

THE ODDS

by

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I bring death like duty-free liquor swinging from my hands as I get off the plane. I even walk straight past the security guards, and they don't stop me. They never say, "Carrying death again? Please step over here, sir."

Last year—after the third death—my wife and I discussed the possibility that someone waits for me to be out of town so that they can kill my loved ones. But I know that it doesn't make sense. There is no huge conspiracy. We're just trying to find some explanation for a cosmically bad run of luck.

As I ride the escalator down towards baggage, I see a crowd of people pushed up against the glass doors in baggage claim. The Minnesota football team is coming back from winning an away game. The fans are dressed in maroon and gold, and they're grinning, hold placards and balloons.

At the edge of the crowd I spot Lise. I wave at her, and she puts her hand halfway up, like at school when you weren't sure of the answer. At least it wasn't one of the boys. Someone else would have come if it had been one of the boys. She pulls my coat out of my arms.

"Well?" I ask.

She nods wearily and slings the coat over her shoulder.

"Who is it this time?"

“Angie. I just heard.”

“Angie?” I’m stunned. On the last trip it was my wife’s stepfather. Now, my youngest cousin.

Suddenly I begin to sweat, and my heartbeat speeds up. My lungs seize. I grab Lise by the shoulder, and then flail around for my inhaler, finding it at last in the outer pocket of my briefcase. I squeeze the pump, waiting for that rush of adrenaline that makes my blood vessels open and my lungs relax. I gasp, nodding at Lise to signal that I’m fine, but she doesn’t even look worried. She’s standing a few feet away from me, staring at the fans, especially at an older woman who is jumping up and down, screaming, “Gophers Rule!”

“What happened?”

“Car accident,” she says. “Hit and run. They think it was some drunk coming home for a party.” She speaks lightly, and I remember that she always disliked Angie. Last Thanksgiving, she and Angie had an argument about how to make the gravy. It ended with Lise slopping drippings into a bowl and slamming it on the table.

I resent the fact that she doesn’t try to comfort me. I know that if I try to put my arm around her, she’ll shrug away, as if my touch is too heavy a burden. Ever since the deaths began, she sleeps across our king bed, as far away from me as possible, her arm dangling off the edge.

“We have to talk to someone,” she says. We step in the elevator, down to parking. Another lawyer gets on—a guy I know from our golf club in Edina. I nod at him; he smiles briefly before getting on his cell.

“Who do you mean?” I ask.

“A psychic,” she says. “I have an appointment arranged. Right now.”

I glance sideways at the guy I know, to see if he heard. He’s talking to someone in his office, complaining about a negotiation that fell through. “I go out of the office for a couple days and things go to heck,” he says.

“I’m not going to a psychic,” I say. “I’m going to call my aunt to talk about funeral arrangements. Angie just died. For God’s sake.”

“Take your pick.” She clutches at her purse, as if someone might rip it from her hand. “Go to a psychic or I move out tonight. Because I can’t take this anymore. Next it’s going to be another one of the kids, and then I will die.”

At this point the guy—I think his name is Brad—gives her a weird look, as if she must be crazy. The elevator doors open. “She’s joking,” I tell him. He puts his hand on my shoulder. “Take care, dude.” I know that he doesn’t remember my name. He won’t even recall our conversation when he gets home, won’t think about anything but the furious client, but it still bothers me that she would expose me to ridicule.

“Keep quiet until we get to the car,” I tell her.

It started years ago with my first wife who died of carbon monoxide poisoning when I was away on a trip. For sixteen years nothing happened. By that time I had remarried, had raised three boys, and started to travel again on business. And on that very first trip away, our oldest son died. Jacob was a great kid—I mean, a really great kid, one of those kids that everyone wants to know. He was working as a counselor at Boy Scout camp, showing younger boys how to tie their own flies to catch river trout, when a thirty-foot oak tree—weakened by recent storms—fell and crushed him. Whenever we tell

people about his death, they shake their heads at our son's unlikely tragedy, as if they disapprove of him dying in such a strange manner. The clerk at our dry cleaner actually tells me, "That's a real unusual way to go."

Ever since then, people I know only die when I go away. It doesn't happen every time, and there is never anything overtly suspicious: the deaths are always accidental. . . Our next-door neighbor had a stroke while he was out running. My wife's stepfather overdosed on his heart meds. And now my cousin, killed by a hit-and-run driver. Lise began to argue with me, after Jacob's death, that I should stop traveling, that it's too much, too cosmic a circumstance to ignore. But I know that it's just coincidence. A mean and laughable fluke. And I know the odds of such a thing happening. I calculated it one day, when I was waiting to start a deposition in Duluth. The witness was late, and the opposing counsel had gone to get us coffee. I'm no math whiz but there are statistics like this, you know. You can find them easily online. I took the number of people in the United States who die in all accidents combined in any given year. Divide that by 52 weeks. Then I listed the number of close friends and family we have—I'd say about 100, if you include cousins and the neighbors. Then I figured in the fact that this happens only when I go away, and I got a rough figure. The odds that someone I know personally dies in an accident precisely on the night before I come home? One in ten million. Greater than bagging a sixty-pound lake trout. Greater than getting hit ten times by lightning. Greater than the odds of a tree falling on you in the middle of a Minnesota forest.

We've reached the parking garage, and I step on a burrito that someone has dropped in the lot. I swear, scraping my heel on the curb. Salsa and sour cream cling to

the tip of my shoes. Lise hands me the keys to the Explorer. I open her door and she slides in, pale hair clinging to the back of the seat.

My wife never used to be someone who would consult a psychic. She grew up in Tipton, Iowa, where people don't take to New Age ideas. She worked as an accountant for a contractor before we got married. She knows how to load a shotgun, and she can fillet a walleye on the back of a pickup truck with just a rag and a Swiss Army knife. She raised our boys with old-fashioned discipline so that they are always well behaved and respectful, the kind of kids that guidance counselors adore. And the boys love her more than they love me, even though I'm the one who spoils them.

But after Jacob's death, Lise changed. She became someone who collects lucky items: a rabbit's foot, a St. Jude medal, a rock that some guy at church claims went with him up Everest. Sometimes I see her taking them out at night, fingering them and talking to herself before she kisses the boys good night. She hangs dream catchers on their walls, decorated with stones and herbs that are said to protect the sleeper from demons. When I ask her about them, she says that she will do anything to protect our children from Jacob's fate. She says that a mother who has lost her child doesn't believe in coincidence.

I get into the Suburban and power it up. It lurches back, and I find it hard, as always, to see where I am going in that beast of a vehicle. We bought the SUV so we could take the boys on camping trips, but after Jacob's death Lise donated our expensive tent and our top of the line sleeping bags to the church yard sale.

When I look over at Lise she is staring at me. Her eyes are clear as if she has found a new religion. "What is your choice?" she asks.

She used to play this game with the boys if they wouldn't eat their vegetables. "You can choose to finish your beans and then have dessert, or you can choose to leave the table and wash the dishes by yourself."

Jacob once said to her, "That's not a real choice," and she responded by shrugging, "You do get to choose, even if you don't like the options."

"All right," I say finally. "I'll go to your psychic. How do we get there?"

We drive to West Saint Paul, to a working class neighborhood of asphalt-shingled houses, fallen gutters, and cracked foundations. We pull up to a small grey bungalow with rust stains running down the roof from a metal vent pipe. An old Chevy pickup sits on blocks in the driveway.

"A high-class psychic, huh?" I say. I can't believe that I'm here, and I pray that no one from work ever finds out.

"She keeps her prices down so people can afford her," Lise says.

I don't respond that she's charging for worthless information in the first place.

We get out of the car. A rat terrier starts to bark behind the chain-link fence. Lise opens the gate saying, "Hello, Buster."

"You've been here before."

She shrugs. "I met her after Jacob died. She was the only person who really talked to me."

"What about the pastor?"

She pauses, as if she has forgotten Pastor Ken. We don't know him very well—it's a huge congregation, one we joined after we moved to the Twin Cities from Des Moines. But it's been a supportive church, and they were great after Jacob died. Pastor

Ken spent several evenings at the house, his hand on Lise's shoulder as she sobbed, and he and I prayed. He was incredibly kind to her, agreeing that it was unfair, that no one should have to go through this. She cried in his arms, making me wish that she could find that kind of solace from me. Of course there were a few false notes: at the funeral he kept referring to Jacob as "Jake." Lise winced every time; I knew she was thinking that Jacob would have hated that.

"Anderson? He didn't understand at all," Lise says.

She marches up to the front door, followed by the rat terrier, which is wagging its tail and licking at her calves. An old woman opens the door. She is short and plump, with a halo of curly grey hair. "Glad your trip went well." Her voice is high, bird-like. "If you kept your key in your jacket pocket, you wouldn't lose it so much."

I'm astounded. I lost my room key five times this trip. I kept putting it down on tables. Then I realize that Lise must have told her how thoughtless, how disorganized I am. Lise is so straightforward that she doesn't recognize a scam.

"You're not convincing me," I say.

"Miss Esme." Lise leans over to give her a kiss as if she is greeting a beloved old relative. "He doesn't want to here." As we walk in the front hall, Lise takes off her jacket and hangs it on a cast iron rack beside the door.

"That's all right," the psychic says. "Won't interfere with the results." She sticks out her hand, but I refuse to take it. She tilts her head. "Don't try to hide your thoughts from me."

"This is stupid," I say to Lise. She is wiping her feet on a frayed mat on the floor. An oak rack above a bookcase holds a thimble collection, covered with dust. Miss Esme

motions us to follow her through a dingy kitchen that smells of cat foot and cheap coffee, into a dining room with a huge mahogany table and three, worn tapestry-covered chairs. Miss Esme pats one of the seats before she sits down. She is so short that she has to sit sideways, with her feet perched on a small stool. She faces me, looking away from my wife. The little rat terrier curls up beneath the table, chewing a pink rubber bone.

“Surely you know there’s something supernatural going on,” she says.

“Incorrect,” I say. “The world is full of chance happenings. These are a series of very sad coincidences.”

Miss Esme touches my arm. Her old skin rasps against mine, making me shiver. She rocks side to side in her chair, a low growling noise at the back of her throat. I’m sure it’s very effective on more impressionable clients. “It’s Kathy,” she says.

I know how these people work. The old woman did some research in her spare time, maybe in newspaper archives online or at the library. And Lise probably told her every detail of my marriage to Kathy—the fights, the time she nearly brained me with a bookend in the shape of a lion, my guilt about her death.

“She’s angry at you. Very angry. You never told the truth about how she died.”

“What are you talking about?” Lise asks. “The furnace malfunctioned while he was away.”

“The cops investigated.” Queasy, I keep thinking about Kathy’s face. I was irritated that she hadn’t picked me up from the airport, and I called sharply for her all the way up the stairs. When I got to the bedroom, I didn’t understand what I was seeing. What I thought was a bright red pillow plopped on the head of the bed was actually her

face--scarlet and bloated from the gas. After I touched her face I staggered back down the stairs and out the front door, collapsing on the UPS man before I blacked out.

“He’d been trying to fix the furnace before he left,” Miss Esme says. “He put out the pilot light by accident.”

I’m sweating. I nearly nod at her until I realize that I never told Lise my fears that I had caused Kathy’s death. The old woman must be guessing. She says, “A big settlement from the furnace manufacturer. But it was your fault. She’s still angry.”

"They investigated," I say again.

“Is this true?” Lise asks me.

"They told me I didn't do it," I said. “I told the investigators all about it. You can read the report.”

“But you’re not sure,” Miss Esme says.

“This old woman is nuts.” I stand, shoving my chair back against the wall. The little rat terrier jumps up from beneath the table, waiting in front of me with a rubber bone in its mouth. “Come on, Lise.”

“And you’ve always felt guilty,” Miss Esme continues. “You always wonder if you killed her unconsciously. You were unhappy. You wanted to move on.”

A prickling sensation invades my chest and neck. I’m breaking out in hives, and the entire horror of Kathy’s death hits me again. I was terrified for two entire months that I was responsible, until the furnace guys told me that it wasn’t anything I did. I hadn’t been able to work that whole time; everybody said how much I was grieving, but it wasn’t true. I was paralyzed by the idea that it might be my fault.

“You’re lying!” I’m nearly crying.

“Kathy wants you to suffer. She is planning to kill everyone you love. Then she’ll stop, and only then.”

I laugh out loud, relieved that she has finally demonstrated her insanity. I look over at my wife, expecting that she will be equally shocked, but she looks panicked.

“Lise,” I say. “Tell her we’ve had enough.”

She focuses on Miss Esme. “What if we got divorced?”

I can’t believe she’d even suggest it; I see how much this woman controls her.

“It won’t satisfy her,” Miss Esme says. She growls in her throat again. “She says she’ll still work against you.”

“So it’s been Kathy all along?” Lise asks. “She killed Jacob?” She turns again to Miss Esme. “What do we do?”

Miss Esme holds her breath for a moment, like children do when they’re passing a graveyard. “Our only option is to try to reason with her. She’s angry, but I believe we can reach out to her. We’ll all have to work together for at least several sessions.”

“And just let me guess, it will be expensive,” I say.

“I do charge for my time.” Miss Esme passes a hand across her forehead. “We will make contact with Kathy, find out how to convince her to go over to the Other Side.”

“The way we did with Jacob.” Lise looks back at me, defiantly.

“I want you to tell my wife that you’re making this up. She’s in a vulnerable state.”

Miss Esme slumps a little in her chair. Waving one of her arthritic hands at Lise, she says, “I’m sorry, dear. We’re going to have to end early this afternoon. I can feel Kathy’s fury and it has just exhausted me.

Lise takes out the checkbook.

I'm not paying for this," I say.

Lise starts to write a check anyway, so I stomp over and yank the checkbook away from her. The pen skitters across the table. Lise lets out a small cry. She rubs her wrist

I leave the house and lock myself into the SUV, waiting for Lise to come out. When I look in the checkbook, I see eleven entries for "Esme Johnson" at fifty dollars each.

Finally Lise emerges from the house. The little rat terrier follows her all the way to the car, wagging its tail and licking at the hem of her skirt. I make Lise knock several times before I pop the locks.

"I can't believe you could have participated in that sham," I say.

"You think it's a sham? Why? Because you can't explain it? You never said anything about fixing the furnace."

"The furnace guys told me it wasn't anything I did. There was a defect in the heat exchanger. Go read the court records - I'm sure Miss Esme did. It all came out at the inquest. I told them everything. There's no mystery here other than how that old wacko managed to scam you."

"You never told me. You lied to me." Lise keeps staring at me, with her clear, honest eyes. "I'm going to do those sessions with Miss Esme," she says. "I'm going to talk to Kathy. I don't want anyone else to die."

"As long as you don't tell anyone we know about it," I say. "They'll think you're nuts."

The next day Lise leaves the house early with the boys, to take them Christmas shopping. I go online to look at Lise's bank statements. This is something I've never done, and I know that she will resent it bitterly. As I go through the checks, calling each one up to see the scanned image, I find that for two years, she has been attending sessions with the psychic, at \$50 a pop. The dates are horribly familiar. I paw through the desk calendar, seeing that I'm right—Lise has been visiting Miss Esme exactly two days before I go away. I sit staring at the calendar for several minutes before she pushes open the door. She comes up behind me and stands there, examining the desk calendar and the checkbook.

"Can I help you with anything?" She says it in a nasty way, as if I'm a monster for looking at our finances.

"Always right before I went away," I say.

"It was the only way I could keep sane. Miss Esme kept telling me you shouldn't go out of town, that someone would die. We were trying to intervene."

"I'd call that suspicious," I say.

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe she's been arranging the deaths," I say wildly.

Lise looks scornful. "Miss Esme can barely get herself up the stairs at night. She doesn't even drive."

In truth I can't imagine Miss Esme tracking down our relatives: waddling over to scare a horse, arranging a hit-and-run accident. But I am desperate to break the claim that Miss Esme has over my wife, this unlikely and ridiculous hold on her spirit.

"Maybe it's her," I say.

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“She says that Kathy wants me to die. But what if it’s Miss Esme who’s the key?”

“Why?” Lise says. “It doesn’t make sense. She doesn’t have any connection to us.”

“I don’t know.” I’m warming to the subject. I know it doesn’t matter what I say. Lise won’t believe me. She has gone over to that world, a world of impractical, desperate people who believe the dead return from darkness to witness what the living have done. I wonder if she thinks that Jacob will come back to us that way; I wonder if she hopes he visits her at night while we’re sleeping. “But I think it’s just as suspicious that someone dies the day after you visit her. You two are blaming me, but what if it’s really her?”

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I have to go on business again, this time to Chicago. The night before I leave, Lise can’t sleep. All night she ranges against the window as if she’s waiting for one of the boys to get home from a date. In her long white nightgown she looks like a ghost. I keep waking up and grabbing for my pants in fear, thinking that someone has broken in. Each time she turns around, shushing me. “Go back to sleep. It’s all right.”

In the morning she is gone. On the way to the airport, I tell the taxi to drive by Miss Esme’s house and I see my wife’s car.

When Lise arrives to pick me up a few nights later, I am already waiting at baggage, wondering who will be next. All during the plane flight I’ve told myself not to worry, but I am so concerned that it will be one of the children that when I see Lise coming towards me, looking angry, I feel relieved.

“Well?” I said. “What happened?”

She doesn't look at me. "Miss Esme."

"What?"

"Miss Esme died last night," she says.

I put my hand on her arm, but she shakes me loose, angrily, and walks on alone.

"I'm sorry." I catch up with her as she steps into the elevator. "Was it her heart?"

"Strangely enough, it was a leak in her furnace."

"That's weird," I say. It is such an awful coincidence that I'm absolutely stumped.

I know that whatever I say next will be wrong. "That's just bizarre."

"It's not only bizarre. It's unbelievable." As we get off the elevator, she walks ahead of me again. Something about the stiff and blaming way she holds her back makes me furious. I feel a huge surge of anger; my vision blurs.

"I hope this proves to you that she was a fake," I say.

"It doesn't prove a thing."

"Come on. If she were really psychic she would have predicted her own death."

"You're sick." She doesn't speak to me during the entire ride home. I know that I'm the injured party, that my wife has abandoned me in some essential way, as if she wants me as far away from her body as possible.

The local newspapers carry the story about Miss Esme's death, and The Pioneer Press mentions that she was once sued for fraud, by a man who said she claimed she could contact his dead wife. "All she gave me was a bunch of baloney," the newspaper quotes him saying. The article ends with a reminder that we should all keep a carbon monoxide detector in the bedroom, especially for more the more vulnerable, like old people and children.

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When Lise picks me up at the airport the next time, I am resigned for whatever has happened, except if it's one of the boys. I find that I'm making bets with God. No promises—I don't think God works on promises. I think that, just like any other guy, he pays attention to a good dare. "If you spare the boys, I bet one of them will grow up to do something amazing," I say to God.

But I know that won't happen. I love our two living boys, but the special one was Jacob. From the time he was about five, he said he was going to find a way to cure cancer. This was after Lise's mother died of leukemia. We were at the burial, and his face was tear-streaked, grubby from the chocolate someone had given him in church. Lise looked at him so proudly that it made me choke up.

When he was born, he ate from her body, sucking on her breasts as if he wanted to consume her spirit whole. I remember thinking that he was going to steal all of her from me, but I put those thoughts away as unworthy of a good father. He would grow up, I told myself. He would leave us. What made me nervous was that Lise returned the feeling, nibbling on his hands sometimes to make him laugh. "I'm going to eat you up," she always said, as he giggled. "That's how much I love you." At that moment, I thought I understood mother love—a sense of overwhelming pride and a love so fierce it's almost cannibalistic, as if every mother wants to consume her babies, to put them safely back in her body.

When I step out through the glass doors, Lise stands there alone, still and distracted, as if she is listening for something. My first thought is that she looks exactly like someone waiting at the top of a long driveway, straining to hear sounds of a car in

the distance. I have to walk up to her directly before she shifts her gaze from the glass door to me.

“Are the boys all right?”

“Nothing happened.”

“They’re okay?” I put my hand on her shoulder. I have to keep myself from shaking her to get an answer.

"They're fine. Everybody's fine."

I'm not ready for good news. I put down my bag. "What do you mean?"

“I checked on everybody we know. I even called the cops to find out if there had been any accidents. Nothing.”

“You’re positive?”

“Of course I am,” she said. “Do I have to say it again? Nothing.”

“That is wonderful.” I reach to hug her but she steps back. And that is when I understand that Lise is angry that no one died. It is unbelievable, but true. She is furious because no one we love has perished in an accident. She doesn’t really wish death on anyone we know. But now she knows that Jacob's death was nothing but a cruel coincidence, a bad case of random chance. There is no one to blame but God, and she doesn't believe in Him anymore.

For about six months I keep cringing every time I go away, but finally I stop worrying. The deaths have stopped completely, as if Miss Esme’s accident put an end to them.

Lise has never gone back to the solid and uncomplaining woman I married. The boys are both in college, and she calls them constantly, to check on them, make sure

they're taking precautions. Sometimes Luke, our youngest, complains that Mom has "gotten really weird."

And she bought a gun for self-protection, on those nights when I'm gone. Sometimes I worry that I'll arrive home late, as she's target shooting behind our house. I can see her raising the sites and turning towards me, staring at me with her clear and honest eyes, unable to resist pulling the trigger. It will be called an accident, and the newspapers will mention Jacob's death, to make the story even more pathetic, so that we can feel deeply for this good woman who lost her husband and son in such a cruel way, a woman who couldn't beat the odds.

THE END