



The Fortune Teller

The funny thing is, when I was at school I refused to believe in fate. All those years in those testosterone charged corridors did nothing to open my mind to the great beyond. I was never the best behaved and never the worse at school. I sort of existed in the middle, the place where most of us exist. I was good at English, not so good at Maths, so naturally my English teachers thought I had great potential and were probably shocked at what happened to me, but my Maths teachers thought I was a waste of space and probably didn't bat an eyelid. If they did, I can imagine them in the staff room, reading the local paper.

“Here, do you remember that lad a few years ago? Andrew Stokes? It says here he's been put away for ten years. Three counts of armed robbery, six counts of theft. It says he was a threat to the community.”

That would be Mr. Dixon, the PE teacher. He'd probably remember me as average, even vaguely talented, but never a star. He'd remember yelling at me for not taking the rugby ball to the try line when three great animals were bearing down on me.

‘You've got the pace Stokes! Use it!’

I ran off the edge of the pitch instead, where the animals couldn't get me. I was different then.

“Another success for the system. Doesn't surprise me though. He was an aggravating little bastard.”

That would be Mr. Jacket, the maths teacher. Naturally he hated me. He had this really high pitched voice that threatened to pierce my eardrums so once I tried blocking my ears with blue-tack. He caught me. He told my parents I was arrogant and obnoxious. He caught me doing French homework in his maths lesson too. That was how much I hated maths.

“Not, Andrew Stokes who worked on the school production, surely not. But he had such talent. He wrote that play, the one that won the young writer’s award. Remember?”

Miss Newcombe. Beautiful, foxy, elegant. That voice, husky like churning gravel. The skirts she wore, sometimes with stockings, the scrum at the start of each lesson to get the front desk. Seeing how many times you could realistically drop your pencil in one hour and bend down to pick it up. And inside somewhere, a tiny shred of belief that she enjoyed it all, that she wore the stockings for us, that one day she’d come in without any knickers.

Inspiration came easy to me then.

A lot can happen in five years. I left when I was sixteen. I did okay. I might have stayed in education, could have waltzed through English and History. But I wanted money. I wanted my independence. I wanted to be somebody.

I’d better explain this fate thing. We used to argue about it sometimes, when it was wet outside or when the high school girls were banned from meeting up with us. We’d sit in the form room with Jonesy our form teacher. He was the sort of guy you’d want for a form teacher when you were fifteen, the relaxed, easy going type. He was younger than most of the other teachers, Welsh. He taught English though. He was probably shagging Miss Newcombe. Maybe that was the real reason for the stockings. They were forever joking and laughing in the corridor. Miss Newcombe was always flushed when they were together. I didn’t mind because he was sort of cool. If Miss Newcombe had to be shagging, and I guess she did, then it was okay for Jonesy to be doing it.

If we were sitting around doing nothing he’d start us off on some topic. Sometimes it was football or music. Other times it might be politics or religion. This was a boy’s grammar school. Apparently we were the top of the pile. Once or twice we even ended up on fate and free will.

“I believe in fate,” he said. “Life’s easier that way. I just go along with everything and wait to see what comes of it.”

“No,” I said. “That’s too easy. I want to be in control. I want to do what I want to do. I don’t want some poxy force telling me what I’m gonna be.”

Jonesy let us use words like ‘poxy’, even seemed to understand them.

I meant it too. It didn’t make any sense to me. It was the early 1990’s. Primal Scream were singing ‘Free’.

‘I’m free to do what I want, to get what I need, any old time...

I’m free to be what I choose...”

And as far as I was concerned, I was.

I wrote a play about fate. The play Miss Newcombe loved so much. In it a man was getting ready to meet his girlfriend. He was in this shitty little rented room. I showed him getting ready, changing his clothes, dancing around, listening to music, having a shave, all very natural. He was just about to leave to meet her when he dropped a coin through a gap in the floorboards. He spent the next five minutes figuring out a way to retrieve it.

They got this lad in the sixth form to perform it. He was like John Cleese up there. It worked because he drew the audience in, made them laugh, got them relaxed, ready for what was to come. Finally he prized a floorboard open and got his coin back but by then he was late.

In the next scene he was at the corner of the street, about to turn into it. His girlfriend was standing front, off centre, smoking, looking fed up (it was performed as a joint venture with the high school). Just as he turned the corner there was this bomb blast (cue sound effects. Mr Newlan, science, had a great time with the pyrotechnics). It was an IRA terrorist bomb. His girlfriend was killed but he survived, all because he dropped a coin down a crack in the floorboards.

“That’s fate for you,” argued Jonesy. “The coin saved him.” Miss Newcombe nodded and smiled, blushed, looked out of the window...

“No it’s not,” I cried. “That’s the whole point. It didn’t matter if he had the coin or not. He didn’t need it. He made a choice to get it.”

“I don’t see it that way,” said Jonesy. “Still it’s a great little play.”

“I’m entering it into the young play writer’s competition,” said Miss.

Newcombe. “Andrew’s my star pupil.”

Miss Newcombe. My fantasy.

I passed English with flying colours and then left to join the big wide world. I got as far as the local post office. My father knew someone who worked there. It was

early mornings and knackerings but the pay was okay and at least I was out and about, not stuck in some factory. I actually grew to like it, especially when I was out on my bike before the world woke up. Just me, the birds and my thoughts. That was the best time.

And then I met Amanda. She believed in fate. She was adamant. She was small and brunette and she liked it when I brought Chinese Food over and she liked horror movies. She also liked me. Her mum was always at work. We had the house to ourselves. I was sixteen. I was working. I had money. Life was great.

There was this fayre every Lent. The Lent Fayre it was called. Amanda and I went to it. There was this gypsy caravan. Amanda went and got all excited about going in but I refused. I stayed outside watching the Gravity Wheel, daring myself to go on it. But I didn't. I cared too much about my health at that time I suppose. I finally did go on it, about two years later, but by then I didn't really care about anything.

Amanda came out glowing. She glowed for weeks. Remember those 'Ready Brek' adverts where the kids were walking to school on this really cold day but they'd had their 'Ready Brek' so they had this orange glow around them? She was like that.

It took me a few weeks to get it out of her. She said she wasn't really meant to tell me because that's what the gypsy had said, not to tell, but she decided it was okay because we were in love so it was just like telling herself really.

"She said that one day I'm going to be a famous Hollywood star. She said I had this aura of success around me."

I have to admit it made a difference. She started going to drama classes. She did well too. She got a part in this local play. She wasn't the lead or anything but it was a start. The director liked her.

"He says I've got natural flair. I'm telling you, it's written in the stars."

Later that summer we went to the seaside for a day out. Amanda was still glowing. We didn't argue about anything, ever. We fooled around all the time. It was the happiest period of my life. I was floating on air and ready to believe anything, even fate, and when Amanda asked me to go to see this other Gypsy I agreed.

Everything changed.

The Gypsy was a man. That didn't help. He didn't have a crystal ball or anything. He had these cards instead. He asked me all these questions and what I wanted to know.

“Anything and everything,” I said. “What the hell.”

It started well enough. He told me I’d have plenty of money, a nice place to live, drive a nice car. He told me I’d be successful with the women too. I thought of Amanda waiting outside the caravan. I wondered what she’d make of him telling me that. Then he turned this card over and his mood changed. The next card was even worse. I could see it on his face. He didn’t say anything for a time. I thought he was figuring out how to put it.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I don’t believe any of this rubbish anyway.”

I meant it as a joke but he didn’t laugh.

“You’ll have money,” he said. “But you will be tempted by many bad things and much of it will come to you in the wrong way. You will have to choose between wealth and spiritual well being. ”

“Choose,” I said. “I thought you were telling the future!”

I left soon after. Amanda was standing on the beach watching the waves, dreaming of Hollywood no doubt.

“Well?” she said.

“Let’s just say I’m going to be a success,” I said.

“I knew it,” she said. “We both are.”

I should have seen it coming. Things started to slip. Amanda grew obsessed by her drama class or the director at least. He was older than I was, only a few years, but he was at University and interesting to her in a way that I wasn’t. He was actually a pretentious dick head but when I told Amanda she defended him so much I knew something was about to happen.

“He didn’t like my play,” I said. “That play won an award. How many awards has he won?”

“Yes, but you were fifteen when you wrote that,” said Amanda. “He’s nineteen. He’s used to reading Ibsen and Chekhov.”

“Who the hell are they?” I asked.

Amanda wanted to go back into education, to study drama properly at University. It was just about all over between us, and anyway, that Gypsy had got to me.

I’d started going out with my mates a bit more. Amanda wasn’t bothered. Funny what happens with women when you display a little confidence. Being with Amanda had taught me the basics. Now I was out on the town and there were girls

everywhere. They all recognised me as the ‘good looking’ postman. All I had to do was talk to them. It was easy. I had the gift of the gab as they say. And they were older, more experienced.

I was getting some money together too. A friend of mine had this scheme. He worked in a men’s clothes shop. Twice a week I’d go in, once on his manager’s day off and once when the assistant manager was off, so nobody would notice a pattern. Sometimes he’d give me a bag of untagged stuff and I’d just walk out of the shop with it. Sometimes I’d buy stuff and then return it and swap it for something more expensive. I don’t know how he did it but we had a good thing going until his boss got the sack and the new guy changed the way things were done. Never got caught though. We’d sell the clothes to lads we knew at discount price. I never thought of it as stealing. It was just what everybody did. Lads that worked in McDonalds handed out free burgers, lads who worked in pubs and bars always missed stuff off your round. Sometimes if I had a package in my mail that looked interesting I’d take it home before delivering it and inspect the contents. If it was the latest video, or a CD or a porno, anything like that, I’d record it first and sell copies. The person who’d ordered just had to wait an extra day or two. No harm in that. I was careful not to do it on the same round too often. Sometimes I’d grab something from some other guy’s delivery barrow instead. That way they could never catch me. What I’m trying to say is I had the gift. I could make money out of thin air.

I split up with Amanda. She found out I’d been with this girl. I didn’t argue. I was more pleased with all the stuff she didn’t find out about. If she’d have discovered all of that she probably would have killed me.

“Blame that Gypsy,” I told her when we broke up. “He put a curse on us.”

“Pathetic,” she said. “You’re responsible for your own actions. Well you would be, if your dick wasn’t doing all your thinking for you.”

“Hang on,” I shouted. “Who’s the one that believes in all this shit? Me or you?”

“Jesus,” she said. She had this look on her face, kind of mock pity. “It was just some guy in a fucking caravan with a crystal ball.”

“For your information,” I said. “There was no crystal anything.”

“Try this then,” she spat. “You are a lying, cheating shit. Crystal enough for you?”

It didn’t matter. She seemed happy enough with her drama classes and Simon

the director. He drove past me once with her in the passenger seat. I was on my post bike. They laughed at me. Both of them pointed and laughed. I had more talent in my fucking prick than he did but she still thought he was the bee's knees. She was shit at acting too, anybody could see that.

I could go on and on about my transformation from successful petty schemer to fully fledged armed robber and enemy of the state. But I won't. I'll sum it up like this.

‘One thing leads to another. Success leads to success and failure leads to failure.’

As for this business about fate...I'm getting there.

I was living in a nice rented flat by the river. I was driving an expensive car, second hand but still.... I had a full wardrobe of designer clothes and in any one week I could guarantee at least one girl would share my bed with me in an evening and breakfast on my balcony the following morning. I was doing all of this on a Postman's wage. I told everybody who knew me better that I was looking after the place for a chap I knew. Even my parent's bought that one. Oh, and I was nineteen years old.

I'll leave you to determine if I was a success or a failure.

So where's the story going to end? Give me one more minute of your time. I got in debt. That's what happens when you forge your references and take on a place you can't afford. I had to get some money quick. A guy I knew was a petty thief. I got involved with him. It was a success to begin with, but over time we upped the stakes, from mini-markets to service stations to sub post offices.

We got caught.

They put me away.

Here I am.

Funny, but at the trial all I could think of was that Gypsy. What did he tell me? That I'd be successful but that I'd have to make a choice between right and wrong. Something like that. I guess I listened to him then, didn't I? He could have just come out and said it, that the price of my success would be a life of crime and a fourteen year sentence. I mean come on, they give murderers less than that and I never killed anybody. They said I was 'a significant danger to the public'.

‘Blame the Gypsy,’ I said. ‘He told me to do it.’

Now for the irony. Are you ready? I'd been inside about three years when I got

a letter from my mother. There was a local press cutting from my hometown.

‘Young starlet killed in tragic accident.’

Amanda it was. She’d been celebrating the final night of her drama production at University. She’d been getting rave reviews. I guess she could act after all.

She got knocked over by a car coming back from a party.

Where’s your Hollywood dream now? Where’s your Gypsy? The wardens didn’t know what to do with me for a while.

And that’s not the end of it. I’ve almost finished but not quite. I met this guy when they transferred me. He looked familiar.

“I know you,” I said. “What you in for?”

He looked at me through narrow eyes .

“I don’t want any trouble,” he said.

He had this Romanian accent or something.

“You’re the Gypsy fortune teller,” I said. “What are they doing throwing a Gypsy fortune teller in the slammer?”

“Fraud, deception, operating without a licence...you want to know the rest?”

I nearly died laughing.

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