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The Psychic from Queens

by Kay Daly

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"Silence, please!" the wild-eyed, bearded man exclaims. "Prestidigitators such as myself require absolute silence." A hush falls over the darkened room, leaving only the faint, tinny plink of harpsichord music in the background. The man holds up a small bundle wrapped in a red silk and unwinds it, revealing a deck of tarot cards. He hands the deck to the solemn-faced woman opposite him and commands her, in low, thrilling tones, to shuffle the cards. Two candles burning on the table sputter as he speaks. When she finishes, he takes the cards from her, deals them onto the table, and begins to read her future.

You might think this is a tableau from a Victorian novel or an old Vincent Price movie. It's not. The scene occurs regularly in the most mundane of places, a small apartment located in Queens, New York City. The "prestidigitator" is Christopher Czajka, theater educator, PBS employee, and part time mystic. For Chris, psychic performance has become a "perennial parlor trick." "Once word gets out that you can read tarot cards, everyone wants you to do it," he says, sighing dramatically. The cards come out nearly every time he gathers with friends, and lately he's begun telling fortunes at charity galas and fairs.

Chris' interest in the paranormal first stirred around age 11. A native of Rochester, New York, he was fascinated by a newspaper article about the Fox sisters, a pair of local siblings who launched the nineteenth-century craze for spiritualism. A search at the local library turned up only one book that featured the Fox sisters. It also included a chapter on the tarot. Chris devoured the book.

"Somehow, I had developed the notion that tarot cards were something ... dirty. Very adult. Nice people didn't have them." He put them out of his mind. That following summer, while vacationing in Toronto, he was stunned to discover tarot cards for sale in a perfectly normal store. "Imagine that!" he exclaims. "I bought them right away."

Chris also purchased a handbook to teach himself how to read the cards, and a silk cloth to wrap them in. "The book said I needed a cloth, so I found one." He still uses the same deck, cloth and book today.

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by *Kay Daly*

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Tarot Technique

The tarot deck consists of 78 illustrated cards divided into four suits similar to the suits in a deck of playing cards. There are also "court cards" (queen, king, etc.), and a group of cards called the Major Arcana (symbolic figures or forces such as the devil, the moon, the star, the hanged man, etc.). Based in a tradition going back at least a thousand years, each card bears a symbolic meaning.

Despite that tradition, tarot card readings are highly varied. The reader can consult a single card, or lay a number of cards out in a traditional "spread," or pattern. Any given card can take on a variety of meanings depending upon its placement in the spread, its position (facing right side up or "reversed"), and the reader's interpretation of the card's symbolism. Some readers forgo the traditional meaning of the card altogether to focus on tiny details in the illustrations. Others look for resonances among the cards within the spread.

When he first started out, Chris' readings were much more mechanical. "I was about 12 years old then, so of course, I simply memorized the handbook. I created flashcards for myself and learned what each card meant. When I read the cards, I simply repeated those textbook meanings."

He's since learned that is not how one reads tarot cards. "Doing a reading is a bit like visiting an art gallery," he explains. "A painting says something to you, but you're also constructing the meaning. In a different situation on a different day, the painting might say something different." It works the same way with cards. "You look at the card, you consider its traditional meaning, you analyze the person and what you know of their situation, and you let the card speak to you."

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Summoning the Spirits

A reading by Chris is a highly dramatic affair. First, all lights are dowsed, and candles are lit. "A rose candle and a vanilla candle," he specifies. "No reason. I just like the way they smell." Harpsichord music is also conducive to a good reading "particularly," he adds, "during a thunderstorm." Once the scene is set, he unveils the cards and asks his subject to shuffle them "until they feel right." Next, he asks the subject to drop the cards into three piles, going right to left, using only the right hand. Finally, the reading begins.

Chris lays the cards in the traditional "Celtic Cross" spread. "This card represents you, this card covers you, this card represents what is before you, this card represents what is behind you, this card represents influences that are yet to come into play..." As he lays the final column of cards, he dismisses them with "And these cards just go over here."

Typically, as the reading develops, a theme comes to the fore, which Chris repeats sonorously as an aphorism or catchphrase. "A stitch in time saves nine," he pronounces again and again as the cards point to a coming time of hardship. "Are you in your garden?" is the refrain of another reading in which the cards suggest the subject is retreating from the world.

To those who know him, Chris' readings are less about psychic wisdom and more about presenting the world in "Czajka-vision"; that is, he uses the cards to tell the subjects how he thinks they should live their lives. Chris himself readily admits that his readings are based more in his canny people skills than in the paranormal. "Reading cards requires a combination of careful observation, perception and a dash of psychic ability." In his best readings, he relies on his talent for picking up signals from his subjects, such as body language or facial expressions. "I can tell if I'm off track or on target. And with some subjects, I get into a real groove, a rhythm, where I'm reading the person and reading the cards, and I really am a sort of medium between the two."

And then there are a few subjects that give him nothing. "You ask questions, and they look at you blankly. You just know you aren't getting anything from them."

Still, more often than not, his readings have meaning for his subjects. And there are some moments that simply defy explanation. "Sometimes, a part of my brain just flips, and things fly out of my mouth that I can't account for," he exclaims with a flourish. Chris surprised himself most recently while telling fortunes at a charity function. During a reading for a stranger, he found himself saying, "You met your boyfriend ... on a trip." "Her eyes went wide with horror," he recalls. "Before I knew what I was saying, I said 'In London. You met in London.' I have no idea where that came from. But she screamed and ran away!" When she returned, he learned he was absolutely right.

So is he psychic? "I'd say I'm a very observant person. I'm very good at reading people," he replies cagily. "And I'm psychic in fits and starts." A palm reader once confirmed this notion. Pointing to a crease just under his ring finger, she showed him how the line was a clear but incomplete half-moon. A complete line means psychic ability. An incomplete line means ... something else. For Chris, the nearly complete line explains his sporadic prescience. "I'm about 95-percent psychic. I only

occasionally get a sense of knowledge that comes from some place I don't understand," he says wistfully. "I'd be much happier if I could do it all the time."

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