

Encounter in a Lonely Place

"You're interested in extrasensory perception, eh?- Well, I guess I've seen as much of that as the next fellow and that's no lie."

He was a little bald fellow with rimless glasses and he sat beside me on the bench outside the village post office where I was catching the afternoon edge of the April sun and reading an article called "The Statistical Argument For ESP" in the Scientific Quarterly.

I had seen him glance at the title over my shoulder.

He was a little fellow—Cranston was his name—and he had been in the village since as long as I could remember. He was born up on Burley Creek in a log cabin but lived now with a widowed sister whose name was Berstauble and whose husband had been a sea captain. The captain had built one of those big towered and shingle-sided houses that looked down from the ridge onto the village and the sheltered waters of the Sound beyond. It was a weathered grey house half hidden by tall firs and hemlocks and it imparted an air of mystery to its occupants.

The immediate mystery to me was why Cranston had come down *to* the post office. They had a hired hand *to* run such errands. You seldom saw any of the family down in the village, although Cranston was sociable enough

when you met him at the Grange hall and could be depended on for good conversation or a game of checkers. Cranston stood about five feet four and weighed, I guess, about a hundred and fifty—so you can see he wasn't skinny. His clothing, winter or summer, was a visored painter's cap, a pair of bib overalls and a dark brown shirt of the kind the loggers wore*—though I don't think he was ever a logger or, for that matter, ever did heavy labor of any kind.

"Something special bring you down to the post office?" I asked in the direct and prying village manner. "Don't see you down here very much."

"I was ... hoping to see someone," he said. He nodded toward the Scientific Quarterly in my lap. "Didn't know you were interested in extrasensory perception."

There was no preventing it, I saw. I'm one of those people who attract confidences—even when we don't want confidences—and it was obvious Cranston had a "story." I tried once more to head him off, though, because I was in one of those moods writers get—where we'd just as soon bite off heads as look at them.

"I think ESP is a damned racket," I said. "And it's disgusting to see them twist logic trying to devise mathematical proofs for ..."

"Well, I wouldn't be too sure if I were you," he said. "I could tell you a thing or two and that's no lie." "You read minds," I said.

"Read's the wrong word," he said. "And it isn't minds . . . " Here, he stared once up the road that branched above the post office before looking back at me. "It's mind." "You read a mind," I said. .

"I can see you don't believe," he said. "I'm going to tell you anyway. Never told an outsider before ... but you're not really an outsider, your folks being who they are, and since you're a writer you may make something of this." I sighed and closed the Quarterly. "I'd just moved up from the creek to live with my sister," Cranston said. "I was seventeen. She'd been married let's see, about three years then, but her husband—the captain—was away at sea. To Hong Kong if I remember

rightly. Her father-in-law, old Mr. Jerusalem Berstable, was living then. Had the downstairs bedroom that opens on the back porch. Deaf as a diver he was, for sure, and couldn't get out of his wheelchair without you helped him. Which was why they sent for me to come up from the creek. He was a living heller, old Mr. Jerusalem, if you remember. But then you never knew him, I guess."

(This was the sliding reference to my borderline status that no villager seemed able to avoid when discussing "olden times" with me—though they all accepted me because my grandparents were villagers and everyone in the valley knew I had "come home" to recover from my wound in the war.)

"Old Mr. Jerusalem dearly loved his game of cribbage in the evening," Cranston said. "This one evening I'm telling you about he and my sister were playing their game in the study. They didn't talk much because of his deafness and all we could hear through the open door of the study was the slap of the cards and my sister kind of muttering as she pegged each hand.

"We'd turned off the living room lights, but there was a fire in the fireplace and there was light from the study. I was sitting in the living room with Olna, the Norwegian girl who helped my sister then. She married Gus Bills a couple years later, the one killed when the donkey engine blew up at Indian Camp. Olna and I'd been playing a Norwegian card game they call *reap* which is something like whist," but we got tired of it and were just sitting there across the fireplace from each other halfway listening to the cards slapping down the way they did in the study."

Cranston pushed back his visored painter's cap and glanced toward the green waters of the Sound where a tug was nursing a boom of logs out from the tidal basin.

"Oh, she was pretty then, Olna was," he said presently. "Her hair was like silvered gold. And her skin—it was like you could look right into it."

"You were sweet on her," I said.

"Daft is the word," he said. "And she didn't mind me one bit, either ... at first there."

Again, he fell silent. He tugged once at his cap visor.

Presently, he said: "I was trying to remember if it was my idea or hers. It was mine. Olna had the deck of cards still in her hands. And I said to her, 'Olna, you shuffle the deck. Don't let me see the cards.' Yes, that's how it was. I said for her to shuffle the deck and take one card at a time off the top and see if I could guess what it was.

"There was a lot of talk going around just then about this fellow at Duke University, this doctor, I forget his name, who had these cards people guessed. I think that's what put the notion in my mind."

Cranston fell silent a moment and I swear he looked younger for an instant—especially around the eyes.

"So you shuffled the cards," I said, interested in spite of myself. "What then?"

"Eh? Oh... she said: 'Yah, see if you can guess dissvun.' She had a thick accent, Olna. Would've thought she'd been born in the old country instead of over by Port Orchard. Well, she took that first card and looked at it. Lord, how pretty she was bending to catch the light from the study door. And you know, I knew the instant she saw it what it was—the Jack of clubs. It was as though I saw it in my mind somewhere... not exactly seeing, but I knew. So I just blurted out what it was." "You got one right out of fifty-two ... not bad," I said. "We went right through the deck and I named every card for her," Cranston said. "As she turned them up— every card; not one mistake."

I didn't believe him, of course. These stories are a dime a dozen in the study of ESP, so I'm told. None of them pan out. But I *was* curious why he was telling this story. Was it the old village bachelor, the nobody, the man existing on a sister's charity trying to appear important? "So you named every card for her," I said. "You ever figure the odds against that?"

"I had a professor over at the State College do it for me once," Cranston said. "I forget how much it was. He said it was impossible such a thing was chance."

"Impossible," I agreed not trying to disguise my disbelief. "What did Olna think of this?"

"She thought it was a trick—parlor magic, you know."

"She was wearing glasses and you saw the cards reflected in them, isn't that it?" I asked.

"She doesn't wear glasses to this day," Cranston said. "Then you saw them reflected in her eyes," I said. "She was sitting in shadows about ten feet away," he said. "She only had the light from the study door to see the cards. She had to hold them toward the firelight from the fireplace for me to see them. No, it wasn't anything like that. Besides, I had my eyes closed some of the time. I just kind of saw those cards . . . this place in my mind that I found. I didn't have to hesitate or guess. I *knew* every time."

"Well, that's very interesting," I said, and I opened the Scientific Quarterly. "Perhaps you should be back at Duke helping Dr. Rhine."

"You can bet I was excited," he said, ignoring my attempt to end the conversation. "This famous doctor had said humans could do this thing, and here I was proving it."

"Yes," I said. "Perhaps you should write Dr. Rhine and tell him."

"I told Olna to shuffle the cards and we'd try it again," Cranston said, his voice beginning to sound slightly desperate. "She didn't seem too eager, but she did it. I did notice her hands were trembling."

"You frightened the poor child with your parlor magic," I said.

He sighed and sat there in silence for a moment staring at the waters of the Sound. The tug was chugging off with its boom of logs. I found myself suddenly feeling very sorry for this pitiful little man. He had never been more than fifty miles from the village, I do believe. He lived a life bounded by that old house on the ridge, the weekly card games at the Grange and an occasional trip to the store for groceries. I don't even believe they had television. His sister was reputed to be a real old-fashioned harridan on the subject.

"Did you name all the cards again?" I asked, trying to sound interested. "Without one mistake," he said. "I had that place in

m^ mind firmly located by then. I could find my way to it every time."

"And Olna wanted to know how you were doing it," I said.

He swallowed. "No. I think she ... *felt* how I was doing it. We hadn't gone through more' fifteen cards that second time when she threw the deck onto the floor. She sat there shivering and staring at me. Suddenly, she called me some name—I never did rightly hear it straight—and she leaped up and ran out of the house. It happened so fast! She was out the back door before I was on my feet. I ran out after her but she was gone. We found out later she hitched a ride on the bread truck and went straight home to Port Orchard. She never came back."

"That's too bad," I said. "The one person whose mind you could read and she ran out on you."

"She never came back," he said, and I swear his voice had tears in it. "Everyone thought... you know, that I'd made improper advances. My sister was pretty mad. Olna's brother came for her things the next day. He threatened to *whoomp* me if I ever set foot on..."

Cranston broke off, turning *to* stare up the gravel road that comes into the village from the hill farms to the west. A tall woman in a green dress that ended half way between knees and ankles had just turned the corner by the burned-out stump and was making for the post office. She . walked with her head down so you could see part of the top of her head where the yellow hair was braided and wound tight like a crown. She was a big woman with a good figure and a healthy swing to her stride.

"I heard her brother was sick," Cranston said.

I glanced at Cranston and the look on his face—sad and distant—answered my unspoken question.

"That's Olna," I said. I began to feel excitement. I didn't believe his fool story, still...

"She doesn't come down here very often," Cranston said. "But with her brother sick, I'd hoped..."

She turned off onto the post office path and the corner of the building hid her from us. We heard the door open on the other side and a low mumble of conversation in the building. Presently, the door opened once more and

the woman came around the corner, taking the path that passed in front of us toward the store down by the highway. She still had her head bent, but now she was reading a letter.

As she passed in front of us no more than six feet away, Cranston said: "Olna?"

Her head whipped around and she stopped with one foot ahead of the other. I swear I've never seen more terror in a person's face. She just stared frozen at Cranston.

"I'm sorry about your sister's boy," Cranston said, and then added: "If I were you, I'd suggest she take the boy to one of those specialists in Minneapolis. They do wonders with plastic surgery nowadays and ..."

"You!" she screamed. Her right hand came up with the index and little fingers pointed at Cranston in a warding-off-evil sign that I'd thought died out in the middle ages. "You stay out of my head ... you ... you *cottys!*"

Her words broke the spell. She picked up her skirts and fled down the path toward the highway. The last we saw of her was a running figure that sped around the corner by the garage.

I tried to find something to say, but nothing came. Cottys, that was the Danuan Pan who seduced virgins by capturing their minds, but I'd never realized that the Norse carried that legend around.

"Her sister just wrote her in that letter," Cranston said, "that the youngest boy was badly scalded by a kettle tipped off the stove. Just happened day before yesterday. That's an airmail letter. Don't get many of them here."

"Are you trying to tell me you read that letter through her eyes?" I demanded.

"I never lost that place I found," he said. "Lord knows I tried to lose it often enough. Especially after she married Gus Bills."

Excitement boiled in me. The possibilities...

"Look," I said, "I'll write to Duke University myself. We can..."

"Don't you dare!" he snapped. "It's bad enough every man in the valley knows this about us. Oh, I know they mostly don't believe... but the chance..." He shook his

head. "Ill not stand in her way if she finds a suitable man to..."

"But, man," I said. "If you. ,."

"You believe me now, don't you?" he said, and his voice had a sly twist I didn't like.

"Well," I said, "I'd like to see this examined by people who..."

"Make it a sideshow," he said. "Stories in the Sunday papers. Whole world'd know."

"But if..."

"She won't have me!" he barked. "Don't you understand? She'll never lose me, but she won't have me. Even when she went on the train back to Minneapolis... the week after she ran out of our house ..."

His voice trailed off.

"But think of what this could mean to..."

"There's the only woman I ever loved," Cranston said. "Only woman I ever could've married... she thinks I'm the devil himself!" He turned and glared at me. "You think I want to expose *that*? I'd reach into my head with a bailing hook and tear that place out of my mind first!"

And with that he bounced to his feet and took off up the path that led toward the road to the ridge.