

Small Medium at Large

Fiction

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I never thought there was a way to make five-thousand dollars a week without selling my body or drugs that could make me feel so awful. No, I wasn't a hit man (or a hit woman, I guess), and I didn't get involved in an extravagant pyramid scheme. I spent three days as a psychic in Birmingham, Alabama.

I don't know if you've ever been to Birmingham, but it's a horribly clean place. It reeks with some church morality that I can't see, but boy, I can feel it. The way that old Mrs. Joslyn says, "How do you do, Miss Lisette?" in her tight-lipped, faux-aristocratic Scarlett O'Hara accent makes me want to vomit, but not before I beat that woman with a copy of a Martin Luther King biography. She's not racist, but she's got very strange ideas about what's considered politically correct. She loves talking about my "people" and "African heritage." I don't mind that, but she uses it grossly out of context. For those playing the home game, telling me that the black kid who burglarized the Seven Eleven the day before yesterday is "one of my people" does not earn you any points with me. Say he's black, for chrissakes, and move on.

The Old South stereotype of superstitious black people must be alive and kicking because apparently I'm the target psychic demographic. Occasionally, when I'm feeling particularly ethnic, I'll wear an African style head-wrap. It's not really African, but it makes me feel African. When I wear that head-wrap in the mall, at least seven teenage girls approach me looking for voodoo magic to help them get boyfriends. Who do I look like, Ms. Cleo? They don't seem to like the response "No voodoo magic in the world can help that fat ass" very much. What can I say? It's a gift.

My story starts in that same mall with me in the same head-wrap. A man came up to me. He had a blue polo shirt on and khaki pants, so he looked like he sliced his golf ball over in Montgomery Ward

with a nine-iron, and it landed in the penny fountain at the food court. (Speaking of which: where on that fountain does it ever say to throw loose change in for luck?)

The golfer guy asked me if I wanted to make a little money. “No,” I said. “I reject your life of materialism and sin.” His eyes widened to pie-plates. “I’m kidding”, I replied.

“Oh,” he said. He laughed that little nervous oh-my-goodness-I’m-glad-she-wasn’t-serious-because-I-didn’t-have-a-script-for-that-conversation laugh and asked me if I’d be interested in helping to bring in some publicity for the General Nutrition Center store in the mall. He explained that women were buying fewer vitamins and weight-loss supplements, which surprised me. I guess the big-beautiful-woman look was in.

I asked him what I’d have to do, and he said something that I was not expecting: “Be a psychic.” It was my turn to look strangely, but when I did it, my mouth puckered into a ridiculous little ‘o’ on the right side of my face.

“You’ve got the right look. You’re short, which makes you look mysterious. You’re curvy, so people will think you’ve got a ton of womanly experience. Besides, you’re sassy enough to entertain people.”

I should have been offended at those comments, but it was so refreshing to have those attributes brought up as positive. I think I was so stunned by the inadvertent compliments that I agreed. He promised me at least a thousand dollars in the first week, but there was no way I’d believe that.

I had no idea how many desperate women I would lure in.

On Monday I showed up at GNC as Madame Illusia. I wore one of those cute little veils stereotypical belly-dancers wear so that no one could recognize me. I borrowed a book called The Art of Cold Reading. At first I thought that there was no way I could fool people into thinking I had psychic powers with that information. Besides that, I worried that my own agnosticism would get in the

way of the reading.

They set up one of those adorable little tents for me outside the store, which really blocked more traffic than it should have. The workers at GNC were angels, bringing me bottled water whenever I wanted it. Before my first reading, I was so anxious I thought I was going to black out. They'd see through me, and it would all be over. I'd be a fraud. Well, I was a fraud anyway, but I'd be a recognized fraud. Besides, I needed the money because I had recently completed my degree in computer science.

When the first woman came through the silky red tent flap, I thought I was going to explode like a seagull filled with Alka-Seltzer. She sat down in the chair opposite mine and grinned widely. I remembered my drama club days and became the flamboyant Madame Illusia, with inspiration from my role as Jeanne Milene, Queen of the Gypsies.

“The lady comes looking for love,” I said with more bravado than I expected. Her eyes sparkled, and I knew I was on the right track. “She comes about a man—”. I looked her over: she had to have met someone—“she already knows.” The woman squealed like a little girl locked in a candy shop for the night. She recommended me to all of her other friends after that reading.

I felt the rush on the first day. In nine hours of telling people what they wanted to hear, my cash box sang to the tune of four-hundred-and-sixty bells. The euphoria was overwhelming. There was no denying I felt like a crook, but I got that secret high that no one wants to admit that they get when they get away with something. I felt so proud, not to mention devious!

Wednesday came and went in a flash. More people came to see me than GNC, but that was okay. After all, it was all GNC's money anyway. That day was exciting because that was when I presented a new ability to my high-paying customers: the ability to commune with the dead.

Around noon, a man came in to speak to his dead mother. He didn't seem all that broken up about her death, so I guessed she had been dead for a while. He didn't wear a wedding ring, so I

assumed (by his age) that he was divorced. If his wife had died in some accident, he probably would have been asking me about her. All of that information came by instinct, and that scared me a little. All in all, it's easy money.

By Friday I enjoyed my job less and less. People praised my “ability” as a psychic. They wondered how I could commune with spirits. I didn’t have the heart to tell anyone until Mary Sue showed up, and I’m not talking about the one with the horrible stories.

I call her Mary Sue now because she just looked so innocent in her little polka-dot dress. I discovered Mary Sue had questions about her husband’s death, as well as the death of her two miscarried children.

Defrauding this woman made my mouth dry out. The charade was fun, but when Mary Sue came in, I realized that these were real lives and not just for entertainment only. I played along with the sick game and hated myself for it when it was done. We parted company. She was somewhat calmer. Tears rolled down my cheeks. I ran from my seat and stopped her. “I’m not a psychic,” I said.

“Yes, you are,” she said. She smiled, happy to have her information, but I had just told her what she wanted to hear, and that tends to make people happy.

“No,” I said. “I’m not a psychic. GNC hired me. I don’t really know...” My voice faltered. “But I’m sorry. About your husband and your kids.”

Mary Sue hugged me tightly and cried. “I just wanted someone to listen to me,” she said.

Friday was my last day as Madame Illusia. Even now, everything that has to do with fortune telling makes me uneasy. I don’t run screaming from tarot cards and crystal balls, but I still get chills when I see psychics on Larry King Live, doing the same thing that I did.