

# BATS OR SWALLOWS



Teri Vlassopoulos



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# THE OCCULT

## 1. PALM READING

Try this: place your palm close to someone else's. Your hands should face each other, but not touch. Feel the heat radiate between the two of you. If you're lucky the warmth will be palpable. Comforting. Do you know what's happening? Your auras are conversing. A homeless man in Toronto taught this trick to Hannah a few days before she moved to Montreal. She'd given him a loonie, and then he walked beside her for the next block. She didn't want to be rude, so she spoke to him and uncomfortably held her hand close to his, and in the end she was happy for the tip. It was a good icebreaker at parties and she was going to need icebreakers soon. She quickly learned that some palms were hotter than others, some conversations stronger.

She met Eric a month after she moved and he countered with his own parlour trick, which was that he could read palms, or at least knew the names of the lines. They stood

in a dark corner at the back of a bar and she offered him her hand. He pointed out the lines. *Your life line cups your thumb. The head line cuts across your palm. And, he said pressing down gently, your heart line is the one that curves up by your fingers.*

## 2. ASTROLOGY

Hannah is surprised but not surprised that she can't find a pregnancy test at the dep around the corner from her apartment. She has relied on this store for so many essentials: cheap wine, toilet paper, the occasional onion fished out from the dirty bin by the cash register. A pregnancy test is probably pushing it. It's mid-March and it's snowing outside, the millionth snowstorm of her first Montreal winter, and she reluctantly heads towards the nearest pharmacy four blocks away. She plucks a test from the harshly lit aisles and returns home, cold and wet and shivery.

Hannah pees on the stick and it turns pink. She's surprised but not surprised when she learns that pink means positive. (Does it also mean that the baby will be a girl? She reads the package and feels dumb when, obviously, it doesn't.)

Hannah paces around her apartment in her pyjamas, holds the stick and calculates. Nine months from now will be January, which means the baby will be a Capricorn. A friend had once offered to do her astrological chart, but she turned her down, so Hannah's only grasping at astrological clues. She's a Cancer and she knows that Capricorns don't mesh well with Cancers. Maybe astrology doesn't apply to mothers and their children?

Eric is an Aries. Hannah knows this because he'd mentioned that he and a friend were going to throw a joint birthday party at the beginning of April. After the third

time they'd slept together, he didn't call for eight days, and then when they finally did talk, they didn't have much to say to each other. Cancers aren't supposed to be compatible with Aries either. Maybe astrology *was* right, maybe the indicators were staring her plain in the face: the stars were misaligned from the very beginning.

### 3. EXTRA-SENSORY PERCEPTION

Hannah wakes up early the next morning and goes to work. Even before she's taken off her coat and unwound her scarf, Dominique, who works in the cubicle next to hers, says, "You don't look very happy today." Hannah keeps her toque on and complains about how cold it is outside.

They work quietly until a window pops up on her screen reminding her that there's going to be a baby shower for their coworker, Sylvie, at lunch. Hannah wants to skip it, but Dominique waits for her before leaving.

"There's going to be cake," she says, her voice sing-songy and sweet, and Hannah can't say no.

The department congregates in the cafeteria. Everyone lingers and takes turns touching Sylvie's belly.

"His foot's right here," Sylvie says and holds Dominique's hand to it.

"I can feel it!" Dominique says. "Hannah, check this!"

Hannah shook Sylvie's hand when she first transferred to the office, but they've never hugged, hardly talked, and a touch like this seems too intimate for people who are practically strangers, so she does it gingerly, awkwardly. She probes the area for a knot of tissue, a baby's foot pressing against his mother's insides, but everything is smooth, curved round, like a globe or a medicine ball.

"Oops," Sylvie says. "He moved. He's hiding from you."

Hannah backs up and helps herself to the grocery store cake, and when the baby starts to kick again, she holds up the plastic plate to show that her hands are full.

Back at her desk, she picks up the phone to call Eric. He doesn't answer so she leaves him a message, a neutral one. He calls back within ten minutes, but when she sees his name on her caller ID she ignores it. She listens to the message before going home for the evening and in it he reminds her of his birthday party. This weekend. *You can bring a friend if you want.*

#### 4. EXORCISM

It's a relief to think of time in terms of distance, not growth. Hannah's driving to Toronto for the weekend and each hour that passes is another 120 kilometres. Before getting the abortion, she worried that for every minute that ticked by, the thing inside of her became more real. More defined. What was a cluster of cells one hour bloomed into an embryo the next and, if she waited another night, might be a fetus by daybreak. With a nose. Or maybe little feet that kicked. She knew it didn't work that way, that the chronology was more drawn out, but her pants seemed tighter.

The abortion didn't hurt the way Hannah was afraid it would and, either way, overriding the pain was a feeling of deep, exhausting relief. The trip to Toronto was a week later and because it coincided with her grandfather's birthday, she was hesitant to cancel. Her hormones were still out of whack and she cried in the car. Once. She'd taken a detour from the monotony of the highway and was driving on a stretch outside of Kingston that passed through the Thousand Islands. It gave way to a more gentle and scenic view, the St. Lawrence hugging the curve of the road. She'd visited



the area one summer, stayed with a childhood friend who had a cottage on one of the tiny islands. She remembers the two of them pushing a canoe into the water, her oar slicing through the calm, clear river.

In the early spring the scenery is desolate. The water is grey-white and icy and the solitary houses on the small islands shuttered and empty. As she merges back on to the 401, she snuffles, stops crying, takes a big, gulping breath. But it was a good kind of cry. Things could've turned out so much worse.

## 5. PROPHECIES

Hannah was nineteen years old at the end of 1999, working at a grocery store when she wasn't in school. People would come in and buy ten-pound sacks of flour, flats of water bottles and dozens of double D batteries, all in preparation for Y2K and the possibility of ultimate world destruction. These were people who'd read a sidebar in the newspaper about what items to have on hand in an emergency and wanted to stock up, but sometimes they would also get the crazies, people who gripped her arm desperately and wheezed, "Where's the bottled water? I want *all of it*." There was something vaguely prophetic about their hysteria and sometimes Hannah would even find herself in a minor panic.

New Year's Eve approached and Hannah thought that if the world ended, she wouldn't be surprised. It would make sense if it did. Still, she didn't make special plans for this potential last day of Earth. On December 31st she sat in her boyfriend's basement apartment with a few of their friends. They drank wine and she doesn't remember what they talked about. When midnight struck, she squeezed her eyes shut and wondered if anything would be different when



she opened them again. But everything was fine! The world didn't fall apart; the computers kept running. They toasted each other, drank more wine, went to bed by three. She got the feeling that they were disappointed that nothing more spectacular had happened.

While in Toronto, Hannah visits this ex-boyfriend briefly. He has a new place, no longer a mouldy basement, now a postage-stamp sized condo downtown, all granite and glass. If the apocalypse loomed again, she wouldn't choose to spend it with him, but she's feeling nostalgic and decides that an hour while she's visiting the city is fair.

He asks her how she's doing, but he asks with a certain inflection—"how are you *doing*?"—as if he's genuinely concerned, like maybe he suspects something's wrong. Hannah keeps looking at herself in the mirror and wondering if she looks different. She's worried that her eyes look older or sad or that, even if she looks the same, maybe her palms give off less heat after such a cold winter.

As they're talking, it starts raining and Hannah pauses to listen to it beat against his windows. The thought of rain is appealing and she hopes the weather is the same in Montreal. Rain would melt the snow, clean the streets.

"I'm good." She says it confidently and he believes her, which is satisfying enough. Maybe "good" isn't the right word to describe how she feels, but while she's sitting there she realizes that she does feel differently than she has in a long time. She feels impermeable.

## 6. SIGNS

When Hannah leaves her ex-boyfriend's condo, she sees a rainbow stretching somewhere in the distance towards the lake. She stands underneath an awning and stares at it. The

colours are blurred and faint, but it's definitely a rainbow.

Logically, rationally and scientifically, she knows that a rainbow is just the reflection of light on water droplets. But she knows lots of things. She also knows that palm reading is a fluke and astrology can be interpreted any way one wants. She knows that she can't read minds and people can't read hers, and that the end of the world will probably not happen on the day everyone is predicting. Most of all she knows that life just *happens* and that there isn't an overarching, sensible pattern to it, but it doesn't mean that she can't believe in signs or look to them for guidance.

The rainbow, Hannah decides, as she walks to the subway, is a good sign. She's not sure what else it could be.

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