

It was in the Summer of 2019 that I began offering “psychic services” for payments in cash out of a newly constructed condominium complex in West Cambridge. My unit had a ground-level door that faced a park, in back of the building, rather than facing the street. This meant that clients could come in and out without drawing too much attention to themselves, and it made the unlicensed business difficult to police. I didn’t bother applying for commercial zoning.

Keep in mind, I’m not a psychic. Interpreted generously, the services I offered amounted to little more than a sympathetic ear. Better to think of me as a cut-rate shrink who doesn’t rely on the pharmaceutical industry to ensure repeat business. And there was no shortage of cut-rate clientele. It was then late autumn in the Boston metro – lots of drinking, and thin light through newly exposed branches. Mostly I just told people what they needed to hear.

Yes, your mother is a bitch

No, you shouldn’t get out of the market in 2020

This sounding-board quality to my work mitigated any moral qualms I might have had at the outset, and it also made the mechanics of the job decidedly less than supernatural (that is, quite reproducible). Importantly, I’m good with people and can maintain a straight face, although I never took to poker. That’s about all you need to get by in the palm reading business though. I gather that politics functions on the basis of similar “expertise”.

So, I had my handful of weekly regulars and enough cash left over, after making rent, for a whiskey most afternoons. Mostly, I drank alone. One drink per client is what I budgeted myself, which seemed quite judicious, since many customers paid upwards \$85 dollars for a single palm reading. It was there, across from the liquor store, that I first noticed the Florist shop.

You see, there’s a slat wood fence that separates the alley behind the liquor store from the residential street where the Florist does business. And, if you happen to purchase, say, a pint of whiskey from the liquor store, you can slow your pace through that alley and sip on the whiskey without fear of being cited for violating open container laws. At that time, the discovery of this back-alley blind felt like a real breakthrough – a budding lush’s double-helix moment, and it took several perambulations before I had the presence of mind to take in my surroundings.

II.

The first thing I really noticed about the business behind the alley was that the Florist seemed to operate with absolute impunity when it came to the matter of zoning restrictions. People were coming and going at all hours (although I saw very carrying flowers even though it was technically located on a residential street rather than a business district). Also, the façade didn’t match the adjacent properties – despite being situated in a historic district - and ornate ironwork alongside the entryway and beneath the gutters reflected questionable construction techniques from an earlier era. I would be surprised if was up to the fire code, much less accessibility code.

But these were exactly the sort of special dispensations I hoped would legitimize my own business so I took note and immediately set about to find out more. Fortunately, it only cost me the price of a single rose to learn the proprietors name: Edmund Leach. I didn’t want to have to lie, despite my chosen profession, so I soon began varying my floral

purchases to include full arrangements, bouquets, and assorted houseplants, mostly of a tropical variety.

Leach the florist didn't bat an eye (indeed, he rarely blinked), but my patrons came to delight in this new eccentricity, and business actually increased when word got around that a new fortune teller in town was surrounded by bright floral arrangements. One especially dour patron went as far as asking whether we should reschedule, on account of what he took to be a death in my family. (I told him the flowers helped me commune).

And Leach himself began to open up, in his own way, which is to say not much at all. He was friendly enough, as one has to be to build and maintain a small business for years and years in the same town. But he didn't seem interested in speaking about flowers, which I found surprising, or talking about the Sox. Rather, we ended up bonding over the weather. Unlike many of my peers, Leach and I shared an ambivalence about smartphone technology and its terrifying ubiquity. But we were both quick to note and commend the technology that could notify you with a buzz or beep if precipitation was expected as close as the next major intersection.

Light drizzle starting on Mass Ave., said the notification, as I walked into the Florist.

III.

After climbing a good dozen cracked and uneven brick stairs to the Florist's entryway, and chiming the old-fashioned entry bell, I saw that the store's sole patron was intent on provoking a fight with Leach, possibly a violent one.

I'll get you, you son of a bitch, was all I caught from the conversation. Leach was unphased, it seemed, and, from beneath the counter, he proceeded to draw out a small flower. It was simple looking, more of a weed really, like a dandelion, only it was a solid black color, even the stem. It surprised and intrigued me that Leach had the patience to offer a gift to such a terrible customer while I had never witnessed him providing anything gratis to the average patron. As soon the note sounded by the bell on the door dissipated into rain drops, I asked: *How can you afford to give something for free to such a painful customer?*

Good customers always come back and bad ones never come back, Leach stated with only the barest inflection. *That customer will only cost me a single flower, a price I would gladly pay to avoid another such interaction in the future.*

Great policy, I thought, somewhat sarcastically. Aloud, I followed up with: *But Mr. Leach, why do you think he accepted your gift?* I said, alluding to the customer's obvious anger. *Has the rain begun, Tom*, he asked? I took that response as his best attempt at magnanimity and dropped the subject. We still hadn't gotten to the issue of zoning violations, so I decided not to push the issue.

But neither Leach's clientele nor my own were universally well behaved, and it wasn't a week before I had an opportunity to test for myself the "gift method" for talking down an irate customer. I had plenty of flowers to give, at that point, and if they weren't already close at hand I might have reached for a baseball bat instead. Vlad was yelling, at that point: *What do you mean you can't see that far, what the hell am I paying you for?* he shouted directly into my face, hot breath and a fine saliva mist all but liquefying my last frayed nerve. *A glimpse of a feeling*, I uttered weakly, trying to keep up the act, and reached for a Chrysanthemum.

Vlad stopped shouting instantly, looked at the flower, and began to breath quickly through his mouth. *You're not taking me seriously*, he hissed, grabbing and crushing the

flower in his fist. The efficiency of motion was impressive, but I had very little time to appreciate it before he executed another move, opening his hand to drop the flower gift and then back slapping me across the cheek. It didn't hurt, not really, but it scared me because I knew there were few options open for recourse. Fortunately, he saved me the trouble by standing and leaving through the front door almost immediately. Perhaps he saw something in my eye, or, more likely, he understood that neither of us were in a position to file a police report.

IV.

I saw what I did – the services I provided - more as a hustle than a con, and Leach's customer service technique was unbearably nuanced to a hustler. Was it flower itself – Was there something striking about seeing a novelty shade on a familiar object that interrupted his antagonist? For Leach's part, was his action symbolic, self-affirming, or just a Floral Fuck-you? I pondered these questions at Paddy's Pub, where I drank when I was bored drinking alone of wanted to watch the game.

You're short", said Dave, before any revelations had a chance to surface. There was already a \$10 on the bar for Jameson and a west coast IPA. But there were also 15 different bar tenders at Paddy's and they all lived in the neighborhood. They only took cash and each bar tender had their own mental price list. And there was no beer menu to serve as an arbiter, so I threw two more bucks down, finished my whiskey in a gulp, and went to grab a smoke out back. Despite the uncertainty with regards to pricing I enjoyed Paddy's – you could still smoke out back and they could open at 8am Saturday morning, which was my day off.

Why were neighborhood businesses provided so many of these zoning exceptions(?!?). Paddy's sold a dangerous and addictive drug, of little objective value, and Leach sold inedible plant matter, again of little obvious value.

Undoubtedly, my seething was encouraged by the encounter with Vlad, and I might have sucked down the cigarette in a single drag were it not for a flyer on the patio picnic table. The man I had seen leaving Leach's shop just the day before – that man's face was shown, in ¾ profile, as a banner image across the top of the flyer. He didn't look angry, in the photo, but I recognized the shape of his face and his silver hair was cut short in both the photo and in my memory from the Florist's. The flyer was a solicitation for donations: *Support for the Family*, the text enjoined. It seems that Mr. Calloway, a lifelong resident of West Cambridge, had suddenly passed away. The cause of death was not listed

V.

I trailed Leach, when his shop finally closed that evening, although I wasn't so much interested in his social technique anymore. Calloway's general threat (all I had heard him say before Leach handed over the black flower) was infused with meaning when viewed in the context of his death. And, since that had only been the day before that the confrontation had occurred (at which point the man appeared in perfect health), I had decided to try reach out to his widow. We had technically met, after all, or at least I had occupied his peripheral vision for a few seconds. It seems that minuscule justification was all I needed, and it became exceedingly difficult to ignore the moral implications of my own business while I dialed the number.

Consumed, she shrieked or bawled when I asked after delivering condolences and adeptly switching topics to the circumstances of her husband's death. I must have simply interrupted her unvoiced thoughts, since she didn't seem to want to know who I was or what my relationship might have been with her husband – good timing. Her family was a

bit more circumspect, however, and I hung up after hearing *Who is it?* Ringing out in the background, between her sobbing. Consumed is not a medical diagnosis, of course, but *consumption* is, or at least it was. So, I made my way to the library, earlier that afternoon, which might have been the only other public location I frequented in Cambridge with any regularity.

It was there that things began to reveal themselves. According to certain medieval texts, fast-acting illness resembling tuberculosis followed “hexing” from a small black flower known to the Scandinavians as Mortuu. The texts I was consulting were questionable, certainly, but there was a folk tradition associated with poisoning with black flowers, that much was clear. As it turns out, Leach wasn’t a turn-the-other-check Christina-type – he was a killer.

VI.

And I followed that killer, on the darkest country roads, as he left the city on what must surely have been the most depressing, snow-draggled day in the history of New England. Alternating bouts of snow and sleet hampered traffic in every direction, and I drifted from anywhere between 2 and 10 cars behind the florist as we headed further North.

Wind and rain and pounding surf as we approached the Atlantic. Ostensibly, it was another shitty Tuesday evening in early December, another work day for most people, when I followed Leach about 12 miles north of Boston proper. It became more difficult to follow him unobtrusively, as we veered first from interstates to state highways, and then to surface roads with asphalt and then beyond. Close to the coast, just east of Salem Village. By dusk, the scene was foggy, smoky even. There was enough residual heat in the bedrock to solidify the vapor in the air near the ground when the sun went down. And the sun went down fast. By the time Leach parked, just at the end of what I recognized as a western “two track”, I was on foot.

Having planned for an outing, I was carrying a bottle of water in a small backpack, as well as a sighting scope and my notebook and cellphone. Leach was visible, through the fog, as an apparition 100 yards distant. He had just stepped outside his vehicle and I ducked down as he stretched out the mileage and surveyed the scene. He didn’t see me. Wrought iron, badly corroded, faced his vehicle at a distance of about 15 feet, a distance that he crossed quickly as he weaved between fenceposts and entered the cemetery.

Fog and dark greens and greys was just about all I could make out from that distance, so I decided to move forward. The ground was covered in dried leaves, so I stepped with great care and my made my way to an entrance, or game trail, adjacent to his parking lot cemetery entryway. I could see him then, hunched over a gravestone, a humble piece of granite that couldn’t have been more than two feet tall. Growing all around the gravesite were black flowers, and their lusciousness seemed oddly out of order with the bleak season.

VII.

