

## MODERN LOVE

## What the Psychic Knew

By MARCIA DeSANCTIS

**Y**EARS ago — panicked, on the cusp of 30, between jobs and wondering where life would take me — I consulted a psychic. I remember staring at the sea of green carpet in her home as she addressed the usual concerns.

She told me to marry Mark, the man I was living with, that I would have a son and a daughter, and that my future with them would not be in New York City, contrary to what I had long assumed.

Finally, I asked the question I really wanted answered: “When will I die?”

“That’s not what I do,” she said. “So I can’t say.”

“You can’t because you don’t know, or because it’s bad?”

She tilted her head to one side.

“Can you tell me how, then?”

“I see a severe blow to the head,” she said, catching me squarely in the eyes. “It will be sudden, and you won’t feel pain.”

“That’s a relief,” I said. I was born with a death sentence, like every creature that walks the earth, but I instantly regretted having this expertise into how I would leave it.

“But here’s what I can say about this life,” she continued, referring presumably to the time before I would be felled by a foul ball at Fenway Park or a tree branch in the woods. “Your purpose is love.”

“As opposed to what?”

She shrugged. “Power, money. Great acclaim.”

“Too bad,” I said.

We chatted for another minute until our time was up. I took the cassette from the recorder and stuffed it into my pocket, and wrote her a check for \$150.

The bits about marriage and children seemed like something any psychic could safely say to a woman my age. So did the blandly good news about love: consolation, perhaps, for bad news about my future bank overdrafts.

But the prediction about my death surprised me. In my family everyone seemed (or was doomed, perhaps) to expire of old age. I admit that at times her insight has kept me uneasy company and on high alert (I never drive behind a truck carting things that might slip off at high speed, for example) as the years, a decade and more time passed.

By then, the psychic was three for three. I lived with my husband, Mark, and my son and daughter away from New York City. But the part about my purpose being “love” had been sidelined, or so I thought, once the power vacuum of middle age descended, sucking the youth from my body, my spirit and my marriage.

Everything I had to give went to my children, and though I loved them and my husband utterly, the drudgery of the day-to-day made it seem as if not love but coffee, my Toyota and sheer logistics were what propelled me through life.

I could see no distant future, just the clean slate of each day that filled up with the murk of worries and exhaustion. There was a relentlessness about my life, and there was resignation in me.

At 45, I had a hip operation, and the following eight weeks gave me a brief window into old age. The view was unlovely. My family soldiered through a long winter with me hobbling. We all needed to get away.

So I booked a few days at a seaside room in Miami with one king-size bed. My kids — then 8 and 11 — and I arrived to glorious Florida blue skies. That first day the sun knocked the kids out early and they fell asleep on either side of me in the sprawling bed, their shoulders already browned up



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Could this small lump, the size of a clementine, be it? What about the foul ball at Fenway or the falling branch in the woods?

and still smelling of sunscreen.

I had dropped 15 pounds after my operation, and as I was not too fleshy to begin with, the loss made me look more haggard than I felt. I tried to right my pajama bottoms that had twisted around me, and as I did I became aware of something in my abdomen, a lump that obviously didn’t belong there.

It was firm and round as a new summer plum. The warmest calm fell over me and I grabbed my children, who rustled as I pulled them close.

Back home, the doctor sent me to the hospital immediately with a “Good luck” delivered in the gravest of tones. There, I saw many of the same nurses who had cared for me three months before. They asked what I was doing there.

“I have a lump in my belly,” I said. Lying

on the gurney, stuck up with needles, I was wholly, entirely unafraid. My husband ran into the room, his face clouded with confusion.

“If this is cancer, I’m toast,” I said.

“It’s not cancer,” he said.

Four doctors appeared at my bedside.

“What’s going on?” my husband asked.

“Do you know what it is?”

The youngest one sat too gently on the foot of my bed. “We haven’t identified it yet, but we know the mass is in your liver.”

“Can you just tell me if I have cancer?” I said.

“I cannot tell you that you don’t,” he said. “We’ll take more tests tomorrow. Please try to get some rest.”

“What is your sense?” I asked. He shook his head. I thought his face answered for him.

When the doctors left, I began to rattle off instructions to Mark, as if dictating a grocery list. The transition team, for when I died, was to be headed by my friend Sarah. “She understands the culture of our house, so she has to be very involved with the kids.”

“Will you stop it?” he said.

“It’s important that they still get the same birthday cakes,” I said. “That lemon cake for Ray. Ava’s vanilla with pink butter frosting. The Thanksgiving recipes. Nana Foley’s stuffing. It’s all about food, really, and Sarah gets this.”

“You’re being crazy,” Mark said, holding my hand.

The mass inside me felt alive, as if its dark center contained the heartbeat in my slackened body. “You have to get married right away.” I would handpick my replacement: the woman who would be the new cornerstone of our home. “You know who I really like?” I asked.

“Enough,” he said. “If you’re sick, you’ll fight it.” Mark’s voice was a balmy wave that drew me into his confidence, and one of the reasons I was compelled to be with him. When we were dating, I imagined him coaxing our future babies to sleep in a darkened nursery. It was the same all these years later, and I enjoyed being soothed.

“Why aren’t I afraid?” I asked, foggy now from painkillers.

I knew the answer. As with the psychic’s prediction, what scared me most was not knowing how anything — ever — would unfold. From aging to anguish about my children to possibly facing my husband’s eventual illness or death, the mysteries of the second half of my life loomed ever closer, and it was too terrifying.

It was certainly a cop-out, but for the first time in years I felt as if I knew where I was going. And I could stop waiting for all manner of blunt instruments to crash through my windshield.

I watched Mark’s face through drugged eyes. He sat awake all night in my room as I drifted in and out of lucidity. Time had attempted to obscure, or at least to trivialize, our deep history.

But somewhere in that haze, I sensed in him the antidote to my fear — not of death, but of life. I extended my arms at my sides, and they ached with the craving to hold my children, as I had done only days before in Florida. I imagined them sleeping, their little arms also curled around nothing but air.

At 5 a.m. Mark went out for coffee, and four hours later, they discovered that the clementine-size mass cocooned in my liver was benign. The next morning a laparoscope siphoned it from my body and the surgeon stitched up the incisions. Mark and I arrived home, and the children, who had been staying at Sarah’s, soon followed.

They were still brown as biscuits from Miami. My little girl looked wary; she had seen me too fragile too often that winter. I wanted to tell her — tell them all — how sorry I was, because I knew that for those moments it wasn’t courage but cowardice that had given me no fear of dying.

A week later, I blew the dust off a box. Inside, I found the tape labeled “August, 1990.” My car had our only cassette player, so I went for a drive and waited for the echo of my younger voice, then the psychic’s.

She spoke of my future son and daughter, then there was a strange silence after I pushed her to reveal how I would die. And at last, her finale: that “love” would be the driving force of my life.

“Isn’t that kind of obvious?” I asked.

“Is it? Wait until you ask yourself, ‘Now what?’ You’ll see.”

She was right. I had seen.

I drove on in silence, wary as ever of falling branches, and I skirted round a truck piled high with ladders.

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