

THIS IS HOW TO TELL THE FUTURE

Sarah Stark

Look outside. When it's dark, take it with a grain of salt. Loosen your grip as the sun goes down. If it's only a whisper, ask for a scream. Casting a spell is uncomplicated when you know the right words, find the right talismans. You can see 'em leave from light years away, if you look real close. This is how you tell the future.

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You met only a week ago, but it feels longer. It feels more like an eon. You'd been buying coffee (you get an iced chai latte every time, without fail) when you locked eyes with him. You were sold, easily.

A couple of glances were exchanged with growing intensity, and then you knew you'd gotten him. He'd made his way over and asked if next time, would you make this a partner activity—"since obviously we both like coffee?"

It is a strange thing, to be so totally aware that very soon, you would know each other very well, but you don't quite yet. Right now, it's a dance through the motions to get there. You want to ask him, "remember when we..." but of course there is no memory that you share yet. Soon you will, you tell yourself. Soon you will.

You get sucked into big feelings easily. It's

a habit you've developed, making things bigger than they need be. But, you think, this is only because most don't know how to feel—it's something of a lost art. You feel sometimes that you're stuck at a more ancient stage of humanity, that your soul got tethered to several thousand years ago. And now you feel the hum of stars, of magic all around you. You know you're the only one who can see it, that it's probably not real, that really, you're hopelessly bored by the world around you—so you glamorize.

It helps you, even if ancient spells are so lonesome that you question their existence—at least you can feel old spirits and know their ways. You tell them stories, and they teach you their spells. Spells to find the right song, how to make people love you (it's mostly eye contact).

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Since you both like coffee, you decide to get it together. He makes you laugh—a lot, like you knew he would, and he wears sneakers that aren't meant to look very cool and expensive, but they do. You snort when you laugh, always have, and he finds it charming. His hands are big and warm. They find yours easily.

When he gets up to grab your lattes (for which he pays—his insistence, and you try

to not let it melt you, but it does, oh it does), your mind wanders. You can make thirty-five seconds last forever, if you know the spell. You wonder if your otherness is man-made—do you make yourself different because you are the most superficial being in existence? Can he tell? Is any of my depth real, you think. CAN HE TELL?

You think of ages gone by, when he would've asked you to dance and climbed the ivy up to your window, but that's not real (you should know this by now, you've been wishing your whole life). You're here and now, and courtship is buying a coffee.

You can tell he had good parents; his teeth are so white—like a carnivore's. But he recounts to you all of his past hurts and you want to run so fast that you go back in time. You want to hold his hand while the other fifth graders are meaner than mean.

This is how you know you're in for it, when you'd move the heavens to heal old wounds for him. For this, you wonder; will he eat you alive?

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You, for all your wild, are not immune to the humiliating vanity of humanity.

You spend hours on your hair, you worry about the mascara running out, you make fun of your least favorite friends, you can't remember the last time you missed a Vogue issue, you're hyper-aware of Taylor Swift's whereabouts. You are not some being of pure goodness and light, whatever stories you tell yourself. You must remember this—no matter what. To forget your alike-ness to everybody else would be

worse than being like everyone else.

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In fact, you think, you are probably among the most hollow and selfish creatures in existence, past or present. You're afraid, so, so afraid of anybody (most of all him) seeing that ugly, rotting sore on your soul. All you are is a liar.

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This time, you meet at night. You've been texting (though you tell yourself it's an exchange of love letters) in a constant stream. He sent you the music video he'd been telling you about, did you remember? He says you look just like the actress. You remember, and can't stop playing the song while you get ready. This is a feat, because you take two hours making your hair just so, and you trust very few people's taste in music apart from yours.

You ask the spirits, God, the universe, whatever (you'll pay for your blasé-ness later) to help you choose what to wear. You settle on the black one.

He's waiting for you when you get to the bridge (in between both of your apartments and the restaurant). His eyes—no, his whole face lights up when he sees you. You imagine yours does the same.

When you make your way there, you drink only things with bubbles, to match your giddiness. He's willing to talk about the personal lives of celebrities for an inordinate amount of time and he makes fun of the tourists speaking too loudly on the walk over, and even better, you make him laugh (this is a spell that's well and

truly real, the only one of its kind).

It would be sacrilege to suggest you part now, so you don't. You go back to his apartment.

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When you wake, you sit up, and look down. You wonder if this is what they mean when they say they feel the presence of God. Divinity. Your bones have danced together—rattling, and you wonder if it's been this way always, in every life.

You forget that he can cast spells, too, and this is a dangerous thought to lose track of. How many women before you have gone mad because of their lovers before you?

Before you leave his place, although you're sure he couldn't forget you now, you spread out some of the contents of your purse around the place. Little rituals to make sure, make absolute sure, that he remembers.

You know you're a lot, too much really. There are two strategies when you are this way: hide it until they love you enough not to care (the lying way) or search for those that do not care (the harder way). You're trying out the latter now.

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You think of the dog, sometimes, how she'd follow you down to Tartarus—a mean beast at seven inches tall. You miss her hair on your clothes and telling her stop barking, I have friends over. You think of the collar next to the ashes above the cupboard in the kitchen, a place you frequent, but in a spot you can avert your

eyes. You've started to forget the color of her eyes and you can't say her name, afraid of the spells it'd cast. You wonder if you're strong enough to tell him about the little ghost you're always chasing—is she somewhere? Unlikely, but how couldn't I try to find her—then you remember, she never liked strangers.

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Things tend to blend together now. Meeting parents. Siblings. Telling him what you think of his writing (it's really and truly brilliant). Weekends away. Reading with his head in your lap. You start to think about rings. Every chance you get, your hands are on each other.

The middle, you think, is the sweetest. But you know when you're in it enough to realize that you've reached the decline. He's got a big nose, like you, which you in turn got from your father.

It's all so achingly lovely. Everything sparkles, shines. The two of you are outlined in starlight.

You have a collection of things, things that are yours, totally your own, despite none of them being your making. Things nobody could fathom like you can and do (you know this is ridiculous). Things that you love so much that you find it difficult to wrench your claws out of. There are a couple of albums among these, some lipstick shades, a Brontë refrain or two, the color pink, opals.

A person can't be one of these things, so he never officially joins their number. But in your secret heart he's right there with all of them.

But you forget your guardians telling you to loosen your grip, lest you are pulled away with him in no direction of your own.

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In your infancy, your mother fought and staved off cancer. You can't, of course, call up any of the memories to the forefront of your mind—you were much too young to consciously remember. But your bones can't shake the feeling of impending doom regarding your perfect, perfect parents who have loved you so much. You've learned to live with it, pet and nurse the feeling, and though it stays with you, always leeching, it never surfaces. She'd been sick while carrying you, and you know the darkness might've seeped into your own veins. But she was so strong, saving you both—your father too, really—and you know that that's in your veins, too. Sometimes fighting a great beast isn't like Homer or Hesiod said it would be—swords clash and fall in all kinds of ways. And you can't escape the end of stories.

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At the apex of your paradise, he gets the call. He's always, always wanted to write. Now they want to pay him to do it, but from miles and miles and borders away. Pride is the word—you've known of his brilliance all along, and now they see it too.

But the miles away. You can't leave. You're tied to this place, this land, to your parents, to your imaginary gardens.

It's a mundane end. A beheading with a dull knife. But it still cuts, and leaves

disease and rot in its wake.

You should have listened to the guarding spirits that follow you always and share their divinity with you. But you looked the old beings in the eye and told them you knew better—and now you're paying for it, adding another crack in the porcelain that can't be quite filled.

You help him pack things up, though your limbs do everything to prevent you from doing so.

You know what he means when he says it kills him that you're not coming. It kills you too. Maybe I'll make my way up there one day, you say. He smiles sadly. You feel close to vomiting, bleeding out, screaming—all of this feeling demanding a corporeal form.

The music swells, he leaves.

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You know he'll haunt you, that this too-short time period will cloak your shoulders and make you shiver for years to come. You don't think he'll be able to scrub you off of him very easily—he'll find bits of you in the coffee shop or on the bridge or hear a Bleachers song or see the music video with the actress that looks like you. It hurts you so badly, cuts you so deeply to think of anybody else on the right side of the bed. You imagine he feels the same.

Chinks in the armor. You think of all the ones you've gotten. There are so many by now, but you've still got so long to go.