

Face of an Angel

A short story by

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John Johnson blinked the rain from his eyes and eased out a melancholy sigh. He was walking along the cheerless sea front arm in arm with his wife, Crystal who struggled to keep up as he strode along at his usual brisk pace; resting her chin low to her chest to keep the clinging rain out of her face. As he walked, John's mind serenaded him with an old Morrissey song he thought he'd forgotten after thirty years; something about trudging over wet sand and having your clothes stolen – a perfectly depressing song that seemed to fit his day to a tee.

Squinting out to sea, John studied the foam topped waves that jostled their way inland to flop on the sodden sand, and tried to recall the happy childhood memories that their soothing sound usually conjured. He looked up at the gray, bloated clouds that rolled in from the chilled Atlantic to discharge a fine rain that found its way beneath even the most waterproofed clothing to leave a body icy and shivering. Mirrored beneath the swollen bellies of the low clouds, the sea rolled muddied and listless against the litter-strewn beach.

Truth was, John had forgotten just how miserable Blackpool was at this time of the year; how the west coast of Northern England was miserable pretty much *any* time of the year, let alone mid-October. John surprised himself that in just forty-six years his mind had rose-tinted that minor fact.

Even the famous tower – the poor man's Eiffel – had not been spared harassment from the nebulous mist that clung to its upper structures like myriad slumbering ghosts. But, despite its grim surroundings, John was uplifted a little to see that the Tower remained proud and erect against the cold, damp air; it reminded him of an elderly war veteran at a cenotaph.

Down on the beach, deck chairs were piled up and hunkered down for the winter beneath flapping, green tarpaulin, and the optimistic purveyors of donkey rides sought shelter next to their shivering, sad-faced charges. Most of the beach front amenities were closed against the promised onslaught of winter, although many of the pubs and arcades remained open; there remained a workable clientele for those particular amusements all year round.

John mused to himself that Addison would love all of this. His daughter was just entering her *Goth* phase, which John thought a little premature, but which Crystal had assured him it was all part of the girl's blossoming and her own way of dealing with her brother's death. As such, Addison loved the dark and disconsolate and that made John sad inside; his baby girl was metamorphosing from all things pink and Disney Princess to black bedroom walls with finger nails to match, and music that sounded like the sound track to a 1970's Dennis Wheatley movie.

The last of Blackpool's *bona fide* holiday makers had retreated once school resumed and the cooler weather took a hold in September; smiling, wholesome families

with two-point-four children and blue-collar careers who crowded the beach with SF50, noise and sand castles and frolicked in the sea no matter how frigid and murky it was. Those same carefree-for-two-weeks families filled the bed and breakfast establishments that were the backbone of the Blackpool economy; queued to see the end of pier variety shows, and merrily frittered away their hard-earned into the slot machines come evening time.

Sadly, this late in the year, the town was almost exclusively the realm of drunken, raucous bachelor and bachelorette parties. As testimony to the nocturnal debauchery such soirees elicited, the gutters along the sea front road were awash with discarded novelty 'L' plates, lackluster plastic tiaras, tattered sashes – 'bride', 'official bridesmaid', 'mother of the bride' – and used condoms that clung to the curb stones like sickly, stranded jellyfish.

This was John's first trip back to his native England since he'd moved to the States a dozen years ago; his wife's first trip *anywhere* out of her native Maryland – ever. Never ones to stray far from their homeland, the Americans.

It was also their first vacation since Declan, who would have turned six come Christmas Day.

It had been the thing of every parent's nightmares, the kind of occurrence that you don't believe that you could ever live through. One minute, little Declan Johnson had been happily playing upstairs with his big sister, the next, the heart-chilling *thump-thump-thump* as his small body bounced down the stairs.

As quickly as that, John and Crystal's son was gone.

Within the precious few seconds it had taken John and Crystal to get to him, Declan was already dead at the foot of the staircase and had looked for all the world like a crumpled, broken toy. His neck had twisted almost all the way around to face his back and there was a surprised look on the beautiful face that had always reminded John so much of Crystal. There had been very little blood – just the tiniest trickle from one nostril – nor any snapped limb bones. It had appeared to John as if he could have simply turned his boy's head back the right way around, patted him on the behind and sent him on his way to watch SpongeBob and the gang.

Only, life isn't quite like that.

Addison Johnson was a smart kid (as well as having the extra advantage of being a doe-eyed blonde and cute as a button) who knew full well that the safety gate at the top of the Johnson's precipitous stairs was supposed to be kept closed at *all* times for the safety of her sibling. Just that once, she'd forgotten to shut it behind her; a simple – but ultimately devastating – mistake. As distraught as they had been, it had been impossible for John and Crystal to lay the blame for such a tragic accident on a seven year old. So, the Johnsons had taken the easier route and blamed themselves.

And each other.

Most days, John managed to convince himself that he'd gotten over what had happened that fateful morning, and he figured Crystal was well on her way there too. But then there were the days that he knew that no, no he hadn't; there were some things in life you were never supposed to get over.

He'd booked the trip to England without telling Crystal and had presented it to her in a way that made it impossible to say no. He'd paid for the tickets, organized the itinerary and enthused that she simply *had* to take the trip, especially when it included the wonderful place of his childhood vacations. Cold, miserable seaside resort holidays were,

after all, as great a British tradition as the Queen and being polite.

Crystal had agreed with some reluctance. They had been forced to leave Addison with Crystal's Mother as a last resort since their regular sitter had let them down at the last minute. That had been an inconvenience, for sure, but a freak gas explosion that levelled the poor girl's entire apartment complex and killed six people could hardly be considered Stacey the Sitter's fault. John and Crystal had decided not to tell Addison about the accident until they returned home, as their daughter had grown quite fond of Stacey. They'd briefed Crystal's Mom to keep her Granddaughter away from any news reports about the explosion, and about how Stacey's head still hadn't been found.

The tragedy had brought back a whole slew of unhappy memories for the Johnsons but Crystal had conceded that yes, they probably *were* long overdue for some alone time. So, after a frantic last-minute scramble to organize Crystal's passport – she'd never had/needed one – John had introduced his wife to the inimitable delights of Great Britain.

Once they had visited with John's small family and handful of friends (the *obligated* part of their trip, as John referred to it), he'd driven her northwards to Blackpool, away from the cynical tourist trap that is the *London Town* that Americans love to visit and think they've seen all of England.

Now, though, plodding through the litter-strewn streets and drizzling precipitation with his visibly fed-up wife, John had to admit that Blackpool had fared far better in his memory than it had in real life. Perhaps he'd have been better off leaving it there?

"I'm sorry, babe," John said. He slipped an arm around Crystal's slim waist. "Not quite Disney World, is it?" He made with a light laugh.

"It's okay, Hun," His wife's voice was muffled against her chest. "I wasn't expecting ninety-eight and hundred percent humidity." She returned John's laugh to let him know that all was well with Mrs. Johnson, despite outward appearances. "It's actually quite fascinating to see what you Brits consider a good vacation."

"It doesn't rain *all* of the time," John protested, although he had to admit to himself that it pretty much did. "When the sun comes out, Blackpool is the best place in the world." He wasn't even convincing himself by this stage.

"It's fine, sweetheart, honestly." Crystal turned her head to face him, intense blue eyes sparkling behind her rain-speckled spectacles, and a beautiful half-smile played on her lips. "This is part of what made the man I love." She kissed his nose. "And looking at those donkeys, it makes sense how come you wound up with that ex-wife of yours."

They giggled together, and John was forced to admit that yes, at least one of the threadbare beasts huddled down on the beach did bear more than a passing resemblance to the first Mrs. Johnson.

And John remembered all over again why he had fallen so helplessly in love with Crystal the very first time he'd laid eyes on her.

John Johnson – hated that name, a product of unimaginative parents – had been on solo vacation in the US following a spectacularly messy divorce from the erstwhile, donkey-faced Mrs. Johnson. He was finishing up his trip with the East Coast, and it was on a chilled and drizzly day not a million miles away from this one that he'd bumped into his future second wife on the Chesapeake Bay.

He'd made an emphatic vow never to remarry – *ever* – and meeting someone other than for a casual one or two night stand was the furthest from his agenda than one

could have imagined when the fair-skinned, flame-haired Crystal Whitsell had blazed into his life.

John had been on the guided tour around the Chesapeake Bay Decoy Museum, more to be indoors until the rain eased off than with an interest in how the locals lured ducks to their untimely death. John had cracked a joke about how the real museum was probably hiding in the reeds across the way which was sadly met with confused looks throughout the group; this, he chalked up to the whole Americans/lack of irony thing. There was, however, one exception to the stony-faced quiet, that being the aforementioned Ms. Whitsell.

She'd laughed at his joke with such gusto that at first John had thought she *was* being ironic; but then she'd flashed him a smile that melted his heart and made his knees go weak. Cliché or no, it was love at first sight for John and, as it worked out, for Crystal too.

John didn't return to the UK. He'd spent the remaining days of his vacation horizontal with Crystal in her ranch house bedroom, and when his two weeks were up, he'd simply married the gal and stayed Stateside.

Hard to believe those twelve years had flown by so quickly since then. John had acclimatized nicely to life in America; enough to have formed a circle of good friends who all *'love the accent'*, to write cheque as *'check'* and not get annoyed when the spellcheckers on his laptop and cell phone chastised him for stubbornly putting the *u* back where it belonged in *color*.

"So." Crystal's loud snuffle broke John from his reverie. He could see that the end of his wife's pretty, button nose was beginning to run and glow red in the chilled air. "Are you going to feed me, or not?"

"Seaside air making you hungry, my love?" He smiled.

More like I'm freezing my balls off." Crystal returned the smile.

"But you don't have—"

"Exactly." Crystal gave her husband a playful elbow in the ribs.

They giggled together like a couple of love struck teens; the familiar pattern of an old joke shared lifting their spirits.

John then realized that he was hungry too. Most likely the power of suggestion, married to the fact that they had missed breakfast at the bed and breakfast. The landlady, Mrs. Staniforth – a sharp-faced, humorless widow – was quite the stickler for punctuality and they'd stayed in bed an extra five minutes for a morning quickie. There was also the heavenly smell of hot cooking oil that wafted along the street and tugged on both his nostalgia and his taste buds.

"Remember I promised you traditional British food?" John asked. "Well, it doesn't come any better than Blackpool fish and chips." He grinned at his wife.

"Sounds good to me." Crystal sniffed the air and the scent of frying food made her mouth water. "As long as we can sit down, my feet are killing me." She'd seen people walking around eating from what appeared to be old newspapers and she really didn't fancy that much.

John promised her that they could sit down, and led her towards the door of a fish and chip restaurant which stood invitingly open a few short steps away. The restaurant was imaginatively named *The Fish Plaice*, which was a common, supposedly witty play on the latter word. As Crystal would point out later, a plaice is a fish so the name boiled

down to *The Fish Fish* and she failed to understand how that was supposed to work. Again with the American/irony thing.

Once seated, Crystal took off her glasses and dried them off them with a rough paper napkin. “You really weren’t joking when you said these places were no frills.” Crystal eyed their table with its plastic tablecloth and old, tarnished *Sheffield Steel* flatware. She glanced at the take-out counter where a steady stream of damp, bedraggled people were buying steaming piles of fish and chips – *French fries* to her and her countrymen – that were bundled up in *real* newspaper. She shuddered to think of the countless health and safety implications of consuming newsprint.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart; would you like to go someplace else?” there was disappointment in John’s voice. “I think I saw a sushi place near the B and B.”

Crystal smiled that smile of hers that could light up the darkest of any situation. “Just teasing, babe, this is absolutely perfect.” She reached out across the table and placed her freezing hand on top of his.

“What can I get you?” a gruff voice broke their moment.

John and Crystal looked up and were greeted by the unsmiling, lined face that belonged to their waitress, the *only* waitress in the place (*Plaice?*). John found himself eye level with her unfeasibly large, sagging breasts and name badge that read ‘**oris**’.

“The D wore off,” the woman pre-empted John’s question. “And Mr. Patel won’t replace it until next season.” She offered a half smile and tapped her order pad with a stubby pencil to signal the end of their chit-chat.

“I’d like the fish and chips and a cup of tea, please,” Crystal spoke up and her accent and ever-sunny disposition brightened even Doris’s dour countenance some. Was that the trace of a smile on the old girl’s lips?

“And for me, too,” John added.

“Peas?” Doris growled.

“Yes please.” Crystal replied.

Doris snorted and looked down her nose at the American. John allowed himself a smile, it was kind of fun to see his wife on the receiving end of what he put up with on her home turf. It had been the longest time before he’d quit saying *alumin-i-um* and asking for chips with his food and getting a packet of Lays.

“Boiled or mushy?” Doris asked and glanced at John. Was that a raised eyebrow?

“Mushy,” John chimed in, not accustomed to ordering food for his wife. “You’ll love them, my dear,” he added upon seeing Crystal’s grimace.

Doris nodded and stomped off, as if customers ordering food just about ruined her day, every day.

Crystal had learned the hard way to mistrust her husband over weird British delicacies after the black pudding incident two nights previous. John had not disclosed that the main ingredient was *pig’s blood* until after she’d eaten a belly full and declared it delicious.

“Ooh, look!” Crystal exclaimed, peering through the greasy, rain spattered window. “They have a palmist’s.”

John was careful not to show his exasperation. One roll of the eyes or a wistful sigh was all it would take to break the amicable mood they were enjoying.

Crystal’s obsession with all things otherworldly had begun with a psychic reading when Addison had been running around in diapers, and had reached fever pitch after their

son's death. More recently, Crystal had either calmed down with the whole thing, or had gotten better at hiding it from her husband who she knew to be – at the very least – sceptical.

Crystal had always been a believer, the more *spiritual* of the two of them. She'd never embraced conventional religion like those Bible-thumping, praise-be-to-Jesus types she'd grown up with, but she was in tune with the new age spiritualism movement and firmly believed in '*there must be something after we die*'. So much so that Crystal habitually paid visits to palm readers, psychics, tarot readers and the rest, as if searching for answers to questions she didn't yet know how to ask.

She'd kept the recording of her first reading. So old now that it was on a cassette tape and John had had to scour the local thrift stores for one of those old-style player/recorders just so she could listen – and re-listen *ad infinitum* – to it. She'd even insisted that John hear it at least the once.

To be fair to the psychic guy on the cassette, he was quite obviously very good at what he did. He'd nailed most of Crystal's particulars without giving away the fact that he was doing what all mentalists did well – reading her body language whilst feeding her the usual loaded questions. He'd managed a spot-on guess about the Johnson kids, although it was probably not too difficult to guess that a married woman of a certain age would most likely have children, but to get the gender and ages exactly right? John had been forced to admit that appeared to be more than just a stroke of good luck on the psychic's part. After hitting that nail on the head though, the guy on the tape went down in John's estimation.

You have a daughter.

A fifty percent chance of getting that one right.

She has the face of an angel.

What parent doesn't think their little Princess is just the cutest thing on God's green Earth?

And the mind of a devil.

Wait, What!?

Who the hell says *that* to a parent? Sure, Addison had all the makings of being a handful; she was already ruling the roost with her manipulative, at times petulant behavior. But then again, what little girl didn't?

The reading had ended abruptly after that, and Crystal had never made her husband listen to the recording again, never even mentioned it, although John knew that she still played it from time to time.

After that reading, John thought that Crystal had seemed different around her daughter. It was a subtle change that John had hoped only he – and not Addison – could pick up on, and on occasion he would catch the feeling that in some way, his wife was wary of the girl.

"Two fish and chips." Doris plonked the utilitarian, white plates in front of the Johnsons. "If you want a bap instead of bread, it's a pound extra," She grumbled. "Each."

John assured the dour waitress that no, they wouldn't be requiring baps, whilst suppressing a smirk at the word for bread bun that his childish generation had hijacked as a euphemism for breasts.

"Can we go?" Crystal asked her husband. "After we've finished eating – this." She peered down at the thickly battered fish and mountain of fries before her as if it had

just beamed down from some alien mother ship. She poked her fork at the spreading puddle of mushy peas that soaked into her fish and looked like lumpy snot or something Linda Blair threw up. “I’d love for us both to have a reading.”

“I can’t see why not,” John was truthful here. With all the best will in the world, he genuinely couldn’t think of an excuse *not* to visit the palmist across the street, as much as he detested the idea. Crystal had him cornered.

“Awesome.” She smiled, and John was pleased to have made his wife happy, even if it was only because he had no other choice.

John peered with some trepidation across the road at the palmist’s gaudy shop front, hoping against hope that it would be closed for off-season. But no, the garish, red and yellow neon sign that declared *Palm’s Read, tarot, fortune’s told* shone bright and illiterate through the drizzle. Above the flickering neon, a fading, hand painted sign declared; *Gypsy Rose*.

Really?

There was a small, grubby window adjacent to the narrow doorway. It was adorned with frayed, crocheted silk curtains which thus completed the cliché that had been a seaside town staple since the mid eighteen-hundreds. Yet one more way of extracting money from gullible holiday makers on their way to the pubs, slot machines and bingo.

John dug into his food like a workhouse kid. As he shovelled the greasy fare into his mouth, he tried to conceal the initial disappointment that the fish was a flat, bland fillet of haddock and not the thick, flaky cod of his childhood – hadn’t he read that cod were on the endangered species list now? Even so, it did taste good sprinkled with salt, swimming in malt vinegar and nostalgia, accompanied by soft, doughy bread and mushy peas.

“This reminds me of that dip at Charlotte’s wedding,” Crystal ventured. “I thought *that* was guacamole, too.” She held a small sample of the green mush to her mouth and gave it a tentative prod with her tongue.

God only knew what the stuff at her sister’s wedding reception had been, but it was neither peas nor guacamole; although John was surprised that his wife had remembered a small detail such as the dip over the embarrassment of the ceremony itself.

It had been an ostentatious church wedding, despite the fact that it was Charlotte Whitsell’s second marriage. Daddy, it turned out, was good friends with Reverend Hopkins and had pledged the equivalent of a hospital wing to the Church’s Restoration Fund.

John had not wanted to take the children in the first place – Addison had just turned four, Declan one – because he had plans to get hopelessly drunk at the free bar during the lavish country club reception. Sadly, he’d been overruled by Crystal who had informed him that Charlotte had absolutely *insisted* the kids attend.

The ceremony had begun by the time they’d taken their pew – last minute diaper change in the car – behind Crystal’s Mom and her ginormous hat (John remembered pondering over just how many birds had died to decorate that hideous millinery – and had even started to count the feathers in order to make the calculation) when Addison had begun to grizzle. Crystal had tried everything in her power to placate the girl, even the dreaded, last resort pacifier she’d not had since she turned three, but the low growl of her daughter’s grizzling had quickly degenerated into a full-blown wail.

John would remember vividly to his dying day the marrow-chilling looks from *everyone* in the church as his daughter's loud screams echoed around the high, vaulted ceilings. It had felt to him like two hundred people – the normally serene and mild mannered Reverend Hopkins included – were willing him and his family to just curl up and die.

Then Addison had thrown up.

Not only on Crystal, but down the back of the mother of the bride and all over the poor unfortunates who sat either side of the woman.

Of course, Crystal and John had been mortified beyond comprehension at Addison's display; by the sound of the unworldly, guttural screams that came out of their daughter, one would have expected her to have projectile vomited pea green soup. But no, it was half-digested, rancid milk that stank like death and the Denny's pancakes Addison had wolfed down for breakfast.

The Reverend Hopkins, who was on his way over to ask – no doubt most politely – that the Johnsons take their screaming child outside so he could continue with the wedding vows, caught some thick, gray vomit globs on his cassock and John had thought at the time that it looked as if Addison was *aiming* the stuff at him.

Declan, thankfully, had been far too young to be embarrassed by the episode, or even to remember it.

John and Crystal had had no choice but to remove Addison from the church, and the ceremony itself was delayed an hour whilst Crystal's Mom changed outfits and the Reverend Hopkins slipped into non-vomit stained vestments.

Addison had stopped crying almost as soon as they stepped out of the church and into the spring sunshine, much to the relief of John's frayed nerves. He'd driven Crystal and the kids back to the hotel where they'd washed up, changed clothes and decided to sit the ceremony out and plan their apologies for the evening reception.

As it turned out, John and Crystal's shame amongst the Whitsell family had been fairly short lived as Charlotte's marriage hadn't actually lasted all that long; what with New Hubby doing jail time for beating the crap out of his bride on their honeymoon.

Charlotte had been left severely brain damaged and with matching detached retinas by her husband's uncharacteristic and – as far as the police could tell – unprovoked attack. To this day, the poor woman wiled away her days in a private clinic muttering quietly to herself about the dark, sinister things that skulked in the periphery of what remained of her vision.

With hindsight, and a not immeasurable amount of cynical superstition, Addison's outburst in the church had seemed to John to have been a portent of sorts, almost like a black cat crossing one's path, or the unfortunate sighting of a solitary magpie. So much so, in fact that when – due to an unfortunate oversight by the photographer – he and Crystal had received their copy of the wedding album, John had half expected to see unpleasant, otherworldly things lurking in the background of the pictures.

But no, just happy, smiling faces oblivious to the impending fate of the happy couple. And Addison's angry, screaming face in the cool gloom of the church.

"Yeah, what was that stuff?" John asked. "It tasted worse than Addison's throw-up." He grinned at Crystal and saw the familiar – and much loved – wrinkles at the corners of his wife's infinitely kissable mouth.

"You know I don't like to think about Charlotte's wedding," she replied. "I've

never been so embarrassed in my entire life.” That smile again. “Although it did stop my parents talking to me for three years, the pretentious asses.”

John reached over the table and held his wife’s hand.

Crystal had only recommenced communications with her family after Declan had died.

They ate in silence awhile, each lost in their own private thoughts. John studied his wife’s reaction to the congealing pool of bright green peas that lurked upon her plate and it looked to him as if she was actually enjoying them. That or she was at least putting on the pretense of enjoying them.

“We should check in with home,” Crystal broke the quiet. “Make sure everything’s okay.”

“It’s six in the morning over there,” John reminded her. “Addison won’t even be awake yet, and you know what your Mother’s like if she doesn’t get her full eight hours.” John shivered as he pictured his Mother-in-Law asleep in his and Crystal’s bed, having refused the guest bed because she said it was too lumpy. John had had to bite his tongue on that one, no matter how much it rankled; theirs was the bed in which he made love to Crystal, in which they had created two children together.

Crystal’s Mom – Janice – with some cajoling had agreed to housesit. Crystal’s proviso at not cancelling their trip had been that the house was not left empty and Addison got to stay home to be in familiar surroundings, especially since their regular sitter had so resolutely let them down.

Crystal’s mother had seemed reluctant at first; of late she seemed to have caught some of her daughter’s wariness around Addison, especially since the colored pencil incident at school.

John wasn’t sure exactly why that particular incident above all others had disturbed Janice as much as it did. It wasn’t as if it had been entirely Addison’s fault and the school had said that the other kid would be okay; the doctors had saved his left eye and there’d been some great advances in prosthetic eyes in recent years. In the end, John put his mother-in-law’s odd behaviour down to Janice’s advancing years and lingering upset following her husband’s untimely death at just sixty-two.

John glanced at the fob on his bunch of keys that he’d rested on the table, an old habit as his growing clutter of keys tended to dig into his leg if he kept them in his pocket.

The fob had a picture of Addison on it. She was all broad, beaming smile, flaxen hair the color of morning sunshine, perfectly round cheeks, a tiny snub nose, and those deep, dark, browner-than-brown eyes that sometimes and in a certain light would appear black. John often found himself contemplating his daughter’s photograph, more so since Declan’s passing, and reflecting upon how little she looked like him, or his wife; so much so, that he and Crystal would sometimes joke that perhaps there had been a mix-up of babies at the hospital.

There were occasions, though, where John thought that Addison looked a little like her Mom, and times that Crystal would make such comments as; *she has your pout, John*, or *she’s just like her damned father*, although he thought they were more wishful thinking than anything else.

Declan had quickly grown out of his mother’s features and had been the absolute spit of John, there had been times that John had thought that looking into his son’s beautiful face was like looking in a mirror.

At that moment John realized that he missed his daughter terribly.

“Well, I think it’s beaten me,” John declared and pushed his plate an inch or two towards the middle of the table for emphasis.

“Me too,” Crystal said through a mouthful of fries. “That was really good.”

“Despite appearances to the contrary?” John laughed.

“I even ate some of that fake guacamole stuff,” Crystal sounded rather proud of herself, like a kid who’s forced spinach down for the very first time.

“I knew you’d like it,” John said. “We should buy a few cans to take home.”

“Don’t push it, buster.” Crystal flashed her husband that smile again.

John slurped down the tepid brown liquid in his teacup.

“Ready to go see the tower?” he asked.

“After we go see Gypsy Rose,” Crystal reminded.

As if he’d *really* forgotten.

The rain had eased up some by the time they stepped back outside, although the sky remained ominously swollen, as if the clouds were conspiring to birth something vast and monstrous. John had settled up with Doris, argued a little with Crystal about her making him leave a five pounds tip – *that was almost eight bucks*, he’d protested – and ushered his wife out of the restaurant.

They had to wait for a sparsely patronized tram to rumble by and then they were across the road, through the palmist’s narrow door and into the eerie – if somewhat hopelessly clichéd – realm of one astonishingly ancient, gnarled Gypsy Rose.

“Welcome!” she cried in a theatrical, non-specific eastern European accent. “I was expecting you.”

Of course she was, John chuckled to himself, how could she not be? He recalled a favorite cartoon from long, long ago in which there was a sign outside a clairvoyant’s premises – not entirely dissimilar to this one, it had to be said, despite being an ocean away – that declared ‘*Closed due to unforeseen circumstances*’.

John smiled at his thoughts and stepped forward, wrinkling his nose against the heady stink of incense and naphthalene.

“Come in, come in, sit down.” Gypsy Rose beckoned them both into her cramped, ill-lit parlour. She pulled up a chair at the side of the room and motioned for John to plant his ass on it. As he did so, the palmist led Crystal by the hand to a rickety wooden chair opposite her own.

Gypsy Rose – and John seriously doubted that she was a true gypsy, or that she was actually named Rose (more likely she was from some inner city council estate in Manchester and was really called Edna) settled herself down and caressed the crystal ball that sat in the center of the small, square table.

“It’s ten pounds for a reading, ball, palm or tarot,” Gypsy Rose told them. Her phoney accent slipped a little and John thought that he’d caught the undercurrent of a twang that could actually have come from Yorkshire, on the opposite side of the Pennines. “In advance.”

Crystal fished through her wallet and handed over what she hoped was a ten pound note and nothing larger. It was difficult to tell in the poor light, but then again that was most likely the whole point of the half a watt bulb that swung gently over the table. John was about to crack a smart one about how it was supposed to be *cross the lady’s hand with silver* and not bank notes but thought better of it.

Gypsy Rose cast a withering glance towards John, as if daring him to say *anything* that would spoil the ambience. John felt almost as if she *were* reading his mind; that she'd made a connection with his psyche and knew what his cynical old brain was thinking. That thought creeped John out, the idea of Gypsy Rose skulking around inside his brain made him feel queasy.

John met Rose's eyes with his and he sank back in his chair, suitably chastised and annoyed with himself for succumbing to the psychic mumbo-jumbo; any more and he'd be begging her to read his palm too.

"Palm please."

Crystal held out her hand, palm up, across the table.

"You have had a troubled life thus far," Gypsy Rose began her shtick. "I see both tragedy and loss." She stroked Crystal's palm and traced the lines with a crooked finger. "But I see a true, lasting love. You are a lucky lady." She looked up into Crystal's trusting face. "The man you are with now is the love of your life," she continued. "But not your first love."

Wait, what?

John sat forward in his chair.

"Your first is a love that runs far beyond our plane of reality and nestles deep within your soul. It is a love that has always been within you, and one which grows stronger as each day passes."

John made ready to be offended but checked himself. The old charlatan had seen the scepticism in his face and this was her giving him a metaphorical – or should that be *metaphysical?* – slap down.

"Can you tell me what my future holds?" Crystal slipped all too comfortably into the occasion.

"Of course I can, my dear," the psychic said with the lightest of chuckles. "Your lifeline is a long and healthy one." She traced what John assumed had to be his wife's lifeline with the gnarled finger. "And where it crosses here, and here, shows that you have two children." She must have heard Crystal's sharp intake of breath. "No, not two. It's one child. You *had* two."

John leaned forward and placed a comforting hand on Crystal's shoulder, she leaned her head against it.

"We *did*," his wife told the woman.

"Ahh, there is your tragedy," the old woman declared as if she'd known all along. "I am *so* sorry for your pain." She pulled Crystal's hand closer still and squinted at it with screwed up eyes. "I see a shortened line for the pain, my dear."

You're full of it, lady, John thought to himself, and then hoped again that Gypsy Rose wasn't reading his mind.

"I can see your child in this one." Gypsy Rose studied a crooked line that traversed Crystal's palm. "This one is a strong, steady line. It –" She paused, stared at Crystal's upturned palm, and the color drained from her wizened face.

"What is it? What do you see?" Crystal sounded a little shaky.

"Your daughter," there was a tremor in the old woman's voice that hadn't been there a second before, her phoney accent all but forgotten. "God have mercy on us all," she sounded terrified.

"Addison? What is it?" Crystal insisted.

“She has the face of an angel –”

The words hung heavy in the cloying air like an early morning fog. Gypsy Rose reached beneath her little table and calmly pulled out a small, snub-nosed revolver.

She raised the gun to her temple and pulled the trigger.

The blunt *crack!* was dulled by the heavy, musky cloths that draped the room and the bright flash from the muzzle startled John’s eyes and they clamped shut.

In that instant, John saw Addison in his mind’s eye; felt her presence seep into his brain to create black, shadowy corners. He saw his daughter’s cold, dark eyes and in them the unholy commotion in the church, Charlotte beaten to a pulp and rotting in an asylum, the gas explosion and decapitated sitter, Crystal’s father laying prematurely stiff and pale in his casket, a kid blinded in one eye by a yellow pencil and other, myriad seemingly inconsequential things that compounded to make perfect, terrifying sense. He saw Declan at the bottom of the stairs, eyes glassy and unmoving, that ugly knot in his neck where knobbed bones had snapped out of place and John felt – knew – that far from being the harbinger of evil, his daughter – his beautiful Addison with her wispy, summer-sun hair and darker-than-dark brown eyes – was the reason.

Gypsy Rose’s lifeless body slumped without ceremony from her chair and hit the floor with a dull, wet thud. The gray slop of her brains oozed from the ragged quarter-sized hole above her left ear and a scarlet torrent of blood flowed from her nose.

Crystal Johnson turned to her husband with a sad look in her eyes. “Oh no,” she said quietly, “not again.”

THE END