

Part Two

# WHEN MERCURY IS IN RETROGRADE

By Madame Morpheme

New York City, 1967

DO you feel twisted off-kilter, my sparkles? When Mercury is in retrograde, everything tangles. It's a time of muddles and miseries, which is why I'm attempting to organize today's dreadful mayhem, sentence by sentence. Did you know that Mercury Retrograde is also a good time to find out the truth and connect with people from your past? It's been three months since my love, Javier, departed, and I still don't know what happened to him. I expected him to appear in my room within days of his death, like my spectral roommates (who are still here overstaying their welcome, despite all my encouragements to the contrary). When Javier didn't come back, I left notes and signs, thinking he was too distraught to find his way back to me and needed help.

Mercury is supposed to guide souls after death, but he's been doing a

terrible job of it lately. So, I cancelled my seances and spent the evening calling Javier with everything in my mystic arsenal.

I spent the night in the glow of a single candle's light in deep commune with the dead. I travelled every corridor of the next realm within my reach. I talked with every phantom within my grasp in an attempt to broadcast the call. I think my roommates were afraid or, at the very least, intimidated by my intensity. Ace stopped playing guitar. Harmony restrained her weeping to silent ghost tears. Chardonnay lingered near the ceiling and stayed out of my things. When it didn't work the first night, I cancelled more appointments, tried again for a second night, and then for a third.

This morning, exhausted and beleaguered, I finally stopped. I removed my cloak and blew out the candle. Remember to be careful, my sunflowers. You never know what darknesses you

may inadvertently invite in when you do this work. One of my protective rituals is to sit down at my make-up table and apply thick swoops of kohl to ward off the evil eye. (I'm so exhausted as I write this I can't think if I should italicize the word kohl. Perhaps just the original Arabic, *kuhl*.)

I was finishing a perfect line when there was a knock at the door. I dropped the brush, kohl defacing a giant orange silk flower on my dressing gown. I should have recognized the bad omen.

"Don't open it! It could be anyone!" Harmony sobbed, flying back and forth across the room. "A demon. Evil."

"Javier?" I was so hopeful, but I opened the door to a wizened woman wearing a frumpy, squashed hat and round spectacles. She was so vividly realized it took me a moment to notice her feet were hovering off the floor.

"Hello, Madame. I see you can see me," she said. "I expected as much. I'm answering your call. May I come in?"

"Oh my." I let her waft in, admiring her air of mettle and verve. She politely floated around me and sat down on a client chair, her sensible shoes clunking together with prim precision. She clutched a vintage purse on her lap.

"Emma Goldman," she said, reaching out her little gloved hand. "I used to live down the street from this hotel at number six St. Mark's Place. It's nice to be back, and I'm pleased to make your acquaintance. You have quite a reputation in my realm."

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*When Javier didn't come back, I left notes and signs, thinking he was too distraught to find his way back to me and needed help.*

"As do you in mine." I said, doing my best to move my hand in sync with hers.

"Well you know, then, that one thing I always say is, 'Today is the parent of tomorrow...'"

"The present casts its shadow far into the future!" Chardonnay descended from somewhere on the

ceiling and draped herself around Emma's feet. "I've read all your books! I especially loved *The Social Significance of the Modern Drama*."

"Oh, that one. Indeed." Emma peered over her spectacles at Chardonnay with curiosity. "It's hard to find."

"Oh, I know. I liberated it from the Strand, like a true anarchist."

I sat down across from Emma, and Chardonnay slunk away to the window to listen.

"Madame, don't be distraught." Emma peered at me. "I have something for your cause." She opened her purse and shook the contents out on the table. A dozen white, glowing ghost fingers flew out. Harmony shrieked, and then darted back and forth across the room.

"Pipe down and sit down. This is serious," Emma said to her. "I wondered," she said, returning her attention to me, "if, given the circumstances and worrisome conditions at the St. Mark's Hotel, some of these might belong to your friends?" Harmony, Ace, and Chardonnay all looked at their hands. Were any of them Javier's? Was there violence? Pain? I leaned forward to take a closer look, worried about how many pieces

## HOLEY HORROR

TRYPOPHOBIA is the fear of holes in non-symmetrical patterns. Although not acknowledged by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, trypophobia has a strong internet presence. There are support groups where writers discuss personal experiences, and sites that post images of naturally occurring closely clustered apertures, such as the lotus seed head, or Photoshopped images of similar patterns grafted onto human skin.

One unpublished study suggests that the holes' spatial frequencies unconsciously trigger a visceral response to patterns found on some predators. Another article suggests the fear may be an evolved aversion to skin lesions and sores that helped humans avoid germs. Apparently, it's the sole contagious phobia — often the fear starts only after hearing about it. Our apologies. □



LOTUS SEED HEAD. What's to fear?

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I might find him in.

"One, two, three, four, five." Ace counted. "Seven, six, eight, nine, ten. Nope. Got 'em all."

"Six, seven, dummy," said Harmony, punching him on the shoulder. "I've got all ten, and all my toes, and so does Chardonnay."

"What about him?" Emma said, nodding towards the darkened corner.

I couldn't see anything, but my skin crawled. I was suddenly aware there was someone else in the room. For how long? How could I not have perceived him? Why did he hide from me?

"J-Javier? H-honey?" I stumbled over my own words. "If that's you, all you have to do is rematerialize. It's okay, m-my love. I'm glad you've come back to me."

Every ghost head turned and watched. A bicep appeared first, shining bright, and my heart skipped like a scratched record. The strong arm faded away and a large foot glowed, followed by a fist. Harmony screamed and everything subsided into shadow again. She howled. As a ghost who's afraid of ghosts, Harmony does help keep some things in perspective. I would have screamed at that moment too, but I didn't want to discourage Javier from re-emerging.

"Shush, let him finish." I calmed my nerves and dashed towards him. "Javier, I want to see you. I'm not angry. I've been looking for you."

Lights danced on my eyebrows, then around my hair. Javier's face glowed above mine, and then his arms stretched around me. I counted his fingers, my own hands trembling.

"Do you have a large pinky?" I asked Emma.

She stood, plucked a finger from the table, and knelt down beside us. She took Javier's hand in hers and placed his pinky back on for him. "There you go."

"Whoah. What did you do, man?" Ace loomed for a closer look, then shrank back. "Something bad."

"It requires less mental effort to condemn than to think," Emma said to Ace in Javier's defense. She then collected the remaining fingers, shut her bag tight with a sharp snap, and slipped through the wall. The last thing she said to me before disappearing was, "You have one more task: look for your smoky quartz. Then, my dear, you should go outside! You've been

stuck in here for too long."

"That wasn't a line from one of her books," Chardonnay glowered. "Can ghosts write books? I want to."

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I ignored her, wishing Emma had stayed to help. Javier was wavering in the corner and I didn't know how to help him. I thought maybe he'd tell me what had happened, but he just blinked and flickered like a candle about to go out.

Chardonnay turned and floated around him. "What's the matter with you? Can't talk?" Then she ran her fingers up and down the curtains, twisting them around and around until taut. She held on and spun.

"Play a chord on the guitar? Major or minor?" Ace offered the instrument to him, but when Javier wouldn't accept, Ace strummed a tritone, the devil's chord, offended.

I tried to hug Javier, but my arms went through him and grazed the wall behind us. He turned his head, opened his mouth and, to my horror, a torrent of blood gushed out, drenching the front of my dressing gown. It reeked. I grabbed a towel and rushed to run it under water from the sink in the other corner of the room, blotting at my clothing until I remembered ghost blood doesn't stain. It evaporates, though not without a lingering stench.

Harmony's shrill shrieks shredded the last of my nerves. "His tongue! He's missing his tongue!"

I woke up sobbing and daubed at my dressing gown, though the blood left no mark.

Chardonnay handed me a purple velvet mini dress and I put it on. I stuffed the dressing gown in my pink hamper. I'll need to burn it later. I stood in the mirror and swept my finger around my eye to remove the errant eyeliner. I patted powder over the goose

egg on my forehead where my head had struck the floor. I straightened my long, brown wig. Composed, I surveyed what looked in the mirror to be an empty room (oh, how I wish it was), then turned around to face my roommates.

"We're going to rematerialize Javier's tongue," I said, my voice shaking. "So he can talk."

"He's gonna have some story to tell," said Ace shaking his head.

"He's going to have a story," I corrected.

"I don't wanna hear it!" Harmony looped in erratic circles, avoiding the ghostly pool of Javier's blood on the floor and held her hands over her ears, moaning. I was beginning to fear what Javier was going to say, too.

"Want to." My correction sounded like a feeble sigh.

I understood the task Emma had in mind and sorted through my trinket box for a piece of smoky quartz.

"Ooooh! Black obsidian!" Chardonnay hovered over my shoulder like a curious crow. "Shiny."

"Leave it!" I said, but her arm continued to reach — until Javier jostled her out of the way.

"Hey!" Chardonnay retreated. "You don't have to be pushy. Thug."

"Javier." I stood in front of him holding the crystal. "This is easier if someone retrieves the actual missing body part for you, but open your mouth and hold still."

I said a dozen secret incantations under my breath, gathering the earth-bound grounding and stabilizing energies of the gemstone around Javier's missing tongue. Blood dripped down

his chin onto the floor as he grimaced and writhed. My head pounded and my stomach lurched, but I kept on until his tongue reappeared in his mouth. He nodded at me, tears streaming down his face, and swallowed.

"Thank you," he said.

"Javier, what happened? Where have you been?" But instead of answering me, he rooted around in his pockets for his wallet, which he opened and closed three times before saying anything else.

"They took the rest of my money. I was going to buy you a pretzel."

"I'm okay," I said, as the room spun.

"You need to eat something, *mi tesoro*. You're exhausted."

I sat down on the bed, spent, though relieved. Javier was back.

He was, of course, right. I was starving after not eating for days, and I'd let everything slide. The rent was due, but I'd cancelled so many appointments. I was broke. I stood and searched through the nightstand for any savings I may have stashed aside.

Javier tried to put his hand on my shoulder, grimacing as it sliced straight through like a cool blade. "What is it, *mi corazon*?"

"Rent." I shook my head. "Don't worry my love, I'll figure it out."

My head buzzed as Ace played an obnoxious riff on his guitar. Harmony continued to moan, still traumatized. In my periphery I could see Chardonnay reaching for my trinket box.

"¡Basta!" Javier shouted as he herded them into the other corner of the room. "Stop. Be quiet."

He floated towards me, hovering close. "I'll get you money. And a pretzel. Everything you need."

And then he disappeared through the wall.

"Wait! Don't go!" I didn't want to lose him again. What if he couldn't find his way back?

Writing all of this down has been of no help — the terror is simply clearer. I should italicize that for effect: *the terror*. Perhaps Harmony was right, and my call was a grand invitation to let darkness in? I need a talisman. If I were to write about a special magic sigil for Javier, would I italicise it? I should make him one. There's something dripping down the front of my dress. Ahh. My nose is bleeding. □

Part three of "The Medium is the Message" appears in the next issue of *Curios and Conundrums*.

