

Chapter 23

IF IT LOOKS LIKE A DUCK

MR. SHEN HAD given me a task: to make the link between a Chinese puzzle and the way I saw things in my head. I'd spotted the connection then dismissed it as too personal. In the end he'd spelled it out and hinted that we shared some mental traits.

I may not have the power to see what's in your mind, but I know what's in my own.

What exactly did that mean? That what I saw in my mind's eye was somehow special? Or just the opposite? Every time I broached the subject over supper he found something else to talk about.

"Ketchup with your beans?"

"More bread?"

"Coffee on the deck?"

After dishes, he was full of questions. Where had I grown up? How had I acquired such a range of knowledge? Who were my favourite writers? When had I started working as a psychic counsellor? Did I have a special someone? How had I found my first stay at Cassandra Island?

I tried reading past his enquiries but nothing came. If the questions followed some agenda, it was one I couldn't see.

We chatted until midnight. It was only when I went to bed I realized he'd asked me almost nothing that I couldn't answer honestly. Subjects that required I prevaricate were dropped. His interest

never crossed the line from curiosity to prurience. Not even Ferko showed so much respect.

I slept well, waking in the morning from a dream: Kirin and her daughter, whom I hadn't met, running through a cornfield playing tag. The little girl looked nothing like her mother, all frizzy hair and dark brown eyes. Both were screaming gleefully. A schoolbell rang. They panted off toward it hand in hand, bursting from the field onto playground tarmac. The dream receded as they joined the lines of students filing in from recess.

Mr. Shen was up before me. I found him on the deck, standing in the Tree position facing east. He'd laid down yoga mats and beckoned me to join him. Just like two days earlier, we made a Sun Salute.

Years before I'd ceased to wonder where I learned the exercise. That morning, the question flickered through my mind again. So much I didn't know was locked inside my six years' missing memories. Why did I know the Sun Salute? Who had thought it crucial that I learn? Had I taught myself? Why was this the only yoga that I practised? Had it served a function in some larger scheme, forever lost?

I made French toast while Mr. Shen took care of frying bacon. We ate breakfast from our laps outside, mumbling pleasantries through fat and maple syrup. By the time we got to coffee—tea for Mr. Shen—the sun was splashing daubs of yellow on the cedar boards and chasing off the morning cool.

Mr. Shen cleared up. When he returned, he brought a deck of cards. Another game? The tangrams had been fascinating but I didn't relish yet another day of solitary play.

Mr. Shen refreshed his tea and stared off quietly. His upcurved lips gave him a look of deep contentment like a tabby basking in the sun.

"Will it come as a surprise," he asked me, many minutes later, "if I tell you I'm aware that you've been lying?"

Lying? *Oh, shit.*

"From you," I answered breezily, "it would surprise me only if I

hadn't been. Apparently, we both know what a lie looks like. Up here."

I tapped my temple.

"Indeed. We share some gifts in common. Like a feel for what a person's going to say next. In your case: 'But we all tell lies.'"

"I'd call that a feeling for clichés. The gambit's obvious. As obvious as what it introduces: In what way am I lying?"

"About who you are. What you are. You misrepresent yourself."

No anger... no feeling of betrayal... no hint of menace... In my head, Mr. Shen remained, as always, placid like the surface of Dawe's Lake, fifteen metres down and skinned with silver.

"Last time I checked," I said, "I was David Ase, obscenely lucky millionaire and full-time psychic counsellor."

"And so you are. Lucky, that is. And a millionaire. And a counsellor."

"So the lie's in being psychic?"

"Not precisely. It's in feeling that you aren't while claiming that you are, like you did your first time at the Island. And then again, two days ago. I asked if you were psychic. You answered yes. But in your heart you don't believe it, do you?"

I saw no point protesting. He'd already shown his skill at reading me. I only hoped he hadn't spotted how relieved I was the lie he was referring to had no connection with Canadian Intelligence.

"What I believe's not really that important, is it?" I replied. "I'm sure you know the saying: 'If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it's probably a duck?'"

I'd been aiming for a chuckle but he wasn't laughing.

"That's sophistry, David, designed to cloak the fact appearances do *not* reveal the essence of a thing. Nor its intent. It's lazy and dishonest."

The criticism stung. I wanted Mr. Shen to like me—and not just because I needed him to trust me should he hold the key to Kirin's disappearance.

He took the deck of cards and started shuffling idly.

"Have you never wondered how it is you do the things you do?"

he asked. "How you know so much about a person whom you've barely met? How you gauge their motivations, grasp their secrets, know their lies, absorb their feelings—all as if you really could see in their heads?"

"You presume to know a lot about the workings of my mind."

"Am I wrong?"

"No, but it's a little disconcerting."

"No doubt. Like glimpsing your reflection when you least expect it. But tell me—have you ever wondered?"

I shrugged. "Does a hockey player wonder why he's good at getting goals? In his head, he simply is, and works at getting better. I have a gift for observation and I've practised it, that's all."

"With such a skill you could have been a writer. Or a spy. Or a doctor or a priest. Why a psychic? What made you want to use your gift the way you do?"

"A friend of mine suggested it. A psychiatrist."

Mr. Shen stopped shuffling—clearly not the answer he expected.

"He was fascinated by the way I sized up strangers," I went on. "We talked about it often. His conclusion, and mine, was always that I'm fast at spotting tells and good at making sense of them. Nothing more."

"So anyone could do the things you do?"

"If they set their mind to it."

"The same way anyone could pen a Shakespeare play or write a Wagner opera if they set their mind to it?" he teased.

"Apples and oranges." I replied.

"Is it? Consider this. Everybody has intelligence and creativity. They're part of being human. But can a smart, creative person—even one who's very smart and very gifted—develop the intellectual or artistic capacity of an Einstein or a Michelangelo just by working at it?"

"On the surface genius, like psychism, looks like an extension of capacities we all possess. It appears to be a simple quantitative increase. But it differs qualitatively as well. That's why genius so often doesn't recognize itself. Psychism, either. Those who have it

view themselves as normal. They can't grasp why others have such trouble seeing things the way they do. A case of familiarity breeding an understandable lack of appreciation."

He sat forward.

"I'd like to show you something, David. This may not be the strongest way to make my point, but divination and prediction are my specialty. Humour me." He put the cards back on the table. "It's an ordinary deck. I sound like a magician, don't I? No matter. What I mean is, it has all the usual cards except two that I've removed. Which two is unimportant. It's so that there are only fifty cards. The math is easier that way.

"I'm going to take the top card off the pile. Just before I do, try to tell me what it is."

He held his hand above the deck. I said the first thing that popped into my head.

"Eight of diamonds."

Mr. Shen picked up the card.

"Eight of diamonds."

He showed it to me, slipped it in the deck, reshuffled, and held his hand above the cards again.

"Ten of spades."

He checked the card and showed it to me.

"Another hit."

More shuffling.

"Jack of spades."

"That's a miss. Ace of spades."

He flipped it so that I could see.

"Five of hearts."

"Miss."

"Two of diamonds."

"Miss."

"Four of hearts."

"Miss."

"King of clubs."

"Hit."

We kept at it till I lost all sense of time. The morning's sounds—the quarrelling of squirrels, the twittering of chickadees, the whine of someone's far-off chainsaw—formed a background to the drone of Mr. Shen replying “hit” or “miss” each time I made a call.

Finally he squared the deck and sank back in his chair.

“Two hundred guesses. That should do. Are you feeling tired?”

“A little fried, yeah.”

“Fatigue can be a problem with this sort of test. Still, your ratio of hits to misses didn't change by very much.”

“You were keeping score?”

“A trick I know. Useful in my field of study. Now, do you know what I mean when I refer to the law of large numbers?”

“I've read about it somewhere. The more times you test a known statistical probability, the more closely the cumulative result reflects the probability.”

“Your reading's served you well. Now, two hundred guesses hardly counts as a large number but it's adequate. Tell me—with fifty cards, what were your chances of your calling the top card correctly after each shuffle?”

“One in fifty. A two percent chance.”

“What does that work out to over two hundred guesses?”

“A probability of getting four correct.”

“I trust you noticed you got rather more than four correct?” he asked with some amusement.

I nodded.

“Would you care to guess how many?”

“Fifty?”

“No, David. The number is much closer to eighty. Seventy-six, to be precise. Thirty-eight percent correct.”

“I won the largest jackpot in Canadian history. Don't you believe in luck?”

“At a variance of thirty-six percent above the odds?”

I couldn't answer that, not even flippantly.

Mr. Shen got to his feet.

“We've been sitting quite a while. Would you like to stretch your

legs?”

Without waiting for an answer he started down the steps toward the lake.

A deer path hugged the granite shore. Well-worn tracks branched off toward the water. Dark, wet hoofprints stained the pinkish rocks. Mr. Shen went on ahead, pointing out a spray of scarlet mushrooms, a geode crusted with blue quartz, a patch of tiny flowers that smelled like apple blossoms.

I stopped beside a sap-encrusted pine root snaking horizontally above the ground. Mr. Shen kept on, then registered I wasn't following and turned around.

“Yes?” His eyebrows queried me above his glasses.

“John,” I said, “that test just now—you're not implying that I won the lottery by looking in the future?”

“Did you?”

“The ticket was a Quick Pick. I didn't choose the numbers.”

“But you chose the time and place to purchase it.”

“And you believe somehow I knew? Trust me, I didn't have a clue.”

He came back toward me.

“Are you familiar with the word, *prevoyance*, David?”

He pronounced it *pray-VOY-ense*.

“It used to be a French cycling team, didn't it?”

“Really? I didn't know. I'll have to take your word for it. But I meant it in another sense.”

“I'm not familiar with it, then. Related to clairvoyance?”

He crouched down by the root and picked up a twig.

“*Prevoyance*,” he said, poking through the pine needles and loam, “is the term we use for being able to predict things. It's from the French for foresight. It's the weakest of the psychic gifts, and the most elusive. The least understood as well.” He smiled. “One could say it's the least predictable.”

“All true psychics have it in some measure. In prediction tests they always score above the norm, with hit rates in a range from twenty up to forty-five percent. In any individual psychic, the score

will fluctuate depending on what's being tested. For example, some are good at seeing the near future. Others have a flair for long-range prophecies.

"No one can foretell the outcome of a physical event—say, a throw of dice—until it's set in motion. Even had you tried, you could not have known the numbers of your lottery before the draw. During it, perhaps, once the numbers started spinning in their bins, but not the whole string days before."

He fell silent for a moment. A beetle he'd unearthed scrambled round in frantic circles then burrowed back into the forest floor.

"What makes prevoynance so intriguing is that all real psychics have the gift but none possess it by itself. It's always linked to something else—a skill that forms the true heart of a psychic's talent."

"May I ask you something, John?"

"Please."

"Was that the point of guessing cards? A litmus test to see if I have other skills?"

"Not 'skills', David. Skill. Just one. Now, may I ask you something in return?"

"We're getting very Chip 'n Dale here," I said, "but go ahead. Ask away."

"Have you ever had foreknowledge of the future? Answer honestly," he added gently. "I know you don't believe such things are possible."

I made dissenting noises but he waved them off.

"Please—I'd like to know."

A punk named Michael Nemecek, a.k.a Bandanna—murdered, as I'd seen... Cowboy driving off to face the music for his vigilante justice...

"I may have," I confessed. "But one time I was stoned, and other I was sicker than a dog."

"And you discount the incidents because of that?"

"I've never really known quite what to make of them."

He nodded.

"Psychotropic agents can enhance prevoynance. As can certain

illnesses. And trauma, though in real psychics the talent is innate.”

Illness? Trauma? Like something that would lead to waking in an alley with a six-year memory gap?

“Pre-supposing,” I replied, wondering for a second if he’d touched the nerve on purpose, “you believe in such abilities. And since you’ve made it clear you know I don’t, I might as well go on and say that in one case it was probably wishful thinking, and in the other, well, it wasn’t as if the clues weren’t there.”

A dark sedan... two large men in front... Cowboy in the back seat, staring straight ahead...

Mr. Shen found that amusing. His face split in a broad, good-natured smile.

“Ah, yes. The rational explanation. You must be very good at it by now. Lots of practice. One might even say a reflex. No matter what extraordinary things you do, they always have an explanation.”

“You make it sound as if there’s virtue in credulity.”

As fast as it had come the humour vanished from his face.

“No, David. There isn’t. None at all.”

He tossed his twig away and stood, the smoothness of it testifying to his yoga and whatever other disciplines he’d mastered.

“Come. You’re getting hungry. After lunch we’ll do another test. A shorter one, to demonstrate the points I’ve made.”



The temperature had risen steeply so we ate inside at Mr. Shen’s enormous desk. Afterwards, while I cleared up, he went outside and came back with his cards.

“Just so there’s no doubt,” he said, “check the cards and verify the deck—I’m doing the magician thing again, aren’t I?—then shuffle them. Oh, hang on,” he reached inside the desk, “here’s the two I pulled this morning.”

While I checked and shuffled, he slid a pad and pen across the desk. I handed back the deck and watched him cut.

He picked the top card off the pile. "Which card is this?"

I wanted very much to say I didn't have a clue, and hadn't we already done this, but his unperturbed grey image in my head—the total concord between what was on the inside and the out—had grown a rippling centre like a stone dropped in a pool. However much this looked like what we'd done that morning, Mr. Shen cared more about the outcome this time around.

And, truth was, I knew which card he held. Had it been any other he would not have looked the way he did. No one looks at playing cards without subconsciously assessing them. A bridge player sees a jack and counts it as the lowest face; a euchre player sees a jack and counts it as a bower.

Mr. Shen played euchre.

"Jack of spades," I said, an image of the card quite clearly in my mind.

"Write it down," he said, nodding at the pad.

I wrote J-S while Mr. Shen put down the card and took the next one from the deck.

"This one?"

"Queen of clubs."

He nodded at the pad again. I jotted down Q-C.

"And this?"

"The queen of diamonds."

Q-D.

"Seven of hearts."

7-H.

Fifty-two cards later, Mr. Shen pushed his chair back from the desk.

"Because I want to demonstrate a point," he said, "I'm going to ask the obvious. What was different about the way we did things this time?"

"You went through the whole deck instead of shuffling each time. And instead of asking what the cards were just before you picked them up, you asked me afterwards."

"Plus," he added, "you kept score yourself. Do you know

why?”

I shrugged. “Presumably so I wouldn’t think you’d lied or cheated.”

He pushed the cards across the desk. “How do you think you did?”

“Based on what you said about prevoyance, not as well. I wasn’t, in the strictest sense, predicting. More like trying to figure out. But my score will be above the norm. I was reading you, or trying to. I gather you like games with variable high cards?”

He chuckled. “I do. Context, as we discussed a month or so ago. So—ready to check your score?” He flipped the deck; the top card was the jack of spades. “And while you’re at it, would you like a beer?”

“Sounds good.”

I’d gotten halfway down when Mr. Shen returned and set an Export at my elbow. He stood behind with his. I could sense him looking out the window. I could also sense the ripple in his calm demeanour growing. The reason wasn’t hard to guess. He’d pulled a fast one.

“John,” I said, laying down my pen, “it appears I’m not the only one not telling the whole truth. Apparently you do know sleight-of-hand. I’m intrigued. How did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Switch the cards. Arrange them in this order.”

“Believe me, David, I didn’t do a thing.”

“You had to have. This isn’t possible.”

“No?”

He touched my shoulder. I twisted round to look. His eyes were grave—graver than I’d seen them yet and filled with something like enormous sympathy.

“Do you recall,” he asked, “I said prevoyance is inevitably linked to something else?”

The meaning took a moment to sink in. His sombre look, the different way we’d done things—he had indeed slipped something past me. But not the way I’d thought.

“You weren’t testing my prevoyant skills,” I said. “Not this time. Not at all. What are you playing at?”

“Playing?” He shook his head. “I don’t think so. Would you like to do it one more time? Set controls yourself? Assure yourself that prestidigitation doesn’t enter into it?”

“I think perhaps we should, don’t you?”

“As you wish.”

He sat down. I kept the cards on my side of the desk this time, lifting each so he could see the faces while I only saw the backs. I marked my guesses as before and verified them afterwards.

The score of hits, impossibly, remained the same.

A hush that I could almost touch fell on the cottage. Up above, a squirrel dashed across the roof. From the kitchen came the hum of the refrigerator. A tingle started in my gut, growing into something nasty like the buzz of electricity. The room turned oddly bright. Auras flickered at the edges of my vision.

“How do you suppose you did it, David?” Mr. Shen asked quietly. His voice was soft and anodyne. The harbingers of agony dissolved like nighttime terrors chased off by a bedside lamp. “If all you have’s a gift for observation, how do you account for calling all the cards correctly? Fifty-two of them? Not once, but twice?”



How did I do it?

No, I thought crossly, *how did you?*

Mr. Shen wore glasses. Had he fixed things so I’d see the cards in the reflection? Had he lied? Was it, after all, a simple magic trick? He’d already shown that he was good at reading me. Perhaps he knew what hints to plant in my subconscious. And hadn’t he and Irene gabbed about the finer points of hypnotism? Could he have used the dry monotony of naming cards to put me in a trance?

I kept my scepticism quiet. If he wanted me to think I had a gift, I’d play along. It wasn’t all that difficult. Who doesn’t want to hear they’re like an undiscovered genius or blessed with supernatural

abilities? Mr. Shen was playing to my vanity. The reason wasn't hard to guess. He was trying to reel me in. "*Prevoyance is the term we use,*" he'd said. *We*. Byron and MacKenzie's cult was looking more and more like a reality, making Kirin's disappearance every bit as ominous as they, and I, suspected.

So why was time with Mr. Shen as easy as an afternoon with Marion?

We moved back outside. I sank down in the Adirondack chair as if I'd sat there all my life. The surrounding forest presence was as sweet as anything I'd known.

Mr. Shen had brought the cards.

"This isn't very scientific," he apologized. "We should be using Zener cards."

"The ones with squares and circles and wavy lines?"

"Did your psychiatrist friend ever use them?"

"No. He wasn't into parapsychology, just fascinated by the way my brain made sense of what it got by ordinary means."

"Really?" He tapped the deck. "Then I wonder what he'd make of this. The same test as before. Flip the cards, show them to me, write down what you think they are. And David—," he paused to wipe his glasses, "—don't be surprised by the results."

"I think I'm past that now."

He raised his eyebrows in a look that said we'd far from plumbed astonishment.

Fifty-two cards later I knew why.

Not one single call I'd made was right.



"Is there some point to this?" I asked. Mr. Shen had gone inside to take a leak a little too conveniently, leaving me to think things over. The strategy was starting to wear thin. "You're good—don't think I'm not impressed—but why the parlour tricks?"

So much for playing along.

"There are no tricks," he answered.

“Come on, John. You always know how things will go before we start. Pardon me for thinking that entails deception.”

“You’re right. It does. But not the way you think.”

“And what way would that be?”

“Hmm—,” he screwed a finger in his chin, “—let’s see. You’ve thought about my glasses, considered sleight-of-hand, wondered if I’m dropping hints, and contemplated hypnotism.”

Pretty good, but no better than I could do.

“In short, every explanation but the one that fits—you can see what’s in my mind.”

“Not that well, apparently.”

I gestured at the pad with its perfect score of misses.

“My point exactly,” he replied. “What makes you think I didn’t lie? Here, give me a sheet of paper.”

I ripped one off. He jotted on it quickly, hiding what he wrote.

“This time,” he said, folding it in quarters, “you’ll only get a few cards wrong. I’ve written down which ones by their position in the deck. There’ll be exactly four. Unless, of course, you miscall by design.” He pressed the paper in my hand. “Assurance that no tampering has taken place.”

As predicted, I got four cards wrong: the fifth, the ninth, the twelfth and the thirty-second.

“Have look at what I wrote. And please don’t say, ‘It’s got to be a trick.’”

5-9-12-32.

I looked up. “I wasn’t going to.”

His brows knit dubiously.

“Okay, okay, I was,” I conceded.

“That’s better. Good thing you didn’t count the cards.”

“Why is that?”

“You’d have noticed that the deck was off. I had to choose cards at random for your ‘wrong’ calls, which meant that when the real cards showed up. . . . Ah, but I see—you *were* counting cards.” He wagged his finger. “Naughty.”

“Only at first. When I hit the queen of diamonds twice, then the

five of spades, there didn't seem much point. What do you mean, 'chose cards for my wrong calls'?"

"I'm never sure quite what the right expression is. Fed you false information? It's like a lie, but the better term is misdirection."

"Misdirection? Concerning what?"

"Concerning—me." He raised his palms in the universal gesture of frustration and apology. "I'm sorry. I know that doesn't help. I wish I could explain."

My tolerance for mystery was fraying.

"Is that an 'I can't explain' or an 'I won't explain'?" I asked crankily.

He made a rueful face. "Both, for now."

"And how long will 'for now' go on?"

"Until I'm sure."

"Sure of what?" My voice went up a notch. "That I meet all your criteria? That you can trust me with whatever your agenda is?"

"Agenda?"

"Oh, come on, John. Aren't we playing at the Magus and his pupil? Doesn't that involve the wise old master finally revealing why his every utterance is shrouded in enigma?"

He held the look I gave him without flinching.

"Believe me, David—there's nothing wise about this master. What we're doing is both dangerous and *terra incognita*."

"Dangerous to whom?"

"To you. I saw your look inside, when you started to feel ill."

"So what?"

"I know where it leads."

"Somehow, John, I doubt that," I shot back, sounding like a scornful adolescent.

A long-beaked bird that had been circling above the lake plummeted and rose off with a fish. The water arcing off its catch sparkled like a slip of diamonds. Mr. Shen seemed not to notice.

"I'm sorry, John," I said. "You touched a nerve."

He made a flicking motion with one hand, brushing the apology away. I stood wordlessly and went inside.

It was cooler in the cottage. I washed and dried the lunch dishes then lay down on my bed, tracing circles on the scratchy blanket with my finger.

I thought I'd known what Mr. Shen was doing. The picnic on Cassandra Island. The invitation to his cottage. The demonstration of his psychic prowess. The tests to make me feel that I was special, too. All headed for a delicately-worded, "There's some people you should meet, a group of others, just like you." All I had to do was play a part, appear to go along. How hard could that be for a former male whore?

But something else was happening. Instead of playing along, I was putting up a fight and spurning every bit of psychic bait he offered. It didn't matter that he knew I didn't buy the *oo-ab* Jena stuff; all I had to do was make it seem he'd won me over.

Somehow, though, he'd gotten underneath my act, the role I needed to pull off for Kirin's sake. I felt cornered by his tests. Something in them frightened me, like memories that, when I tried to call them up, exploded into searing pain. It made no sense.

I heard a creak. A moment later, Mr. Shen tapped on the bedroom doorframe.

"David?" he queried diffidently. "I was afraid I'd find you leaving."

I sat up.

"No, no. Look, I'm sorry. It's just that what you've been showing me, it's all a bit much. I shouldn't have sounded so—"

"—testy? It's all right. The fault was mine. Your reaction wasn't unexpected. I shouldn't have presumed. Accept my apologies. Can I convince you to come outside and join me again?"

I studied him a good long time, looking for the chink, the crack, the little piece that didn't fit. Nothing came.

"Give me a minute," I said.

"Would you like another beer? Something else, perhaps?"

"No, thanks."

After he left, I got off the bed and smoothed the blanket. I'd left my suitcase open on the dresser. I folded up some dirty socks and

tucked them in. The pillow needed fluffing. I gave it a good pounding. The throw rug by the bed was rucked. I straightened it. A dessicated moth lay in the window frame. I transferred it to the garbage pail.

Finally I went outside.

Mr. Shen was in his chair, fingers steepled, deep in thinking mode. The cards were gone. I sat down in the other chair. The sun had swung around, slanting at an angle that put half his face in shadow.

“Images,” he said, not looking up, “images and memories, emotions and volition. Pre-cognitive volition, to be accurate—the urge that forms a thought and leads to action. These are what you read from people’s minds. We call it empathy—a term made trivial by TV shows but still the one we use. Empaths can read something else as well: the wholeness of a person. We’ve tried to quantify exactly what that means without success. It appears to be a knowing that can never be reduced to smaller parts.

“I had hoped to demonstrate, by steps, that you have the gift of empathy. That you sense these things, not by ordinary means, but with your mind. That you aren’t, as you believe, just someone who is good at observation. My agenda, as you called it, was to highlight the absurdity of your position. To bring it to the fore so you would see it cannot stand up under scrutiny.

“I had doubts I would succeed, doubts the pain you started to experience confirms. As did your reaction when I mentioned it. What I hoped to show you, and the manner of my doing it, conflicts with a conditioning that bars you from the truth. Your thoughts cannot go certain places.”

“The wall of pain,” I said.

He looked up, but not at me. “Is that what you call it? I was wondering.”

“What do you know about it?”

“I know that because of it, you’ve had to make up who you are. Invent yourself.” He turned. “The invention isn’t real, David. You’re someone other than you think.”

Someone other than you think... the dream of everyone... a general truth... fortune-teller's honey...

“What else do you know?” I asked him cautiously.

“I know the way things look inside your head. I know the terms you use. Puzzle-pieces, mental maps, sculptures. I know about the grey that isn't grey, how it shapes itself in ways you can't describe because it has no analog in vision. I know about the core of you you sometimes cast into the future. I know that face-to-face, your image of a person's clear, but in a group the clarity diminishes. Conversely you are nearly helpless to resist a strong group feeling. You suffer déjà-vu. You have a fear of being discovered, which makes you nervous around agencies that gather and keep records. And you have a hole, a part of you that's missing, surrounded by a wall of pain.”

“Are you reading this from me?”

“No, David. You're nearly as opaque to me as I to you—the misdirection that I spoke of. The difference is, I can reveal myself or any part of me at any time to you or any other empath. You cannot. Not because you lack the skill but because you don't know how.”

Don't know how... don't know how... don't know how...

Something happened on the deck. It was as if a cloud had veiled the sun while the world itself had brightened.

Mr. Shen, I realized, had lied. And more—he wanted me to know.

“You don't mean, ‘don't know,’” I said. “You mean, ‘don't remember?’”

He didn't answer. Neither did he look away. Time hung suspended. The lambent vision faded. Mr. Shen got up and wandered to the railing.

“Your friend is safe,” he said, speaking to trees. “And yes, there are some people that I'd like you to meet.”