

# THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

## PART ONE: BY THE LIGHT OF THE PERIGEE MOON

By Madame Morpheme

New York City, 1967

ST. Mark's Hotel reverberates with raucous sounds of its misfit residents. Outside, the East Village thrums the steady, racing heartbeat of the city. We're all speeding towards final destinations, some more debauched and desperate than others. In all the commotion I want to believe there's still elusive order in the world. My room here has always been a sanctuary, but, my dear sweet peas, after what happened tonight I fear I'll never find peace again.

I cannot let things fall apart. Tonight for the first time I slipped up and lost control of my room, but the centre has to hold. You see, my pretty petals, I'm in a sensitive and emotional business. I talk with the dead. People come here to ask their darkest questions. They come to listen, weep, and heal. They rely on me. Like Coney Island Freddie, the best tattoo artist in the city, I'm working underground and booked till Tuesday – of the first week of March next year.

If you do find an appointment with me, I'll invite your lost loved one to join us, and your dearie will appear to me as vivid as you are. It's like Lady Acceptance herself lounges on the radiator in my room in a silk flowered kimono, exhaling exquisite smoke rings into the night. You can say anything, my poppets. I insist only on cash up front (the same as this hotel), and good grammar. I reserve

the right to correct all of your mixed metaphors and misplaced modifiers in loving memory of my dear mother, an English teacher who sometimes still whispers corrections in my ear. After tonight, perhaps I should ask for her advice.

MY evening started out with a surprise. I was preparing for a séance when Javier, my neighbour, knocked and interrupted my rituals. I was about say, "I'm busy!" when the door popped open. All that upper body strength and puppyish exuberance launched him right through the door... and my careful boundaries.

"Pretzel!?" he shouted. (I think he's incapable of speaking in a quiet voice.)

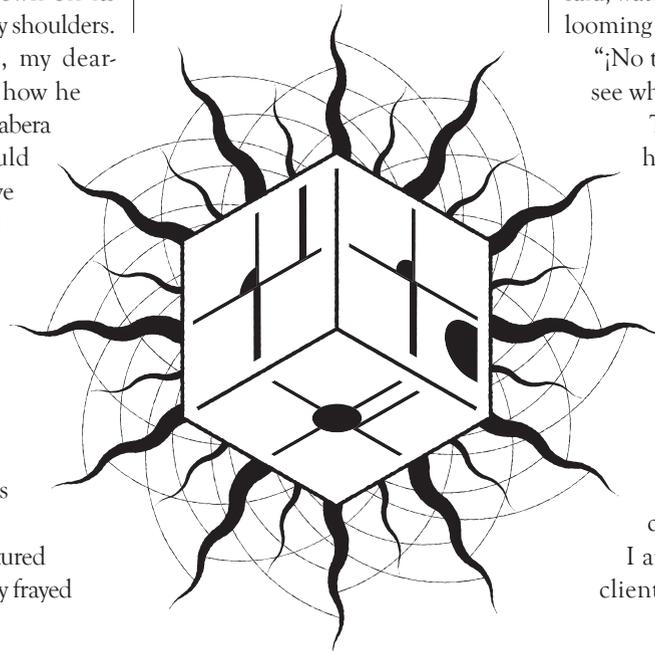
"Well..." I hesitated, so he took my Kelly green velvet cape down off its hook and draped it over my shoulders.

I should have stayed, my dearies. I could have resisted how he looked in that Cuban Guayabera shirt, then nothing would have changed. My resolve crumbled. Emboldened by the perigee moon, I let him sweep me away from the safe retreat of my room. We descended the stairs like a king and queen, blind to the mice, the pools of last night's alcohol, and the blood stains on the carpet.

I took his arm as we ventured outside. Cat calls clawed my frayed

nerves, even though I tower over most (I'm six feet, five inches in heels). I've experienced more than my share of violence on these mean streets. With my third eye I also see where malevolence lurks. Tonight, I thought, perhaps with Javier at my side, I could walk around without any harassment from anyone alive or dead.

He held me close, nodding as we passed friends from the block. Of course, he paid for my pretzel like a gentleman (plus two for himself). We stood at the curb eating hot dough heaped with mustard until he reached out and licked each of my rock salted fingers. That was new, too, but the powerful White Moon brings beginnings, fresh feelings, and makes emotions transparent to all. Astrology



aligned for us. It was a delicious moment I too quickly ruined.

"Come on," I said, wanting to prolong the warm vibes. "Let's see magic." I led him to Astor Place to see The Alamo, the new cube sculpture everyone was talking about. When you deal with phantoms all day, something anchored to the ground weighing 1,800 pounds is a marvel of materiality. I wanted to share how comforting and solid it was, even though it's perched on an angle. I reached out to touch the cool metal. Then Javier decided to show off.

"This is how it's supposed to go!" He pushed his whole muscular weight against it. I heard a crack like a cosmic rupture as the whole thing spun around and around. I reeled with vertigo while Javier stood there, a huge smile on his face. A cloud blanketed the moon, bright fissures criss-crossed the sky, and the air smelled of smoke. Grim shadows grew, and I knew we'd inadvertently set something terrible in motion.

"I have to get back to the hotel," I said, watching savage spectres emerge, looming overhead in the darkness.

"¡No te vayas!" He said, unable to see what I could. "Don't go!"

Terrified, I rushed back to the hotel. The tick tock rhythm of my stilettos against pavement was my only reassurance. Javier followed, but with each step I felt a primeval tendril force pulling us farther apart, a strange distance.

THERE was no time to cleanse our auras or cast protective spells. When I arrived back at my room, my client Amanda was waiting for

me, glazed-eyed and blending into the wall in her beige overcoat. That was the first departure from our routine, because she had negotiated the greasy stairs by herself. I usually escort her.

“*‘Come on,’ I said, wanting to prolong the warm vibes. ‘Let’s see magic.’*”

As soon as I saw Amanda, I welcomed her in with my usual kiss, kiss, warm embrace.

Though fragile, Amanda's not one of my most complex cases. I keep her on as a respite between more demanding clients. I'm an unusual medium because most of us are specialists: clairvoyant, clairaudience, or clairsentient (that's able to see, hear, or feel messages from the spirits among us), and I'm all three. I'm a synaesthete of the spirit world. That's what you get for inheriting the powers through bloodlines on both family sides. Both my grandmothers had The Gift, and I was an only child, so I received it in concentrated form.

Amanda's appointment should have been an easy one, even in my rattled state. I lit the candles and incense in the same order I always do, said the same incantations and invitations. Amanda's silent, anguished tears began to roll on cue as her dearly departed cat limped in and sat down at our feet with a plaintive mewling. I handed Amanda a silk handkerchief and assured her the cat was well, chasing mice on the other side, even though the damned cat was miserable and probably always had been.

Tucked away in my room pursuing my calling, I should have felt safe, but I had a sudden premonition something else was coming. Perhaps I heard the first strum on the out-of-tune electric guitar before the wild-haired phantom playing it emerged beside me.

"Tigger wants you to know he's warm," I said to Amanda.

"Morphine!" the guitar player screamed in my ear.

"Uh, mmhmm, yes, yes, T-tigger is quite content," I continued.

"I need MORPHINE!"

"Hold on a second," I said.

A potent smell of gardenia flowers and perspiration wafted into the room.

"Is Tigger purring?" Amanda asked.

"Oh yes, like a – like a..."

Someone else, newly dead, appeared, cowering in the corner, white dress shimmering in the candlelight.

"You said purring like a lawnmower last week."

"Yes, exactly like that, my petal."

"Morphine!" the guitar player shouted.

"What's happening? Where am I?" the girl in the white dress began to sob.

That was when I realized all my protection barrier spells were broken, leaving random phantoms free to roam.

"My dearest Amanda, I'm afraid..."

"Oh! What's happening to Tigger?" she asked, panicked.

"I'm afraid I have a headache is all. Tigger is fine." The cat hissed at me. The guitarist strummed distorted minor chords, and the girl in the white dress wept harder.

I set out a black obsidian stone to clear the psychic smog, gave Amanda a hug, and escorted her to the hotel's shabby front door. I was hoping the intruders would dissipate into the

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night, but when I returned there were now three uninvited ghosts, and one of them was rummaging through my closet.

“C’mon, I need some morphine,” the guitar player wheedled this time. “It’s bad. I’m dying here.”

“My name is *Morpheme*, the smallest meaningful part of a word, not the opiate!” I replied. “I don’t have any drugs, and they won’t get you high any more anyway. You’re already dead.”

“Opi-what?” The guitarist kept strumming.

“Am I dead?” The girl in the white dress wailed.

“Yes,” I said, chasing the ghost cat out. “You’re all dead, and my room is invitation only.”

“But I adore this red feathered number!” the woman in the closet said, doing a little sashay.

The guitar was obnoxious, the bawling was irritatingly loud, and all my lovely gowns were off their colour-coded hangers and strewn across the floor. It’s a medium’s job to maintain composure, but I lost my temper.

“Get out, GET OUT!” I shouted. “This is unacceptable and I will not be haunted!” A royal blue feather boa floated through the air as the ghosts played tug-of-war. Exasperated, I left the room to prove my point. I had nowhere else to go but Javier’s and, my lovelies, I was devastated he wasn’t there. He was always around whenever I wanted him for a dress zip-up or to borrow a lighter for my candles. For the first time, I realized how much I needed him. I waited 20 frantic minutes before visiting the desk to ask questions. The crusty clerk shrugged until I gave him The Look. He confessed Javier was late to pay.

Javier has a knack for materializing money from somewhere. It just finds him and sticks. My first thought was of The Alamo and the reach of those dangerous tendrils. My nose began to bleed, dripping fresh red trails on the filthy carpet. I retreated to my room, head in the air, and holding my nose. The ghost trio was still there,

bouncing on my bed.

All I could do, my cherubs, is all I can ever do: try to talk them through the cold, final truth. Ace, the guitarist, overdosed; Harmony, a naive California hippie, was strangled to death by a boyfriend on a bad trip; Chardonnay, a Rockettes dancer dabbling in the oldest profession on the side, died

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from an infected scratch wound after disposing of a client who refused to pay. She’s still looking for her knife, and will probably be haunting these halls, searching for it forever.

“I don’t know what I’m doing here,” Chardonnay said, perplexed.

“You can go,” I said, in a clear and reassuring tone. “All of you. It’s time to move on.”

To my frustration, none of them budged. Chardonnay just kept talking: “I have an English degree. I was going to be a librettist after my dancing career was over.”

My mother had an English degree, too. Flooded with memories of my mother’s assuredness and control in all matters of language and grammar, I asked Chardonnay what she thought of the Oxford comma. An odd question, given our situation, but she immediately stood up and illustrated her position by holding up three items from my closet.

“Fishnets, comma, opera gloves and satin corset,” she said.

I countered with, “Micro mini, comma, breast forms, comma, size 12 go-go boots!” Somehow debating punctuation calmed me and I felt a sense of relief – for a moment.

In my abject exasperation I broke another rule then, and told the ghosts about my own personal life.

“I’m missing someone,” I told them, envisioning Javier so clearly in my mind’s eye it was almost like he was

in the room. The trio stopped flitting around and stared at me with hollow eyes so I continued.

“I’m worried he’s in trouble. I’m thinking gambling, misfortune, misadventure. I’m feeling pay-up, payback, punches. What-ifs.”

“Sentence fragment,” I heard my mother whisper, breaking my story spell. Ace laughed.

Chardonnay stood and pointed at the ceiling, where the flash of an ambulance light from the street below began to dance in a loop. She traced the light’s blood red path with her elegant arms.

“I didn’t hear a siren,” Harmony sobbed again. “There wasn’t one for me, either. No rush.”

“I don’t get it,” Ace said, picking up his guitar and strumming. “What’s happening?”

I looked out the window to see attendants struggling to load a large body bag into the back of the ambulance. I thought, no: not this, not now,

not him. Through the thin plaster wall I heard scavengers begin to dismantle Javier’s room.

**B**Y morning, everything will be gone. There’s no respect for the dead here. It’s too common. His room will be cleaned and made up for the next paying guest.

I’ve collapsed on my bed. Ace is playing a dreadful song. Ghosts are useless in grief because all they can do is amplify it.

My trio of visitors is noisy, smelly, and needy, and this has to be a temporary arrangement, but I let them stay the night, a terrible consolation. It’s Javier I really want. I need to find out what happened to him. Can I undo the black magic? I long to bring him back, just as he was before, in a form I can touch, feel, and lean against. □

*Part two of “The Medium is the Message” appears in the next issue of Curios and Conundrums.*

♫ KICK

## SOCIETY FROM THE CATS’ POINT OF VIEW



“CROWS! I WAS CRAVING A GOOD MURDER.”