Fate

*(In 1973, the UK wasn't yet in the EU. Foreign language teaching assistants like me had restricted access to French bank accounts. When I ran into the palm reader of this tale I'd just deposited my pay check, and was carrying all my money for up to three weeks. There was also a real life girl. How the gypsy injected her initials, JG, into the fortune-telling and with what accompanying legerdemain is honestly recounted. I did indeed talk the gypsy into relenting; she did warn me I would have—non-specific—bad luck if I didn't return to consult her again. I did hang out with JG in ways that were close to dating. We did canoodle a little to no purpose, because I was a doofus and she wasn't. All other narrative turns here are fictional.)*

"The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate,

God made them, high or lowly, and ordered their estate."

Mrs. Alexander, "All Things Bright and Beautiful"

"Be civil, hands; on you

Although you cannot read

Is written what you do."  
 W.H. Auden, "Precious Five"

November 1973. David had been in France for four months when he tangled with the gypsy. She stepped quickly out from a dark alcove and into his path, standing the same height as Bridget Jennings. For a moment, having Bridget Jennings on his mind, David believed she *was* Bridget Jennings; then the old gypsy spoke to him, and Bridget was gone. The woman before him was weathered and shabby. Her grey eyes were as sharp as flint.

"Monsieur," she announced, politely, firmly.

This was on the rue de Béthune, a bustling cobbled backstreet, too narrow for cars, but thronged with cinemas—fifteen movie screens—and with bistros—a new one, still more aromatic, every thirty yards. Neon signs swayed in the wind above the stone pavement, dangling from rusty poles; the ubiquitous mopeds buzzed between the pedestrians like mosquitoes.

"Monsieur," she repeated, her hand laid insistently upon his wrist. David backed off a little, but she set herself before him, her grip as tough as rope. He stopped, his way quite blocked.

"Oui, madame?" he responded, making the best of it. Well, what the hell. Why not? Wasn't this what he had come here for? To risk new cultural experiences? To challenge himself and grow?

And so far so good. He was teaching and studying in the unglamorous heart of France's industrial north, in a major city called Lille, grey, cramped, and lively. He had never heard of it until the scholarship letter arrived in his mailbox, back home in Fairfax, Virginia. Living abroad, he discovered now, skewed the perspectives, so that all kinds of national archetypes seemed to loom out of the crowd and make him go, *Wow, really?* Everyone was a fleshed out caricature! The stiff visa official, with his abruptly ductile shrug; the purse-lipped businessman, sweeping back his well-kept hair as he revved his Citroën; the drab, stocky couple in a back road cabaret, his fist banging the table, her raucous retort, their blended burst of laughter.

With delight, David wandered the streets, collecting and cataloguing. All his life he had felt like an outsider, and now at last he had a reason to. As an adolescent he'd made the standard kid rebel's pledge to never accept the way things were. He courted a black girl, not (he had the grace to hope) because she was black, but her blackness certainly pleased him. More embarrassingly, he had at one point claimed to be half-black himself; adopted. He may not have fooled many people but himself, but he bought into it somehow; acting a role, he realized eventually, helped him combat his appalling shyness.

Here the situation was much simpler. He was an honest-to-goodness foreigner. He felt liberated, immune, in an environment too unreal to touch him. Its money was toy money; its language was a white water rafting ride, hilariously sweeping him overboard sometimes, but as exhilarating as it was terrifying; its history was a bunch of photo ops to which he owed no pledge of allegiance. Here, even his own past could be whatever past he wanted, because who would know or care; even the person he chose to masquerade as he could and would walk away from—so why not try on any skin he pleased?

It had never quite struck him, back home, how people vowed fealty to bulk personas, how doggedly and predictably they pursued the paths they chose and the paths that had been appointed them. For years, one image in particular would remain with him, pulled out of shape into metaphor, but based on something honestly seen: a junction of corridors aswarm with students, veering to the right and to the left; on the one side, a tribe of the meticulously French chic, on the other a tribe of the extravagantly French shabby—the matching sets of attitudes which they embodied rattling them along like boxcars. And then came tribes of the middle-aged, growing old too quickly, some short and fat, others short and thin: the working classes bloated by French bread, red wine, and a ballast of potatoes; their bourgeois counterparts retaining a sinewy leanness, but bent by their grey lives into greyness, fading modestly and creakily away.

The North Africans in particular intrigued him. Like him, they were outsiders, but they were all the more profoundly cut adrift, despite their numbers, by being an entirely male subculture. They neither bemoaned this situation nor accepted it with dignity—but they adapted to it without shame. Loud and cliquish, they followed women in the streets and propositioned men at the railway station. Walking almost anywhere in town, David would pass one café after another filled with their clamor and jostle, beer mugs perched precariously on the rims of the machines, cigarettes waving through the air, trailing bouquets of smoke.

The Anglo-Saxons were every bit as cliquish, and also, who knew how, as easily distinguishable to the alert gaze. As David strolled along casually whistling, a beggar might accost him with a "You speak English?" A woman friend would find gangs of street urchins trailing her, chanting, "Anglaise, Anglaise!"

The woman was Bridget Jennings. She was a fair-haired Londoner, maybe five foot and a smidge. When she drank too much she liked to curl and stretch like a cat while crooning old hymns. The hymns part was apparently a standing joke she shared with a university pal, which she'd let settle into a ritual.

The first time he spoke with her was at a party. She was singing, "While shepherds watched their flocks by night," her eyes closed and her legs tucked under her; slowly, she rocked back and forth lullabying the words as if she were there right now at the holy birth and bearing witness. David sat beside her and waited. She paused, opened her eyes at him, and smiled. He said, "Hello, I'm David," and she leaned her head on his shoulder. "I've an uncle in Miami, actually," she told him, before continuing with the next stanza. He accepted the weight of her, resting his own head back against the wall.

"Do Americans have that hymn?" she asked eventually, disengaging. "What are you smiling at?"

"At how you Brits end every other sentence with *actually*, actually." He imitated her accent. She swiveled to face him and took his hands. The air-bed shifted lumpily beneath them. "Let me read your palm." He felt her fingers trickling through his own.

It was a fairly popular ploy at the time. Instead of letting it lead where she intended—she was pretty but very odd, and a little too drunk, was his excuse—he professed himself fascinated by the mechanics of palmistry. Had she studied it? How did she know how to read palms?

In the end she lent him the dog-eared paperback she carried in her purse. They did kiss a little, politely, even playfully—no hard feelings, maybe later—but clearly, he had to acknowledge to himself, he had suffered a failure of nerve. Girls like her intimidated him. Plunging into an alien culture was one thing, but, well, look at the lines of his palm: casual flings were ordained to be a problem. His strong head line and his skittish heart line ran dangerously adjacent, until the bolder one just absorbed the fainter one: how could that be good? For weeks he sat worrying over the treasure map of his hands, the primary lines and the secondary lines and what might be buried in their creases; the tiny rope ladders connecting them; the mesh of near invisible side trails. There were whole chapters of the book that (however powerful his head line) he could make no sense of: he counted and recounted what he took for travel lines and true love lines and their numbers spun like tumblers. The more he bent to unlock the mysteries of his fate, the more even the simplest signs eluded him.

So when the gypsy didn't merely ask for money, but offered to read his palm, David needed no persuading. He did, of course, sense trouble: his head was telling his heart, "Walk by on the other side" and "Watch out, buddy." Back home, he would have listened: "Vagabond, crook, menace to polite society." But here wasn't his society. Here he was immune. He held out his two hands.

"Non, monsieur," she said. "Just the right hand."

That was odd. He protested. "All the books say you read both palms."

"I read the right hand," she retorted crossly. "In the left hand you must place some money."

Aha. Cross the palm with silver. He plopped in a one franc piece.

"Paper is better."

Cross the palm with paper? Inflation or industry modernization? Well, why not: it was his own palm. He extracted a ten franc note.

"More," she said. "Different denominations."

That wasn't good. He scoured his brain for exit strategies or sidesteps, next moves that wouldn't offend her. Some American money! A dollar bill! Above all, he had to make sure the cash stayed in his own hand; he would keep a tight grip on it. He peeked in his wallet; nothing but three local hundreds; he was coming from the bank; his visa didn't entitle him to a French checkbook; he'd taken enough out of his paycheck to last two or three weeks. He would pretend he had no more.

Impatiently, she snatched the wallet from him, removed the three hundreds, and closed his left hand about them.

"Voilà. Now give me back your right hand." Simultaneously, she enclosed his left hand in her right one; she began to trace a finger across his open palm.

"You come from overseas. I see that in six months or a year you will make a long voyage."  
  
His heart sank. She continued in this vein for some time, seizing on things obvious from his appearance and his accent, spouting platitudes and generalities as if they were great insights. Perhaps partly because of this it came with the force of revelation when she declared: "I see someone who is important to you, or who could be. Whose initials are B.J. I see the two of you growing closer, very soon, you and B.J., and then closer still. Ah, such happiness! Et voilà, monsieur, c'est tout."

Bridget? Him and Bridget Jennings? If at first David had mistaken the gypsy for Bridget it was because he was crushing on her. They hadn't just run into each other by chance, he'd dropped by her room in the *résidences académiques*; she and another friend had come to call on him. He'd promised her he'd bring her book back, and vowed to himself to make a pass. If only to get her out of his head! He'd imagined it was she he had glimpsed in the back seat of a passing Peugeot, entering a café across the grand boulevard, behind the turned-up collar of a girl at the bus stop. The shrewd and solid suspicion that they would irritate the heck out of each other—that "such happiness" as they might spark would blaze to ash within a week—was blown off down the street like old newspaper. He asked the gypsy for details, but as she was repeating "Monsieur, c'est tout," and making to go, he realized for the first time that the money had found its way out of his hand and into hers. He clutched her arm and began to protest. He protested at length.

"I am poor, monsieur," she said simply. "I need this money."

"So do I. It has to last me three weeks!"  
  
"But monsieur, you are an American!" She was crazily indignant, as though he were trying to put something over on her. "Have some consideration for the poor and destitute, monsieur."

"I have such consideration. Without my 311 francs, I will *be* poor and destitute."

"Do you wish to have good luck in life, monsieur?"

"Yes, of course, but…"

"You will not have good luck if you take back this money I have earned."

"Oh really? Oh really I won't have good luck just because you say so, and oh really you've earned 311 francs?"

"You will have bad luck with the fortune I have foreseen. You and BJ will know no happiness."

"I'll take that risk. 311 francs, ça aussi c'est une fortune. For a simple student like me."

"Monsieur." She stared hard at his face, searching for signs—a sad, ragged woman, with skin as brown and crumpled as an old paper bag. He remembered the urgency of her hand upon his wrist; perhaps she was in real trouble. But he couldn't afford this. He couldn't and wouldn't buckle. He stared hard back at her.

"Très bien, monsieur. I'll give you it back. Most of it. But I have a condition. You must promise to return to this corner on Wednesday afternoon. And we'll see what we'll see. C'est juré?"

"Okay," David promised, not meaning it for an instant. "All right."

Unexpectedly, she gave a soft crackle of laughter. Of pleasure, of skepticism? It was eerie, but it failed to unsettle him. She was handing him back his three hundred franc bills and what he was feeling was sheer relief. He even managed an answering chuckle. How daring a young man he was to associate with the likes of her!

Anyway, eleven francs was a pretty good fee. He was shot of her. As he turned away she shouted, "You will have bad luck if you don't come back!" That very evening he and Bridget fell into each other's arms. It was someone's birthday, and they were both drunk. He woke in her bed with no hangover; in the shower she was singing "All things wild and wonderful, the Lord God made them all." It was a drizzly Saturday. They spent its grey daylight hours together, window-shopping in the rain, catching a mid-afternoon film. "See you when" he asked, "next weekend?" "How about Thursday," she asked, "at the club Angellier?" "The comedy skits thing? Sure!" On Wednesday, a half day at school, he went nowhere near the rue de Béthune.

And then it became the most uncertain affair David had ever attempted. She didn't show up at the club Angellier. "Julie came by," she said on Friday evening, "with the new Carly Simon LP." At the résidence académique, a score of Anglophones trailed in and out of each other's rooms. He and she spent more time with other people than each other, and when they did find themselves together the conversation sputtered and fizzled. For a few weeks he kept working on developing their interactions into a relationship; he met neither encouragement nor active resistance. Mostly, Bridget was cheerfully evasive. When he tried to pinpoint when he knew it was over, he came up with yet another evening of crossed wires and strained silences. Eventually she shoved him out of her room so she could go to bed with his closest French friend; it had never really begun.

He saw the gypsy once more. Walking through town with Karen he'd passed near her and she'd called out, "Don't think I don't know you. You'll have bad luck with this one too."

"It wasn't bad luck," David replied. "We weren't a match." Yet how could she know Karen wasn't Bridget? He felt no obligation to have gone back. But he shouldn't have promised he would.

Nevertheless, his affair with Karen continued to flourish. They were products of the same kind of world—had even lived at the same time in the same Boston suburb—and had pursued the same impulse to depart it. It was a relationship their parents might have arranged—and been hotly rebuked for arranging. *We will follow our own path, thank you, and you will respect our choice.* How amusing to have then chosen each other! The longer David and Karen were in France, the more natural it seemed for them to be together. No amount of gypsy ill will could touch them.

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In their first years back in America, David used to tell this story often. "Our marriage is under a gypsy curse," he would say to friends. "Listen to this!" His fondness for the tale annoyed Karen, partly because Davy had actually met her, Karen, first, and had taken longer to get around to any great interest in her. But she disliked still more how he sentimentalized the tale. The English girl was "colorful" rather than just plain weird. The huckster gypsy became a creature of mystery, a rebel against conformist society, a luckless but plucky outsider—perhaps, who knew, a tragic figure. The shillyshally of Davy's involvement with them was presented as engaging eccentricity; the belated awakening of his common sense—the failure to return—was now a minor betrayal.

To Karen, the portrayal of the old woman as a heroic figure, storming the battlements of convention, was a ludicrous one. She was as much a type as the students, the peasants, the riot police, the Maghrebis, the incestuous Brits. It required little courage on her part to live as her people had always lived. What was more, she pandered to people's superstitions and had tried to cheat Davy. It was time that Davy outgrew his tolerance for these deadbeats. Karen had a vague belief that life had its secret patterns, that coincidences meant something, but if there was a plan, it was not ours to know, and she was impatient with the wheelers and dealers who sought to con us with their grasp of it. She might believe, somewhat, in fate, but never in gypsies.

David responded that he believed in gypsies and not in fate. He liked to bring up the dying words of Lord Nelson; the two versions of them polarized into a crucial distinction. If he had been Hardy, bending low to catch his admiral's final whisper, uncertain whether he'd heard a "Kiss me, Hardy" or a mere "Kismet, Hardy"—fate—he'd have taken the warmer option and kissed the man, praying that he too might remain obstinately full of feeling to the last. You see, he might expostulate, you might accept how things are or you can struggle to love and to go on living, with all the force of your free will and spirit. What mattered far more than destiny was charity.

To be fair, David was aware that he could get supercilious, and it didn't please him. Such beliefs were fine, but did he really have to pronounce upon them? There are aspects of our make-up, he decided, which are core to us and resist our control. He would have liked to be, if not flawless, the best version of himself possible; what sometimes exasperated Karen as effeteness was simply a straining towards an ideal world where even minor and commonsense betrayals would matter. Sure, it was a pet dream rather than a code to live by; a wish to sigh about, rather than an inducement to any practical work.

By the fifth year of their marriage their arguments had turned shrill and frequent. Their infant daughter was becoming difficult. David was unhappy at work, struggling without pause for footholds, ways to further his career. He was treading water there, and not in sight of land. Karen, no longer working, at home with their child, felt trapped in a shrinking world. They could not afford to separate, but had little energy to give to their marriage. They stopped fighting. They brooded. They barely spoke. A year or so passed. When, eventually, things began to improve, it took them both by surprise. Without apparently having done anything to deserve the reprieve, they found themselves enjoying each other's company again, and increasingly confident in their ability to ride out all minor storms. Perhaps their circumstances had improved also? Honestly, not that much, yet, but they too soon began to—"It must be fate," they laughed. "We must be masters of our fate," they laughed, not really caring which summation was the truer.

David had never taken the old woman's curse seriously. Yet it saddened him a little that it had proven so ineffectual. He wished that they might have triumphed over it by an effort of their own will, by the obstinacy of their passion; instead, they had done so despite giving in to indifference. Karen was right, of course—it was entirely reasonable not to have kept the appointment—but he recalled a dream that had haunted him for a while. When had he dreamed it, in France, back here in America? He could no longer say. Yet somehow it had entered into memory; it vied with the true memories.

He is at the rendezvous. As she sees him approach, the gypsy's taut stance relaxes, and her morose features open in a smile. She gives again her soft cackle of laughter.

He follows her through a maze of side-streets to a hovel in the vieux quartier, back of the Place des Oignons, where few buildings are habitable, and many are nevertheless inhabited. Two or three North Africans (Moroccans? Algerians? he should learn the difference!) are talking and laughing somewhere nearby. There is some menace in the sound. The gulf between his life and theirs bears in on him with sudden, tremendous force: he is an intruder here. But the old woman busies herself smilingly around him, offering a cushion, offering tea, and he grows less tense.

He is in a room with no ceiling and no windows; an outer wall overlaps the breach in the inner one, providing some shelter from the wind; the third story roof, high, high above them, is virtually intact. The floor is laid with maps and charts. One tells the tale of David's life, his past intricate but clear; less so the plot turns of his future. He pores over them, calculating how to modify his destiny. The lines, though less inscrutable than those on his palm, splinter, spiral, and attenuate until they are quite uncertain. That he would be ashamed of; this he will not do; that he must not so much as think of. His interest is soon exhausted. Even the clear lines amount to no more than a fact sheet: circumstances stripped of attitudes, they tell him nothing of how he will feel—but he continues to study the thing, out of politeness.

He asks why she wanted him to come; this puzzles her. Why, to sell him the map, of course! He shakes his head and smiles. She says: "See here, this little whorl. This is how you can get to win and keep BJ." Should he try to make sense of it? Instead, he looks around him, at her gypsy slum. Overhead, a pigeon flaps. Looking up at the roof beyond it, David can't decide whether he spies a grey patch of sky breaking through a small hole or whether it's an effect of shadow.

She laughs again and says, "But you came back."

As she takes his left hand (so she'll read this other hand now?), palm upward between her two hands, he feels her heat course through them; the delicate criss-cross of lines seems to pulse and shift, rubbing together in discord and a startle of harmony. The impression is surreally clear; vivid in the way that only a dream, a wish, a tale, a destiny, in their sheer grandness, can be.