"But why Brazil?" I said.

"There are people to visit in the Amazon Basin." Serchio arched his back and yawned. "Holluth still has a

lot to learn about plant helpers."

Drugs that make you throw up and have good or bad trips, he meant. John had told me about his own experiences as a young man. You could die, he'd said, or go permanently mad.

"You could get peyote here," I said. "Good, strong plant-stuff. I can get you a name." Alec would know someone. "Don't go, Serchio. We need so much help right here."

"But you have it, Edie," he said, a touch impatiently now. "Don't your cards tell you? You already have some one born here, a great teacher, just a little older than Holluth is now. A few more years and you should be hearing about her."

"Who?" I said. "Where is she? How do you know?"

Serchio cocked his head to the side, listening. "That's our boarding announcement. Thank you for the tickets." He bent to collect their luggage.

Holluth put *Hank the Cow Dog* back into his canvas book bag and came over to politely shake my hand. I told him to hold his bag open, and I tucked my Tarot deck inside it, next to *Where the Wild Things Are*. Then he stumped up the steps after Serchio, and not long after the bus roared and shook and backed away, swinging into the lane leading down out of the terminal.

I guess a person on a spirit journey doesn't hug the power-people who consent to help him on his way. Some of them must be a lot more prickly than I am. Maybe they carry bigger shadows around.

.....

"Incredible," Alec said. "Just like that? You put them on a bus?"

"That's right," I said.

"I don't understand why you're leaving town, too." Alec nudged my suitcase dubiously with his foot, as if he thought I might have an anaconda in there. "You know how dangerous it is to travel. My parents will come down on me like a ton of bricks for just letting you go like this. Where are you going? Why are you going?"

My things were packed up and stored in John's basement, my bank account was emptied, and the travel permit that should have taken me to Ashland will take me to the Canadian border instead. Bella says I'm crazy, that Homesecc will catch me. I don't know how to explain that my shadow hides me. Out of sight, out of mind, does have its uses, it seems.

She arrived at my door yesterday, out of breath and damp from climbing my stairs, fierce with curiosity. "Is John taking you on some New Age pilgrimage or something?"

I said, "Not John, no."

Bella gave me a wounded look. "I don't get it. Where are you going, then?"

"Out of New York, for starters."

She sighed and folded me in a pillowy hug. "I'll miss you, Edie," she said. She will, too, for a day or so.

And I'll miss her, but the one I'll miss the most is John. I miss him already. He has a nervous tremor in his hands now, and he won't look me in the eye. The magic he'd yearned for all these years was much kinder and warmer than what actually came to him at the bookstore; when that wild magic called, he shrank back.

I saw that happen, I saw him blanch and shrink and age into a different man, older and afraid. He can't forgive me for having seen that.

I don't even know how to tell him how sorry I am.

The Fool; Judgment; the six of Cups; The Magician; The Tower; and Death. The practice spread that day last spring was mine. The Magician, with no magical falcon in attendance, was me. I was The Fool, too, acting on impulse over a child, the six of Cups.

Death? Well, my life has certainly changed course. This evening, I'll head uptown on Fifth and catch one of the express buses that take commuters out of Manhattan, and then I'll take a train farther. No one will give me a second glance, a middle-aged woman reading a paperback on the local.

I have the small, gray feather that Holluth pressed into my palm when he shook my hand before boarding the southbound bus. This morning, I stood on my roof and tossed that feather up in the air. It drifted down and settled pointing north. So north I'll go, as long as my money and my health hold out.

It may be that I'll come upon someone, somewhere, who'll be glad to share the shelter and the shield of my Saturn affliction.

The End