THE GYPSY TOLD ME

 I’m not particularly a superstitious man, but I do admit to being interested in the occult and in the paranormal. Is there a spirit world beyond our own? Is there life after death? Can the future be foretold? Can palms and minds be read by total strangers? As you will soon discover, this curiosity is central to my story. My name is Norman Bowers. I just turned 46. I guess you could call me a confirmed bachelor, because I never got married, nor was it getting any likelier that I ever would as the years ticked by. My relatives and friends graciously set me up in numerous “blind date” situations over the years, but those mostly fizzled. Some were downright uncomfortable, like the lunch date with a Filipino nurse who couldn’t speak English above the level of an American toddler. Or the shock I received contacting “matches” for coffee meetings using on-line dating services, where the women looked or acted nothing like their profiles. I have been told by my co-workers at the California Almond Growers that I am not unattractive to the ladies. I am neat and clean, enjoy good health with the help of moderate exercise, and am a dependable worker with a steady job in middle management on the loading docks. No drinking, drugs, or smoking. I live in a modest home in West Sacramento, across the river from California’s State Capitol. I am frugal and save my money. Both my parents and older brother are deceased. Once, as a teenager, I was in love for two years, but she and her family moved back East, so that was that. The memory of her still haunts me at night whenever I wake and cannot sleep. Nowadays, I have a canary and a fish aquarium for companionship. Pretty sad, eh? For entertainment, I like to go to the movies, catch a softball game, or I just stay at home and watch TV or read. That’s my life in a nutshell.

 One day, my friend at work told me about a fortune teller who just opened a tiny shop in Old Sacramento -- a historic center adjacent to the Sacramento River, complete with paddle-wheeled riverboats, cobblestone streets, Wild West and Pony Express re-enactments, restored buildings from the 1860’s, restaurants and bars, tourist souvenir shops, and a world-class railroad museum. Sacramento was famous as being the closest city to the 1848 California Gold Strike in Coloma, as well as the being the western terminus of the Transcontinental Railroad, which linked the Union Pacific with the Central Pacific from Omaha.

 “Norm, you’ve got to go and check her out. Her name is Carlotta, and she is the real deal, some kind of gypsy from Europe I think. Some friends of my wife went for a reading, and this lady was spot on. It was freaky, man. And she only charges five dollars for a half-hour. How can you go wrong with that?” said Luis Ramirez, his teeth flashing beneath his greying mustache.

 Because I had been reading about the occult quite a bit on the internet recently, I saw no harm in doing a little personal investigation. It would make a good story anyway for my co-workers, however it turned out. So I skipped the nearby Saturday River Cats softball game, headed down to Old Sac, and quickly found Carlotta’s tiny shop next to a combination ice cream and T-shirt store.

 The narrow window had a picture of a crystal ball, surrounded by golden curly-cues. In bold, fancy script above it was the name CARLOTTA. Underneath the crystal ball were the words in similar fancy script: SEES ALL, KNOWS ALL, TELLS ALL. A dark purple-painted door matched the purple drapes behind the window. The door had an old-fashioned, brass human hand door-knocker. Kinda spooky, if you want to know the truth. But I gave it several knocks, after which the door opened slowly and a woman’s face peered out.

 “Would you like a reading?” she said, smiling, as I entered into what looked to be a dimly lit studio. Hanging wind chimes rang gently in the breeze as I entered the doorway. As my eyes adjusted from the bright sunshine outside, I noticed a table covered with a red cloth and two plush easy chairs on either side of it. The room smelled faintly of incense. The atmosphere was both comforting and exotic. On the table was a crystal ball the size of large grapefruit, resting on a golden metal holder of some sort. It being September, a small air conditioner hummed from somewhere in another adjoining room. The floor was covered with intricately-patterned Oriental carpets.

 “My name is Carlotta. Each reading is five dollars for thirty minutes. Only one reading per person per day.” She smiled again and extended her hand in greeting. Her hand was warm yet firm, with nicely shaped long fingers. She wore one silver ring on the middle finger of her right hand. Carlotta appeared to be about 30 years old, her voice slightly accented in some unknown foreign manner. She was tall, perhaps 5’10”, and pleasingly slender. Long, lush dark-brown hair. Dark eyes and eyebrows. Very feminine. She could be Italian, Spanish, or Greek, but maybe a gypsy from Turkey or Romania instead for all I knew. I had never travelled abroad, so I was just guessing. Carlotta wore a cream-colored ruffled blouse and a long, paisley-floral skirt and some kind of dark blue slippers. A tasteful silver necklace with some sort of orange (topaz? amber?) crystal pendant was hanging from her neck. No stereotypical gypsy hooped earrings, however.

 I introduced myself. “Please, Norman, let us be seated and we can begin,” she instructed. “I’ll need to hold your right hand during our session. Now relax, and I will tell you some things about yourself. You can help me by periodically telling me if the facts I share are true or false.”

 Well, in the course of a half-hour, Carlotta told me things that frankly astounded me. She told me about my parents and my brother. The name of my favorite dog when I was a child. Where I went to high school. All about my teen-aged love affair. That I was interested in the spirit world and para-psychology. That I lived alone. Even where I worked and what I did for a living. Amazing! As instructed, I provided positive feedback after each string of revelations. Before I knew it, the half-hour was up. Carlotta had a large wall clock discreetly hanging on the wall behind me, so she knew the exact time to end the session. We separated our hands. Mine was somewhat sweaty, maybe due to my lingering nervousness.

 “It was a pleasure, Norman. I hope you can come back and visit me soon. That will be five dollars.” Carlotta rose when I did, as I opened my wallet. She smiled again and took the money and poked it into a small goldfish bowl which was already stuffed with some cash on a discreet little side table near a lit candle. The same table had a rosary and crucifix on it, and a glass of water.

 I stepped outside back into the ninety degree September heat and blinding sunshine. I couldn’t wait to tell Luis and the guys all about it at work on Monday! How did Carlotta know these things, seeing as we had never met before?

 “Well, Luis, you were right,” I told him during our lunch break at CAG two days later. “Carlotta blew my mind with her accuracy. Plus she is very attractive.”

 “Norm, maybe you should go back and see her again,” Luis suggested. “Maybe she can help you look into your future, now that she knows about your past. Hell, maybe you can even ask her out on a date! You could make out with a real gypsy,” he poked my arm and winked.

 The following Saturday, I went again to see Carlotta. Two older women were leaving the studio as I walked up to the familiar purple door.

 “Hello, Norman, I remember you! Did you want another reading?” Carlotta asked in an enthusiastic, less formal manner. “Good timing. I just finished with some other clients.”

 I entered the darkened studio and sat in my regular seat. Carlotta gently took my hand after she sat down. She seemed somewhat more personal towards me this time, or was it just my imagination? I relaxed and basked in her undivided attention for thirty pleasant minutes. The time went by too quickly. We basically discussed my mediocre level of happiness. Carlotta said she sensed that I felt unfulfilled with my life. She knew I felt that life in general was passing me by… “Norman, you feel adrift,” she remarked, looking deeply into my eyes. She is such an attractive woman, I kept secretly thinking and feeling while she talked. We also talked about my loneliness, and I agreed completely with her analysis. I asked to come back the following Saturday for another reading after getting up and paying her the five dollars. She said that would be fine, and that she would look forward to it. She surprised me by giving me a friendly hug good-bye.

 I went back to see Carlotta four more times. I was drawn to her on so many levels. I really trusted her, even though I knew absolutely nothing about her background. Funny, huh? I thought about her now and then, both at work and at home. I couldn’t wait to see her each week. I respected her uncanny psychic abilities. She truly amazed me! I was simply drawn to her, and her mysteriousness. I felt a heightened sense of life just being around her. At work, Luis again teased me, saying I was falling in love with her. Maybe he was right. I acutely noticed the subtle fragrance of her perfume, her different clothing outfits and hair styles, her melodious vocal intonations – and especially the electric thrill of having her hold my hand during each visit.

 By now November had arrived, and along with it, the winter rains finally came to the Central Valley. The usual sunny skies alternated with grey and chilly days. But because of Carlotta, I felt energized and chipper and free from my typical seasonal depression.

 At my next session, her reading took a decidedly different track. Carlotta talked about my need to make more money. She advised that if I had more money, I could buy a larger house and a better car, and that I could easily attract more eligible women into my life. I had to admit that I had thought about this same fantasy too. Maybe I should look for a better job, move to another part of the state, or maybe even move to another entirely different state. We discussed the options. The bottom line remained: more money was the key. This time, Carlotta unexpectedly refused my five dollars at the end of my half-hour, explaining that we had transcended our roles as client and medium and that we were now “good friends sharing advice.” She then asked if I was available for lunch the following day, Sunday, because she had some important information to share with me. I immediately agreed to 1 p.m. at the Rio City Café in Old Sacramento, right off the river, just a five minute walk from her studio shop.

 Carlotta looked outstanding in a chic beige trench coat, stylish hat and leather knee boots when we met at the restaurant. She ordered grilled salmon, green beans with slivered almonds (assuredly from CAG, I boasted), and hot herbal tea. I had the same. She came quickly to the point once our food arrived.

 “Norman, I had a client come into my studio the other day for a reading,” she began. “It so happens that he works for Smith-Barney, the stock market investment firm, right here in downtown Sacramento. He asked me if I wanted an insider tip on buying stocks in a new fuel-cell tech company – EnduroX -- that was just getting started in San Francisco. He explained that anyone who got into it on the ground floor could make a fortune fast. He himself was putting all of his spare cash into buying in, and he suggested I do the same. He gave me his business card. I was totally convinced that he was telling me the truth. Because of my complete psychic certainty in my interaction with him, I am investing all of my liquid assets in this venture, and I suggest you do too.” Carlotta looked directly into my surprised eyes. “But we need to move fast. The stock goes public in 72 hours. The broker, however, needs our money in cash so as to move it into purchasing ‘pooled shares’ the minute the stock is released openly on the market. He will charge no brokerage fee as a favor to me for helping him out in an earlier reading with a personal matter. When I talked with him on the phone Friday, he said we could probably triple our investment in less than six months.”

 We had coffee and shared an apple-cinnamon crepe for dessert. Neither of us talked for a while. My head was spinning while I silently mulled her startling revelation and suggestion. Carlotta, rising to go, insisted on paying for lunch, but I left the tip. Outside the restaurant, she grabbed both of my hands and gazed at me with her beautiful brown eyes and said, “Think long and hard about it, Norman. This is a big, serious opportunity. But I absolutely know it is going to be a winner! Let me know by tomorrow evening what you decide. Drop by my studio before I close at 5 p.m. if you decide yes. And, of course, bring your money. Until then, good bye!” The skies were beginning to drizzle as she swiftly hugged me and we parted. Now what? I thought.

 That night in bed, I wrestled with my conflicting thoughts and emotions. If I took a chance -- and trusted Carlotta -- I could possibly elevate my circumstances to a new level. Or maybe I was walking into a disaster. I had roughly $49,000 saved up over the years. Though some of that money was in certificates of deposit, I could still remove it first thing tomorrow at my Wells Fargo bank with just some small early withdrawal penalties totaling under $75. The deciding factor was Carlotta. She had repeatedly proven to me – seven times, in fact (a lucky omen?) -- that she really did ‘know all, see all, tell all.’ She had to be the real thing! This was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to better myself, I was convinced… Hence, I made my decision, and fell into a deep exhausted sleep. At work on Monday, I asked my boss if I could take off early at 3 p.m. to take care of a personal business matter. I drove to Wells Fargo and got $49,112 in cash after about an hour of waiting and tedious paperwork. I put the $49k (490 crisp, new $100 bills) into a quart Zip-Lock plastic bag – covertly placing the money deep in my overcoat pocket while the teller suspiciously eyed me-- then put the remaining $112 in my wallet. I drove next to Old Sacramento, and quickly found parking near Carlotta’s shop.

 A white-bearded older man was leaving and closing her purple door when I arrived about 4:30 p.m. I knocked using the brass human hand door knocker. Carlotta smiled and welcomed me, after cautiously casting her eyes left and right from the doorway. “I’m so glad you came, Norman! Did you bring the money?” she asked softly once we were inside.

 “Yes, I have $49k in my pocket,” I replied. I removed the cash bundle from my overcoat and presented it to her.

 “Good. Now listen carefully. What we are doing is technically legal, but it has to be done in a subtle manner, almost secretly. I want you to meet me here on Saturday at 9 a.m. when I open and I will give you a status update and a receipt for your part of our investment. I myself have $27,500 to pool with you. And my stockbroker friend is putting in his $150k,” Carlotta revealed.

 Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. “It must be a walk-in client,” she announced, looking slightly annoyed. “You should probably leave. Thanks again, Norman. Don’t worry about a thing. I’ll see you on Saturday. Then all we have to do is wait. Think about all the money we are going to make!” Carlotta hugged me and walked me out the door, past a young female urban hipster eager for a five-dollar reading.

 But when I returned at the appointed hour on Saturday, I was shocked to see a dramatic “CLOSED” sign in Carlotta’s window. I knocked and knocked, feeling panicked and nauseous. The purple curtains were gone, and peeking inside through the glass, I saw that the familiar furniture in the studio was also missing. Just the fancy gold writing on the window remained. Oh my God, what have I done? No, no! She robbed me…There could be no other explanation. Now what?

 I was in agony, and virtually sleepless, for the rest of the weekend. When I went to work on Monday, I was further stunned to learn that Luis had quit. I was told by his supervisor that he had a serious family emergency back in Torreon, Mexico and had to permanently leave CAG. For the next four months, I was in severe depression. I was understandably worried about my lost money and my financial circumstances. I still had a roof over my head and a job, thank God. But it would take years to rebuild my nest egg for my retirement and my old age. I was too afraid and ashamed to go to either the police or to visit the Smith-Barney office downtown and try and find Carlotta’s stockbroker associate. I had blundered so badly that now I had to suffer and pay the price for my stupidity, I felt. What a fool I had been! What a loser! I had nightmares about Carlotta and entertained brutal fantasies of finding her and beating her to death. Meanwhile, I numbly went through my routine tasks at work each day, inventing excuses whenever I was asked by co-workers if anything was wrong with my personal life. I called in sick several times. I started to eat poorly and gained some unwanted weight. I was increasingly apathetic and lethargic.

 In early April – the 12th, to be exact – I received a mysterious letter at home postmarked from Mexico City. I didn’t know anyone from there. It was carefully addressed to me, but with no specific return address. When I read the contents, I felt dizzy, and had to sit down. Here’s what it said:

 “Dear Norman – I am so very sorry for what I did to you. By now you probably realize that I am not a psychic. My real name is Consuela, not Carlotta. Luis Ramirez is my cousin. It was he who told me all the details about your life. That’s how I knew all about you during our readings. We made a plan to steal your money by setting up a phony investment scheme. If it was successful, we would move around the U.S. and repeat the pattern with other older, single men– fleeing each town before we were discovered. But I just couldn’t go through with it all. My conscience bothered me, probably from my Catholic upbringing. The guilt was unbearable. You were such an honest and kind and trusting man, Norman, that I just couldn’t hurt you so terribly. I couldn’t keep and then split your money with Luis. But one fact was true. I did have a stockbroker share inside investment information with me during a reading. Though in reality I had no extra money myself to invest (certainly never $27,500), I did risk your $49,000 on the EnduroX deal rather than steal your money. Guess what? Enclosed is a check for you. (I hope you don’t mind, but I needed to keep 10% of the original amount to cover my psychic studio rent and other expenses for those months in Old Sacramento.) Again, dear Norman, please forgive me for the pain I put you through. God bless you. Find a nice woman and get married. You deserve much happiness. Sincerely, Consuela”

 When I looked again in the envelope, there was a genuine green cashier’s check for $167,322.18…

 THE END by Jack Karolewski – September 28, 2015