

## CHAPTER 2 A PLUCKED STITCH UNRAVELS THE SLEEVE

The craggy coastline of California is topped with an arterial highway that weaves in and out of its mountains, valleys and low-lying hills. There are long swaths of this road--the Pacific Coast Highway--that lie flat and wide as you head toward the center of the state and the offshore drills shrink out of view; while other, more Northerly sections barely contain room enough for two cars to inch past one another while book ended by sheer rock faces on one side and steep, deadly cliffs on the other. I escaped the urban sprawl of Los Angeles and drove up this very highway toward Santa Barbara to meet with a new health practitioner. I'd always been proud of my efforts to maintain good health through my 50's and wanted to stay healthy as long as I could.

I tuned out the road noise and thought about the coincidental events that led to this moment. I relived them as I drove, letting my thoughts wander as the landscape changed from concrete skyscrapers to bedroom communities on old avocado farms and the wind perfumed my car with eucalyptus then later, ocean brine.

About a year earlier, I had dinner with my friend Bill, whom I'd known for decades. He'd recently returned from England, having spent a few months with his daughter Beth during the last months of her college exchange program. He was excited to share her experiences with some new health practitioners that she met "across the pond" since he knew I was really into fitness and health. But I didn't know how a 20-something could possibly have anything in common with me. Weren't kids into texting and MySpace and piercings? What could this possibly have to do with me? But Bill persisted.

I listened half-heartedly as he described Beth's work in a clinic specializing in Iridology. These practitioners believed that markings in the iris of the eye revealed the health of the body. I couldn't help but think about Voodoo and Shaman witch doctors chanting spells as they danced around a bonfire, but I figured it couldn't hurt to humor Bill, as long as he didn't force me to fly to an Asian jungle and visit a chubby, middle-aged Filipino man in a tent who pulled chicken entrails from my belly button and declared me HEALED!

Bill went on. And on. As luck would have it, the chance to have a reading came up a few months later when his family attended a wedding and stopped at an organic food store for a snack beforehand. The women were dressed in Sunday best, with perfume and jewelry and perfectly styled hair held in place by dozens of hidden hairpins and really flammable hairspray. The guys weren't much better off. Suits were for work, pretty much, and the thought of having to wear anything but shorts and a T-shirt on a weekend ranked up there with having to go shopping for any reason except for beer and maybe a new stereo system. Plus they had to shave. On the weekend. How could it get any worse?

The hungry guests piled into the small food store where they stuck out like aliens amongst the throng of Bohemian-chic shoppers wearing dreads and Birkenstocks. It was hard to tell the men from the women. They couldn't leave fast enough. Until Beth spied a

poster announcing free consultations by an Iridologist. There were only five minutes left to the reader's hour in the store. Beth herded the family toward him at triple the normal pace that people usually move. It was as if the Marx brothers collided with March of the Penguins as everyone rushed to have a reading before time ran out. All they needed to complete the picture was old time organ music. Hit it!

Beth was impressed to receive the same diagnosis from the local reader as she had in Britain. Bill's reading was unremarkable, but as the doctor looked at his wife, he yelled, "She's the one that needs help!" This was already sounding a little weird and unnerving. "It was uncanny. He called out all her current medical problems, even the ones her regular doctor found with Western medicine. He worked with her and she was slowly weaned off some medications. She said she felt better and lost weight, too."

I didn't say too much, but I was interested in this. I mentally filed the information away, and months later consulted the Iridologist. For some reason he didn't reveal, he just said he couldn't help me and referred me to another practitioner. I never found out what he saw in my eyes that day. I was a little frightened but it was overrun with massive irritation and skepticism. Another specialist? At a few hundred dollars a pop? Didn't all doctors take kickbacks? Wasn't it all just one big guessing game? Maybe the chicken entrails guy knew what was best after all. I took the referral slip in spite of myself and soon after found myself driving up to Santa Barbara.

"Hello, I am Farideh." Her voice was soft and accented and she had a delicate Singsong way of speaking. I had to listen closely to fully understand and appreciate her words. She was petite and had large, kind eyes and a warm smile. She led me to a small, tastefully decorated room whose prominent feature was two white couches facing each other across the top of a coffee table. If you squinted and looked at them from the end, they looked like two giant, silent bulldogs staring each other down, preparing for a fight. I half expected one to lunge at the other, like something out of Sesame Street or PeeWee's Playhouse.

So this was my health practitioner. Well not really. At least not my physical health practitioner. I sat across from her, but she gestured for me to join her on one sofa. The other was left empty. It's almost as if she was keeping it for other guests. If I only knew how prophetic that thought would be.

"Do you know what I do?" she asked. Before I had a chance to say anything, she said, "I speak to those who are on the Other Side." This admission almost instantly changed the course of my life and what I thought about almost everything. But I didn't realize it at that moment. Carrying on the gifts that members of her family possessed through many generations, Farideh was a medium that had the ability to communicate with the dead.

But still I was a little anxious. I wanted to know more about this seemingly unremarkable woman. Didn't mediums usually show up with great flourish? With capes and turbans and incense and crystal balls? And what about the Psychic hotline? What

about the con artists that tricked desperate, troubled clients into leaving thousands of dollars crammed into a Samsonite at the bus station at 5:00 on Tuesday with nothing more than a promise to exorcise the demons that tormented them? I didn't know what to think. The woman that sat next to me was dressed in a sweater, black pants and loafers. She looked like she belonged in a two-story, Spanish-style house in Yorba Linda with an Audi in the driveway and a Yorkshire terrier nipping at her heels. I decided to ask Farideh about her background and steer the conversation away from myself. Part of me just wanted to test her. To debunk everything she said. The other part wanted to believe.

Farideh was from Iran, although she referred to it as Persia. She and her siblings grew up in Iran and left for the United States following the fall of the Shah in 1979 when Farideh was just a teenager. I remember those tumultuous days. I remember seeing the choppy, grainy news footage every night on the news. And I can't imagine what it must have been like to flee from the only home you'd ever known not knowing if you would ever see it again or if you would even survive to see another day.

She became less talkative as the minutes passed and appeared completely distracted after several more minutes. I watched, curious, as her head tilted to one side, as if she was listening to a silent voice. She was rubbing her right hand over her left. It was very gentle, like when you're soothing a crying baby. She continued this for a few minutes and probably didn't even know she was doing it. I was startled out of the silence as she gestured lightly toward the empty sofa across from us.

"A man and a woman are sitting there."

OK, now ANYBODY could say that. I was unimpressed and wondered if the rest of the consultation would be filled with generalities just like this one. But I still asked her who they were. Maybe she would surprise me.

"They are in their 60's. They have dark hair and dark skin. Not brown, lighter skin."

I didn't know what she meant. Lighter than brown...my thoughts raced as I tried and failed to connect anything or anyone with what she was saying. I thought 'This is it. This is where she's going to start fishing for information.' I felt smug and yet I wanted to leave.

"There is a word for it. I do not know what it is in English. People in Europe have this skin. Dark skin."

"An olive complexion?" I asked.

But I still didn't want to reveal anything to her. I was still wrestling inside myself as to whether I should stay or leave.

“Yes! That is it. They have known each other for a long time, but...not all their lives this time. They used to be brother and sister. In this life they were husband and wife.”

She hesitated, concentrating intently. “From England? No.”

She slowly shook her head and continued, “I am not sure.”

I was a little annoyed that she seemed to just be talking to herself. Or to the invisible, olive-skinned people on the other couch. I like to think I didn't have any expectations of this session and that I went into it with an open mind, but this meeting...this conversation...was not what I expected.

Farideh seemed to be unaware of my presence and it felt like she didn't want my input. This was something I wasn't used to. Other mediums would look at me expectantly to fill in the blanks when they made generic, fishing comments and it was clear they were only playing off my reactions. Farideh was totally different than anyone else I'd ever met. Her comments were directed toward the other sofa. I felt like an intruder and half expected her to escort me out of the room.

She quietly continued, lost in her own discussion with the invisibles or whomever she was talking to.

“Europe? They are from Spain. They are speaking Spanish...no, a dialect of Spanish. Cat...Catalan. I cannot understand their language, but I understand what they are saying. The man...the Spain he knows was different from the one now. It was difficult in the one he knew.”

My parents, Eduardo and Dolores, were from Catalonia and lived there into their 20s before emigrating to California. And for most of their adult lives, in realization that most folks didn't even know where Catalonia was, and that most folks thought it was a resort island off the coast of Los Angeles, they told people they were from Spain.

And this was a stake to the heart, for they were proud people. But having to explain their origins repeatedly to natives of their new home in America was exhausting. They never had the immediate, global audience that Sophia Loren had when a reporter began his question with “As an Italian...” to which she cut him off in a rare, furious outburst: “I am NOT an Italian. I am Neapolitan.”

And so everyone they knew knew them as Spanish. But for someone they never knew to pick out this little-known fact was overwhelming to me.

My stomach lurched into my throat as it did when I rode the Big Shot ride on the Stratosphere in Las Vegas. And this time, as with then, I wondered, ‘What the HELL am I doing?’ How could Farideh understand what the invisibles were saying if she didn't understand Catalan? There were too many questions and I was still grappling with how she worked that I didn't know what to think. I didn't even know whether I should stay or

leave. But, I decided, it had been a hell of a long drive so I might as well stay for the whole time. I asked some general questions, listened and took notes.

“What does the man look like?” I asked. She said he usually had a beard, but was now clean-shaven. He was reserved, pensive; but the woman was animated: She wanted to do things, to organize and lead. She was very opinionated. The hush in the room was broken as Farideh pounded her fist into her open hand. Opinionated.

The picture she painted with her gentle accent in that tiny room with the white bulldog couches with us on one side and two invisible, olive-skinned, Catalan-speaking dead people was one of a pushy, dominant female. It sounded just like my mother. She was stubborn and opinionated from her first breath to her last. As the thought ran through my mind that little had changed in the years since her death, I flinched. What the hell was I thinking? Did I really believe this? There went my stomach again and I felt like fleeing from the room.

Farideh’s mannerisms changed. There was tension to them now. They were frantic.

Rushed.

“The woman says they have to catch a train; they have to go. No...*she* has to go. The man is staying.”

I recognized my mother’s gestures...only though now they were coming from...or through a woman who never met her. It was eerie.

“This lady is very pushy. The man is nice, full of love. Who are they? Wait.”

Farideh held up her hand as I started to answer.

I forgot. She didn’t want my input. I wasn’t being addressed. It was as if I was the invisible one.

“He is sweet and gentle,” she continued. “He says the lady with you in your World is a very tough woman.”

Farideh’s whole tone and body language changed as she turned to focus on me. I remained silent. Was she really speaking with a person? Or two people? Where these people really my parents? Was the last person she mentioned my wife? I tried to stay calm but my whole body and mind were in turmoil.

Everything Farideh was saying was correct, but it was overwhelming. Was this a scam? Had she managed to gather information on my past and my family? How? There was no public information available and we didn’t share any common friends or acquaintances. At least I didn’t think we did. I was a mess of contradictory thoughts. And my head reeled.

Hey...I thought, a flush on the back of my neck...we both know the Iridologist. THAT was the connection! He could have called Bill...then Farideh...but then

Nothing.

It didn't make sense. None of it did. I wasn't sure what to believe. I thought the best thing to do would be to thank Farideh, write her a check and leave. Now.

As I was kind of lost in thought, Farideh once again jolted me back into the conversation. Into the conversation where I stayed quiet and she talked to the empty bulldog couch. This time she addressed me.

“It is your Father. He is saying ‘This is my son. If he cannot touch something, taste it, smell it, hear it or prove it, it doesn't exist’ ”

I started laughing, half out of some built-up tension and the other half out of...what? Release? Acceptance? Vindication? I didn't know. But I did know that her description was true. I felt more comfortable and we continued with the session. There was some information I could immediately verify and accept, and some I couldn't. At least, not that day, in that room with the couches. And, one cryptic, unsettling comment stood out from the rest: my Father said our reunion was not coincidental.

It had been planned.

Say WHAT? How can that be? I was just beginning to get a little comfortable with what I was hearing and now THIS. Planned? What about free will? Remember when George Carlin poked fun at religion and asked us all to really think about the insanity of the belief that one huge, invisible entity surrounded the Earth in an invisible place called Heaven and puppeteered everyone's lives for good or bad in a huge grand scheme that none of us had any control over? The grand puppet master of them all? I don't think so. I struggled with what I was hearing and fought to appear unaffected. Maybe that was why my Father decided to drop the other shoe as Farideh walked me out. And this was no ordinary guy-sized 10B loafer. This was Shaq's size 22 Nike Air trainer.

And it wasn't dropped. It was hurled at my head.

She started, hesitantly, “Your Father is saying ‘my son’ and he is smiling. He wants you to do something, but I do not understand what he wants. He is talking of a woman. From what he is saying and the emotion I sense, she is very important to him and dear to him. He wants you to bring Margaret with you. Do you know who she is?” I felt like someone punched me in the chest. “Yes” was all I could say.

Yes, I knew.

Margaret was my wife.

The tough woman.

But no one, other than my father, her family and me knew she was tough. At least, not unless you crossed her, which most casual acquaintances had not. People who met her were positive she was just the sweetest person you could ever meet, but underneath it all she could be...a fire-breathing dragon/pit bull mix.

Farideh left me with, “”Your Father wants you to bring her when you come. It is important to him and it will be important for her. He says to tell her hello, that he loves her and to keep doing the right thing.”

I don't remember unlocking the car door or getting in. So much for the calm exterior. I was on autopilot. I could no longer keep the bewilderment off my face or out of my heart as I started the ignition. I don't remember that either. I do know I made it back to L.A. but you could chalk that up to alien abduction and missing time. Why not? With what I just went through, anything was possible.

Looking back a few years later, I tried to pinpoint when the journey began. Was it on the day I reunited with my Father at Farideh's? On the day I talked with Bill? Or when I started researching reincarnation and metaphysics back in the late 60s when we all turned on and tuned out?

Nah. It couldn't be that simple. If you thought it was, go back to the end of the line. The journey began even before I was born. Dad gave me a clue when he said our reunion wasn't coincidental. And although I heard him say those words, it wasn't until nearly a year later that I understood them in a whole a new light.

And what about coincidence? I used to believe in random happenings. Not anymore. It's out of our hands, baby. Type-A's...well hell, everyone...might as well chuck it all and go live in an ashram and plant asparagus and relax. I've found that coincidence doesn't help to shape our lives and now that Dad and I...uh...talk, he's shown me that coincidence doesn't exist. Pre-planning does.

But that day in Santa Barbara in the small room with the bulldog couches and the soft-spoken woman with the special gift made me realize that the main person that she was translating for, the person that she gave a voice to, was my Father.

Eduardo Montalvo-Fernandes

Hi Dad.

It's good to talk with you again.