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1. A Remarkable Encounter

“Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities. Truth isn’t.”

—MARK TWAIN

IN THE SUMMER OF 1971, when I was twenty-one, I met the man who would change the course of my life. The previous May, I had graduated with a bachelor’s degree in sociology from Niagara University in upstate New York, with absolutely no idea what to do next. While buying time, I took a job lifeguarding as I had done for the past few summers, this time at a new pool in Great Neck, Long Island. In hindsight, I was ripe for a conversion experience.

During an otherwise ordinary afternoon, another lifeguard pointed out a man on the pool deck, whom she identified rather sardonically as a psychic. With curiosity piqued, I decided to introduce myself to him during my next break. At that time, I would say I was open-minded to psychic phenomena in principle, but intensely skeptical

of those claiming to produce it. As a teenager, I had had a number of dreams around death that had proven startlingly prophetic. This motivated me to read some of the popular paranormal literature, most of which was anecdotal and little of which impressed me. I had also taken a noncredit, adult education course on the paranormal at Buffalo State University, with instructor Douglas Dean, a well-respected parapsychology researcher. In the course, Dean reviewed laboratory experiments, conducted with strict protocols, into such phenomena as telepathy and energy healing. Those did impress me, and I was puzzled as to why so many scientists were hostile toward what appeared to be legitimate results.

Bennett Mayrick was dark haired, had a crooked nose, and was deeply tanned, slightly overweight, and about six foot one. I estimated him to be around fifty years old (in fact, he was forty-eight). Though I had never met a psychic before, I expected him to be full of exaggerated claims, eager to promote himself and to profit from his alleged talent. I couldn't have been more wrong. As we chatted through a couple of my breaks, he made it clear that being a psychic was not a business to him and that he had only recently discovered his abilities. Instead of trying to convince me, he spoke in a soft, very deep voice, as if bemused at my interest. This was definitely not a guy who was selling. Instead, I sensed his profound ambivalence about something that was happening to him that both excited and threatened him.

According to Mayrick, eight months earlier he attended a party where a psychic provided the entertainment. After everyone had thrown a personal object into a box, she withdrew them one at a time, attempting to tell each owner something about him- or herself.

After a few readings, the psychic inexplicably instructed Mayrick to select an item and to tell a story about it. Though he protested he was a nonbeliever, she pressured him until he picked up a ring. Holding it in his palm, he announced that its owner had recently changed jobs. To his surprise, this was confirmed. Mayrick picked up a second object, then invented another story. Again, this was confirmed. As he testified, he did this several more times, growing increasingly elaborate, and each time having the details corroborated.

Though personally unconvinced, I egged him on by asking, “Were you receiving visual images?”

“No. I just blurted out the first thing that came to my mind, feeling like a damned fool!”

He didn’t know many of the people at the party, and finally he concluded that everyone, including the psychic, was targeting him as the butt of a joke.

Deciding to take the gag to the next level, Mayrick selected a watch. Holding it in his palm, he related a detailed story about an affair that its owner had carried on, precisely describing the man’s lover and the places where they had met. “All of a sudden one of the guys at the party got really

red-faced and flustered,” reported Mayrick. “Later another guy took me aside to ask how I’d known about the secret affair. Apparently everything I said was true.”

Before I could express any skepticism, Mayrick undercut me by expressing his own. “I fully expected I’d get a call the next day from the host of the party telling me I’d been had. Instead, people kept phoning to ask where I got my information. They thought the psychic and I had been in cahoots. Even after several days I still expected a call. When it never came, I started picking up objects and making up stories, trying to figure out what was happening, and waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“You mean the delayed call from your party host?”

“No, waiting to be wrong.”

Now I was sure this guy was either grossly exaggerating or deluded. No psychic ever dared to claim 100 percent accuracy. That was unheard of, even among the gullible. At the same time, I was taken aback by how nonchalant Mayrick seemed about his declarations and how uninterested he appeared in whether or not I believed him. The good part, from my point of view, was that he had set himself up to be checkmated.

“Will you do a reading for me?” I asked.

I had expected him to be evasive. Instead, he was ironic. “Sure. Give me something. Maybe I’ll finally be wrong.”

I handed him my wallet, determined not to offer any verbal or visual clues.

Again, he was one step ahead of me. “Don’t tell me anything about yourself. The less I know, the better it works.”

While holding my wallet in the palm of his left hand, he smoked with his right one. His eyes—very dark, and clear yet complex—seemed to go out of focus as he said, “I’m sensing anxiety around a woman who’s probably in her fifties. She has black, fairly short hair, and she’s talking to a younger woman who looks a lot like her—probably it’s her daughter. They’re expressing concern about a second young woman, this time blonde, who’s planning to move to New York.”

As Mayrick described how this conversation was supposed to relate to me, I interrupted with some impatience. “You could be talking about my mother and my sister and a friend of mine who may be moving to New York, but the descriptions are too vague to be convincing, and what you claim they’re saying isn’t characteristic of them.”

He refused to backtrack or attempt to reposition himself. “Check it out. It’s a conversation that just happened. In the kitchen.”

I was profoundly unimpressed. “What else do you get?”
“Something’s wrong with your car.”

“I just had it inspected. Yesterday. It’s fine.” I made no effort to hide my disappointment. Some part of me had wanted the excitement of hearing him score with something dramatic. At the same time, I felt that anyone who claimed infallibility deserved to be taken down. I was now

quite certain this guy was only an interesting character. “I think you’ve just heard the other shoe fall,” I said.

He remained unfazed. “You’ll find I’m right.” He was like someone telling you that your birthday is March 14 when you’ve got a birth certificate—not to mention your own mother—insisting that it’s October 6. Clearly, he bought his own stuff.

Partly out of politeness, partly to see how far our resident psychic would go, I asked if he had any other unusual talents.

Without the slightest embarrassment, he made the most absurd claim I had ever heard: “I can dissolve clouds. If I stare through them for a few seconds, they dissipate. Here, I’ll show you.”

Of course, I knew that some tribal societies claimed to be able to manipulate the weather, which is why “rain-maker” is a popular political metaphor for someone who can change the climate of opinion. What I didn’t know is that dissolving clouds is also part of the paranormal literature. Even if I had, I doubt it would have made me any more receptive.

“Pick a cloud,” Ben urged.

I refused.

He insisted. “Come on, it’s the damndest thing.”

I pointed directly overhead. “That one.”

Ben’s eyes took on that same unfocused look I’d noticed before. After fifteen or twenty seconds, he announced with satisfaction, “There it goes.”

I looked up. The cloud was gone.

“Isn’t that something? I only found out a couple of days ago that I can do it.”

I picked a second cloud—a medium-sized cumulus floating in isolation against a deep-blue sky. “Try that one.”

This time I watched the cloud. After about fifteen seconds, its edges dissolved while its dense center grew transparent. A few moments more and that cloud was also gone, though no others around it were affected.

Mayrick grinned at me while I searched for some plausible explanation. Surely the wind must have blown the clouds apart, or perhaps the sun had created an optical illusion.

“Let’s have one more demonstration,” I requested, determined to preserve my sense of reality by framing the next experiment. After picking four clouds of similar size and shape, almost touching one another, I put on dark glasses and studied them, memorizing their shapes and textures so completely that to this day I could draw them. “Dissolve only the bottom right one,” I instructed.

For the next twenty seconds I strode around the pool, burning into my consciousness the features of the clouds, which had not changed discernibly while I studied them, assuring myself they would remain as I had seen them.

“All finished,” announced Mayrick.

When I looked up again, the bottom-right cloud, and only the bottom-right cloud, was gone.

Conceding defeat, I shook his hand. “That’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen.” Then I walked away, still convinced I had been tricked.

A few hours later, with the psychic all but forgotten, I was half a mile into my commute home when I heard a terrible crash, followed by the scraping of metal on asphalt. The entire exhaust system had fallen out of my car. During the rest of my drive, with the engine spewing smoke, I rationalized away all inclination to credit the psychic: he had not specifically mentioned the exhaust system, and I was in the habit of driving old cars in which mufflers gave out. This one was a 1964 Nova with a replacement red seat because the original had disintegrated.

When I finally arrived home, I found my family in the backyard preparing a barbecue. After cornering my sister, I asked her about the conversation that Mayrick had described between her and our mother.

She was flabbergasted. “How did you find out about that? It was private.”

“Where did it take place?”

“In the kitchen.”

Under normal circumstances I would have been annoyed at both the inconvenience and the expense of having to fix my car; however, during my morning drive to the garage with it sounding like a tank, I found myself fighting an atypical feeling of exhilaration. The car, the clouds, the kitchen conversation: Mayrick had certainly

caught my attention. I was eager to see him again, and since he and his family rented an apartment beside the pool, I didn't have too many days to wait. As soon as I spotted him with his son and daughter on the deck, I sprinted over.

"You were right!" I told him. "My car did break down, and my mother and my sister had the conversation you described."

While I considered this a momentous admission, Ben appeared unmoved. As I would increasingly observe, if I said that the sky was blue and he thought it was green, he would just assume I was color-blind.

On my next break, I peppered him with questions: How did he know something was wrong with my car, but without being able to identify the exhaust system? What was he thinking and feeling as he made his predictions?

While chain-smoking as usual, Ben replied, "When I hold an object, I get an urge to say something, but I don't know what until I hear myself say it. With your wallet, I thought of a car and of trouble. Maybe if I'd held it longer, the idea of the exhaust would have come to me. Maybe not."

That exchange established our relationship for the rest of the summer. I would spend my breaks giving Ben objects from my friends, then questioning him about his answers, which were invariably correct. I was curious. He was flattered. I was also helping to probe a mystery that baffled him.

During Ben's early readings, he would sometimes blurt out very personal information without being able to check himself, just as he had done at the party. With practice, his psychic abilities evolved from an entertainment over which he had little control into a talent that he could channel and even direct. As he described this new process to me: "I'm finding I can scan for information—to be active instead of just waiting for it to find me."

"About anything?"

"I don't know. I've just discovered I could do this."

From time to time Ben gave me impromptu readings, with that familiar faraway look but without needing to hold an object. "You feel you're different and I believe you are. You also sense things you have no business knowing. And you don't believe anyone can fully understand you."

I changed the subject. "What do your friends think about your talent?"

"Most take it as a joke. Some say they always thought I was different."

Since Ben had kept his psychic abilities hidden from himself for so long, we speculated about how many other people were "weird" without knowing it. One of our lifeguards—I'll call her Amelia—came from a large Irish Catholic family that lived in my neighborhood. I used to imagine her very likable mother as a closet witch who was trying hard to live a conventional life. The kids were also very artistic and sensitive, and probably psychic.