

LORRAINE SHEMESH

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COURTESY GERALD PETERS GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

LIZA MONROY

Love and Death and Faith and Fate and Marine Iguanas

Links between love,
death, and story

I make appointments with a by-referral-only tarot reader the way most people go to the dentist. At least I assume; I rarely ever go to the dentist (sorry, Mom). But I show up dutifully for my annual appointment at the sixth-floor walk-up studio in Brooklyn where the by-referral-only tarot reader offers gold fillings for cavities of the soul.

The tarot reader is a formidable woman with a large presence and equally sizeable bouffant, white but for one thick streak of intense purple. On the top floor of an unmarked brownstone on a picturesque, tree- and gaslight-lined street, she transforms question marks into periods. Her fee of a hundred dollars an hour seems nominal for the sense of certainty I get from her readings. She predicted the month I would hear the news of my first book's acceptance for publication. She told me the New Jersey apartment I was preparing to move into with my then-husband would leave me feeling like "Rapunzel in a tower," spelling the end of our marriage—it did and it was. She had no means of knowing that tower had been crumbling for quite some time. She told me my next relationship was cosmically doomed from the get-go and that guy ended up trying to set my apartment on fire.

Her insistence that clients record their sessions is my evidence of her accuracy. I have every session stored on my phone. You can always go back and listen; it's all on the record. Because of this track record of correct predictions, I believe what she tells me, though I also find my belief absurd. As a journalist and an atheist, I traffic in facts, in what can be tangibly proven—with this one exception. I am both faithless and devout, holding these contradictory ideas simultaneously. That her business relies on referrals alone serves as justification from the part of me that believes to the part of me that doesn't—it's not as if she's sitting in some storefront, illuminated by a cheesy neon sign, inviting in any random passerby. Dependence on referrals equals credibility; would you recommend a doctor who misdiagnosed your condition?

* * *

In the spring, I land a summer job in Beijing teaching essay writing to Chinese students hoping to attend U.S. colleges. I'm excited and afraid; it's the farthest I'll have traveled alone, hired by people I've never met, about to be paid more than I have the right to earn in such a short

period of time. It all seems too good to be true, and I make a rush appointment with the tarot reader. She looks down at the cards and tells me not to go, not because of the job but because my soul mate will be revealed on my summer travels, and going to China would throw things off. His name begins with a *J*.

“... he’s a traveler, you’d like a traveler. He’ll be photographing sea turtles ... I don’t know why I’m picking up a camera with this guy. It seems like he’s very literate, which is another thing that’s important to you.”

NAME BEGINS WITH A J.

PHOTOGRAPHING SEA TURTLES.

I know right away she’s talking about Jonah. There are sea turtles in Puerto Rico and Jonah will photograph them because he takes pictures of everything.

Jonah is a photographer I met at martial arts class. He has hazel eyes and black-framed glasses, a wardrobe’s worth of plaid shirts, and the straightest, whitest teeth I’ve ever seen because his father is a dentist. (Maybe I’ll end up going more often.) The problem with Jonah is that, while we spend a lot of time together, he’s still somehow convinced he’s going to marry a woman who left him and left the country. He insists she’s coming back. This is the reason why Jonah and I end at friendship. But if someone leaves you and, from a distance, reels you back with apologies and promises of a fresh start, it can’t end well, can it?

Our group of martial arts friends—including Jonah—have plans to attend a mutual friend’s wedding in Puerto Rico before I am to leave, or now not leave, for China. We’ve rented an apartment near the five-star resort where our friend is getting married.

The by-referral-only tarot reader’s prediction is more specific than ever, too precise to ignore. I renege on China. I won’t tell Jonah about the by-referral-only tarot reader’s prediction, not until our wedding day. That will be the perfect moment to reveal she had seen our destiny. Maybe she can officiate our wedding.

* * *

As a bachelorette present, I gift my friend, the bride, a session with the tarot reader. The bride is a skeptic, a rational being, an accountant. But she is also polite, so she accepts the gift, scheduling her date with divination mere days before leaving for her tropical paradise wedding. I don’t

know what questions she brings to the appointment; I’m too concerned with my sea turtle prince to ask.

* * *

The resort occupies 483 acres of former coconut plantation and is a Certified Gold Audubon Signature Sanctuary, which means the inevitability of sea turtles on its fine sand, my fate held in a Nikon D7000 over their nests. It’s a landscape of winding roads, lush vegetation, and palm trees bearing signs that read Iguana Crossing.

Iguanas are everywhere. No sea turtles, but I don’t yet know I’ve made a mistake.

* * *

In the morning, the bride’s father eats a twenty-dollar omelet at the alfresco restaurant. He has plans to hike in the jungle and swim in the ocean before the evening ceremony. There’s a room reserved for wedding guests staying elsewhere to rest and get refreshed. I open the minibar and reach for a Diet Coke, but it costs six dollars so I return it to its place. *What occasion would ever call for a six-dollar diet Coke?* The group of friends—minus the bride, who has requisite hair and makeup appointments—heads to the pool to get started on mojitos on what no one can imagine will be anything other than a perfect day.

An iguana lazes in the poolside shrubbery. As if to mock the sea turtle prediction, Jonah fetches his camera and starts snapping away while I try to figure out how to lure him to the beach, where the sea turtles will be.

He waves me over from the other end of the pool. “Come look at this!”

“What is it?”

“This other iguana,” he says.

I approach where he stands taking pictures of a second iguana. It is some kind of aquatic iguana with a spiky crest, like a marine iguana, the kind only known to exist in the Galápagos. This iguana goes for a swim in the pool as if it were a guest at the resort. Jonah snaps more pictures.

“We should go in soon, get ready,” he says.

“Yes, but please just come down to the beach first,” I say, hoping to nudge fate along, sea turtle induction.

“Okay.”

While this is happening, some lobbyists at the resort for a political fundraiser spot an odd-sized object floating

in the water, then in toward the sand. At first they think it is a suitcase or an animal, perhaps a large fish.

Jonah and I make our way down the path toward the ocean, until we are stopped by the groom. His face is pale. Looks like bad news. He’s from a prominent Puerto Rican family and I suddenly become afraid someone has come to the resort to assassinate someone, or that a dangerous and estranged distant relative has shown up. These absurd thoughts are abandoned as he speaks, replaced by the knowledge of something equally absurd. *A body on the beach*, he says. *Washed up*, he says. *They think it’s her father*, he says.

It can’t be, I say. *We just saw him at breakfast*. What I keep to myself: the by-referral-only tarot reader would have called it. She would have told the bride to keep her father out of the water. *These things don’t happen*, I tell him—as if there’s a contract with the realm of possibility that such a coincidence is banned, it can’t be him, wouldn’t be him, probably isn’t him. Fathers don’t die at weddings two hours before they’re supposed to walk their daughters down the aisle.

On the beach, the confused lobbyists huddle around a human-sized mass, covered by what appears to be a hotel sheet.

* * *

Remember Schrödinger’s Cat? The paradoxical thought experiment about the cat in the box that’s somehow alive and dead at the same time? I’m no physicist but it’s always fascinated me. Basically, this cat is in a box with a Geiger counter, a bottle of poison, a hammer, and some radioactive substance. When the radioactive substance decays, the Geiger counter triggers the hammer to break the bottle, and the poison kills the cat. But until the box is opened, it is unknown whether the cat is dead or alive, because there is no way to predict when or if the radioactive decay—a random process—has occurred. So the cat is both living and dead until the box is opened.

Schrödinger’s purpose was to illustrate how, in a physical system, you cannot say what something is doing until it is observed. In the many-worlds interpretation, in one universe the boxed cat might be dead while in another, parallel universe it lives on. It suggests the existence of worlds beyond our world, things that can be known beyond

our limited perception. It’s the same reason I’m addicted to the tarot reader.

Before the sheet is lifted, could the body underneath be simultaneously the father and not the father?

Can fathers be both dead and alive, until observed?

* * *

The body. It did belong to him. Now it belongs to her, the bride, one of my closest friends. Her mother died when she was younger. Like me, she’s an only child. She came here to create a new family and lost all she had left of her old one. Instead of being walked down the aisle, she is responsible for getting the body removed from the beach before her own wedding, dealing with the morgue in this bureaucratically unsound island paradise.

The bride paces alongside the gathered crowd, talking into a cell phone. It’s as if they’re setting up to shoot a scene in a movie: death in the tropics. If it were a scene in a movie it would be a cliché, that’s how exact it looks. I keep waiting for my friend’s father to get up because it’s gone on too long. A member of the resort staff wraps bright yellow tape around some palm trees.

“Maybe the body is fine,” someone says. “Maybe they’re just giving it some air.”

The body lies on the sand, indifferent to the commotion it has caused. Everyone wants to help but the only thing to do is stand there asking questions. Somebody says her father was getting in a last swim before going inside to change and the thought crosses my mind that the biggest change a person can go through is from alive to not. One of the resort employees shakes her head and says, “I am sorry.”

This reality is one difficult to align with the kind I wish for, the kind with divine seers, predictability, certainty: the kind that drives me to the by-referral-only tarot reader. And I am ashamed of one of my thoughts, that now Jonah and I have experienced tragedy together, which will cause us to grow closer and realize what’s really important. In this ripped-open emotional state, he will realize he loves me. *Somebody died* and I’m still admiring the way Jonah’s glasses frame his hazel eyes, lashes so long they look painted. Or maybe it’s natural to want to look elsewhere, as it is to believe such naïvetés as “things happen for a reason.” How had we just been sitting on the pool patio, drinking

mojitos? Why didn’t the by-referral-only tarot reader warn her? Of all things, didn’t she see this? If she did, she covered it up, and if she didn’t—either way, my reliance on her is called into question. Jonah didn’t photograph sea turtles anyway. The whole sea turtle thing is suddenly ridiculous and obscene. Who is running this place, where a bride’s father, instead of walking his daughter down the aisle, is spotted by some lobbyists, floating lifeless in the ocean, drifting into shore?

* * *

Waiting to hear about the wedding is like waiting in an airport for a delayed flight that may not ever arrive. In the hotel room, in shock, we down wedding-favor rum mixed with six-dollar diet Coke—yes, this is the occasion that calls for six-dollar diet Coke. When the unbelievable and unreal happens it brings all that is believable and real into question. That covered body lying indifferently on the sand undermined my deep-seated desire to believe things happen for a reason, even though I don’t really believe this at all. It’s a crisis of faith without the faith.

Jonah and I play backgammon on my phone and everyone talks about fathers. Dead fathers bring back ghosts of other dead fathers; we relate what we experience back to prior experience. Especially that which leaves us feeling unmoored in a formerly contained space—we grasp for something to anchor to, any anchor. My father died and then the bride’s father dies on the beach right before her wedding and I’m faced with all kinds of exponential dead-fatherhood. It’s not that I even want to tell another story about love and death and faith, but not having a choice in our stories seems part of the point.

My father doesn’t drink anymore because he drank so much he can never drink again. In that case, it was expected, or should have been, but even though I knew about his alcoholism, heard reports from his brother that my father did not leave the apartment anymore or let anyone in, I didn’t believe his death was coming. I never observed my own father’s body. The news came via long-distance phone call, the funeral fast, hidden, abroad—the brother arranging and completing it all before I had time to book a flight. I’ve never been to his grave. It’s as if he’s still out there, wandering, estranged. Is it any wonder I long to believe in magic?

One father disappears, another washes up on the shore of the shallowest sea. I have never told my friends the story of my father. We can be so close, so intimate, and unaware of these person-defining facts. I want Jonah to love me. Jonah is predictable. Jonah is stable. His father is a dentist.

“Want to hear something dumb?” I say as Jonah presses the phone screen for a digital dice roll. “I go to a tarot reader sometimes. A by-referral-only tarot reader. I actually believe the things she tells me, like that I’m going to marry a guy who I’ll see taking pictures of sea turtles. Isn’t that absurd?”

“Ridiculous,” he agrees.

“Yes, exactly. Ridiculous.”

I feel guilty for trashing my beloved tarot reader who has been right about so many things over the years. I instantly regret revealing the prophecy as now I’ve messed with it, surely guaranteeing it won’t happen. But she betrayed me, invented sea turtle photography and the certainty of Jonah, and she definitely didn’t tell our friend to keep her father out of the ocean.

We take turns checking on the bride in her suite, hoping for some way to help though of course there is none. She has makeup on. She is on the phone with the morgue. The body has not yet been taken. She is placed on hold. It starts to rain.

“I wonder if it’s raining on my father,” she says.

* * *

The show will go on. It’s a blur that opens with a moment of silence. His name is still on the program, Entrance of Bride Escorted by Her Father. “They look like actors,” somebody says. One of the groom’s uncles steps into the role of her father, walking the bride down the aisle. And I am acting the part of wedding guest. No one mentions the sudden death again. Standard vows are recited. I head to the reception to further pursue drunken oblivion, the state previously determined best for immediate coping with forced celebration in the midst of shock. What does a person do when the happiest day of her life is also the worst? Everybody wonders. No one asks. We’re all out of questions. The appetizer trays are grand. I crunch a chip loaded with tuna tartare. We just need to get through it. *Wedding guest, wedding guest, wedding guest.* Get through a celebration—what a mixed-up concept. Champagne is

poured. Under these circumstances, we are expected to dance so we dance. I don’t think we’d know what else to do, anyway. Like marionettes, all of us dance.

I’m dancing with Jonah. I must have a hopeful look about me. He seems to know what I’m thinking. He knows me, what I want.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “It’s not going to happen.”

The DJ spins another Latin pop track.

“Why not?”

“Nothing’s changed. I had a dream once that I married her. This may sound weird, or maybe not given what you told me earlier, but I’ve always had prophetic dreams. Perfect and beautiful. I don’t know how to describe it to you. It’s not really something I can explain.”

“What if you’re wrong?”

“I’m going there next week, bringing her back to New York. But don’t worry, you still have your sea turtle man coming up.”

It’s you, I want to say, but I haven’t yet received proof. We have one more day for him to take that photograph but it’s probably all ruined anyway. I’d broken what is surely a code that interfering with fate changes its course. I want to sink into that marble floor. First of all, in the face of death I am preoccupied with love. Secondly, a prophecy is only useful when it tells you what you want to hear.

* * *

At the airport, hungover and awaiting my flight home, I listen to the by-referral-only tarot reader’s recording in hopes that it might somehow provide comfort, that there might be a clue that Sea Turtle Man is still out there. I fast-forward to the part about sea turtles and realize I made a mistake. She doesn’t say sea turtles. She never said sea turtles. I don’t know where I got sea turtles. She names an entirely different animal: marine iguanas.

That resort is a hotbed of iguanas. If I hadn’t misheard, if I’d known the whole time he was taking pictures of iguanas, would I have experienced a transcendent moment of recognition that I did not because of my error? I check Jonah’s photography blog: it is already plastered with pictures of iguanas. Fate got me on this one. It was real all along and I can’t tell Jonah he fulfilled the prophecy after all. He’s already gone. But another thing arises; on this closer listen, it becomes evident that the by-referral-only tarot reader

was only speaking metaphorically anyway. She’d meant that I would encounter my future husband that summer on my travels *in an unexpected way*. Marine iguana photography was only an example, a stand-in for randomness. Now I wonder if the question isn’t about whether I believe or don’t believe, but whether she can be right and wrong at the same time.

* * *

Once I researched the strangest coincidences ever known. One was a cab driver in Jamaica who hit and killed a guy on a moped in an intersection, and exactly one year later, in the same intersection, with the same passenger in his cab, he hit and killed the guy’s brother, who was riding the same moped.

* * *

Right after the wedding, the funeral. In my early thirties, it’s the first I’ve attended, my first time witnessing the rituals of death—viewing the body in the casket (waxy, unreal), tossing handfuls of dirt into the open grave. I thought I’d missed out on closure for not having gotten to my father’s funeral but this ritual does not provide any closure, not really.

You know what’s really provided closure for me? Research. Facts. I need to follow bread-crumbs toward some illusion of a deeper understanding, even if it does have to be tinted, to some extent, with dabbling in magic. If By-Referral-Only is such an accurate tarot card reader, why did she not see it? Or did she see it and not say?

I ask the bride if I can listen to her session recording. “I need to know what she saw.” My friend sends over the audio file. I’m surprised that one of her first questions is “Will my father’s health be good over the next year?”

The reader draws some cards and points out The Star and The Tower. “Sometimes he doesn’t address issues with you the way he should,” she tells my friend. “He doesn’t take care of himself the way he should. Your dad’s an interesting guy. There may be something that happens that throws him a bit out of balance.”

GEE, YA THINK?

What I wonder most is why my friend chose this question in the first place.

She asks about the wedding.

“The Death card,” the reader says, “the death of bish-ops and kings. There is something on the horizon. It’s like *why didn’t that show up?*”

Is she talking to herself? Or hiding something?

I call the by-referral-only tarot reader, this time not to make an appointment, but to find out what happened. I tell her nothing about the bride’s father. My intent is twofold: I don’t want to hurt her by coming across as if I’m accusing her of having been wrong and demanding an answer. I also want to try to uncover, purely, if she was hiding what she saw, and, if so, why.

“What can be seen, in terms of death, in your line of work?” I ask. “Can you see if someone is going to die? And is it mandatory to tell the client or would you not do that? Like, a code of professional conduct?”

The by-referral-only tarot card reader is oblique. “The universe tells you what you need to know,” she says. “You don’t ask about something you don’t want to know.”

How does she know what or how much someone really wants to know? “Oh, and PS, Your father is going to die in the ocean, which is only, like, three feet deep, just a couple hours before the wedding. Nothing you can do about it. Figured you might want me to tell you in advance.” If she’d said that, would my friend have kept her father out of the ocean? Away from the wedding? Maybe his death was inevitable no matter where he was or when. Maybe it would have been worse otherwise. My mind spirals, a marine iguana eating its own tail.

A few days later, my friend the bride and I drive through Brooklyn in her father’s SUV, now her SUV. A plaque on the bumper reads FISH NOW, WORK LATER. I hope he did.

“Maybe she didn’t know, but you had some idea,” I say.

“What do you mean?”

“Why did you think to ask that question?”

She seems perplexed and I don’t pursue it further.

Maybe we all have to be our own by-referral-only tarot readers, making our own calls about our own marine iguanas.

By referral, I decide, is code for exclusivity. It doesn’t really mean anything. It doesn’t mean it’s better: the speakeasy you can only get into because your friend knows someone who has the number, the club you need a key to unlock, or where the bouncer standing outside handpicks clientele, pointing *you and you and you*. It’s the idea of

being left out that makes us getting in appealing. Without the exclusivity, it’s just another place. *Not just anyone can find her*. If you did, you’re in on a secret, and that makes it special. It’s smart marketing. *Not everyone can have this, but you can*. If the reader had been in a neon-lit storefront, I wouldn’t have taken it seriously at all, or even walked in the door in the first place.

* * *

I arrive on the patio of our favorite neighborhood bar, crowded with summertime revelers. The group of friends sits with takeout tacos and pitchers of beer. Jonah holds up a photograph on his phone. IT IS A MARINE IGUANA. Not the fake Puerto Rico pool kind, but the majestic, colorful, huge, and real Galápagos kind. I walk in on Jonah showing this photograph to the table. I am nauseated. “Who took this?” I ask. “My father,” he says, “just got back from a tour of the Galápagos.” When not working on teeth, Jonah’s father is also a photographer. This is his picture. Jonah mentions that he, too, would like to travel to the Galápagos to photograph these strange majestic beasts, that the pool iguana in Puerto Rico was just a warm-up for the real thing. He’s joking and my head is swimming. He doesn’t know about my mistake. The false sea turtles. There may still be hope. Somewhere inside this marine iguana hall of mirrors, I’m trying to figure out what to make of the signs but have gotten no closer.

Things that can be known:

The marine iguanas lie on salty Galápagos rocks.

The pool iguana swims in Puerto Rico, permanent guests of the five-star resort.

The fathers are underground.

The by-referral-only tarot card reader sits six stories up in her studio a mile away, reading cards.

Somewhere, sea turtles lay eggs in the sand.

I still believe, and still don’t.

There’s a link between love and death and story, something to do with urgency. Isn’t there a bright, flashing urgency to it all, knowing all of this could be gone in an instant? The time of the marine iguana prediction became the last I’d see the by-referral-only tarot reader. My own father is only a memory. Bodies wash up on the shores of five-star resorts before weddings. You preserve these bugs in the amber of moments.

Photographer of all photographers, Annie Leibovitz, said, “Things happen all the time that are unexpected, uncontrolled, even magical. The work prepares you for that moment. Suddenly the clouds roll in and the soft light you longed for appears.”

* * *

Jonah flies to the woman who left him and left the country. If he is in fact Marine Iguana Man, I’m in for a long wait.

I leave the city again, to a martial arts retreat in Ithaca. Get out of my head, back into my body. One of my house-mates is a man visiting from California. His name is Jason. He brought along a thousand-page book he reads on the couch between trainings. He’s very literate. I’m not paying attention, and I don’t consider a short trip Upstate to be in the realm of “summer travels,” but if I’d been in China, well, I would not have been there. I’m not paying attention or thinking about this though. He isn’t photographing marine iguanas or sea turtles, nor is there any marine life around at all, other than some plain fish in a lake, but at the end of the year, I live with Jason in California. A few months after that, I check Twitter and see Jonah got married to the woman he brought back, just as he dreamed. I feel relief. The Marine Iguana chapter was a time when I grasped to believe before I understood something about the powerlessness of force.

As predicted, Jason is a traveler, too. We travel well and are equally negligent about the dentist. He thinks tarot readers, by referral or not, are out-and-out bullshit. Though the dire need with which I went to mine evaporated—I think I only went to her to try to solve the enigma of love—I’m still fascinated by the mystical.

On our honeymoon, we visit a tiny island in Brazil where we’ve been told (not by a tarot reader) we’ll see manatees. We don’t see any manatees. The island, as it turns out, is a sea turtle preserve. We go snorkeling and see sea turtles up close, everywhere, fields of sea turtles beneath our flailing limbs.

Liza Monroy is the author of the memoir *The Marriage Act: The Risk I Took To Keep My Best Friend In America... And What It Taught Us About Love*, the debut novel *Mexican High*, and, forthcoming, *Seeing As Your Shoes Are Soon To Be On Fire* (Counterpoint/Soft Skull, October 2016). Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *O*, *Jezebel*, *Poets & Writers*, *Marie Claire*, *Newsweek*, *Village Voice*, *Jane*, *Self*, *Psychology Today*, *Bust* and others. She lives in Santa Cruz, California with her husband, baby, pug, and potbellied pig, Señor Bacon.