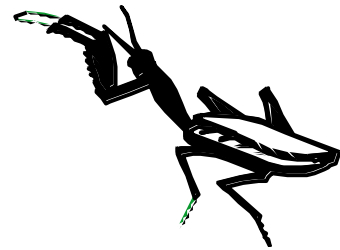


# The Mantis and the Mirror

Sample Chapter

## Blind Date



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### 3. BLIND DATE

One late afternoon I was doing some gardening when I saw Mildred Dolittle walking toward me. She stopped and asked how I had been. She did not wait for an answer but started chatting away in her typical unthreatening fashion, taking me on an unsolicited mental tour of her own flower garden. Then she proceeded to the latest neighborhood gossip. I knew that this topic had the potential to mushroom, so I started to define tactics to respectfully make my exit. Casually, I picked up my tools and pretended to study them while still maintaining a polite ear toward my narrator. This seemed to work, for all of a sudden Mildred fell silent. She looked at the tools in my hands and then I felt her gaze creeping up toward my face. Our eyes met and although her face was usually rather emotionless, I noticed a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

“Are you dating anyone?” she demanded, while taking the tools out of my hands and putting them down again, as if I was one of her grandchildren who needed to put down a toy.

“Well, . . .uh. . . kind of,” I answered evasively, trying to make sense of this unexpected interrogation.

“I know just the right man for you.” Mildred continued, ignoring my reply. “A doctor. He’s handsome!”

Now, I must admit Mildred’s brief statement did catch me off guard. Perhaps that’s why I got cold feet and told Mildred I appreciated the thought, and lied to her saying that I was dating someone already. I made an excuse, grabbed the tools, and quickly walked behind the house. In reality I was as single as could be, having just gotten out of a bad relationship with a guy from work.

Over the next few days, the conversation with Mildred kept popping up into my head and just wouldn’t go away.

“This is a little odd,” I said to myself. “Here I’m becoming intrigued by a person whom I know nothing about.”

Well. . .almost nothing. I knew that he was a doctor and that Mildred thought he was handsome. These were my two meager clues. But was that all there was to know? Mysteries have always been a favorite of mine, so this was my opportunity to be a sleuth and I set about uncovering more clues about the mysterious handsome doctor.

What else did I know?

I knew that he was most probably about my age! This was a major deduction, because from a statistical point of view, that did narrow it down quite a bit, ruling out large sections of the male population. “What else was there?” I pondered, trying to stay on track. I knew I was missing the biggest clue here. After all, a doctor in my age group, who someone else thinks is handsome, would not necessarily make someone’s heart skip a beat.

Then it hit me; clue number four! Mildred had decided that the doctor was worth finding a date for!

“And,” I continued, now verbalizing out loud: “Mildred thought that this person and I would get along!”

That was clue number five and the most important one of all! Mildred was idiosyncratic, but I did trust her judgment.

Suddenly, the words of the Mantis came back to me: “From now on you will notice certain events that are taking place in your life. Just little happenings that appear unimportant, but that nevertheless have the potential to change the direction your life is taking. . . .Trust your intuition!”

Already two weeks had passed since the conversation in front of my house. I grabbed the phone book, found Mildred’s number, and dialed it. The phone seemed to ring forever, but finally Mildred’s husband, Jay, answered.

“This is Sydney and I have changed my mind about the doctor,” I blurted out to Jay, realizing that instant that I was saying something that sounded incredibly daft. First of all, I did not know Jay. And secondly, I remembered that Mildred and Jay probably knew multiple doctors. After all, neither of them was in very good health. So how could he possibly know which doctor I had happened to change my mind about?

But fate was on my side. He apparently had been made aware of my predicament.

“Oh, you mean Pat,” he said. “I’ll let Mildred know. Bye.” Jay had already hung up.

“Pat. . . .hmm.” I cleared my throat.

“His name is Pat.” I articulated into the now silent receiver, as if I were addressing an audience through a microphone.

That same evening I heard back from Mildred, who agreed to inquire if the doctor Pat was still interested in communicating with a nervous, strange young woman by the name of Sydney.

Every evening coming home from work, I would throw down my stuff and head straight for the answering machine, hoping for an affirmative from Mildred. And every time it was the same:.....nothing!

“What is this woman doing? I exclaimed more than once to the answering machine. But the answering machine wouldn’t answer and just blinked its little red eyes at me. Actually, the question was entirely rhetorical, because I had a pretty good idea of what Mildred was doing. Mildred would be working in her kitchen or she would be tending her garden, chatting with her neighbors.

Another week went by. The answering machine remained stubborn and related nothing of importance. Needless to say, things were not moving fast enough for my taste. After yet another couple of days, I overcame my fear of looking like a romantic fool and called Mildred once again.

“So, what did Pat say?” I demanded, after making a rudimentary attempt at introductory conversation. It turned out that Mildred had totally forgotten my request. I was shocked, but Mildred didn’t get worked up about it. “Let me find out.” she said. “I’ll call you right back.”

And so it happened. Mildred let me know amazingly quickly that Pat was cool with it and recited me a phone number.

“Have you given him my number too?” I asked.

“Sure. You’ll like him,” said Mildred and hung up.

I picked up the piece of paper with Pat’s phone number and stared at it. What should I do? I knew that etiquette dictated that girls needed to wait for the man to take initiative. I also knew that I was not going to put up with friends or men that would not allow me to take the lead on occasion. I took a deep breath and dialed the number.

A man’s voice answered with a neutral “Hello.” The voice had a faint accent.

“May I speak to Pat?”

“This is Pat,” the other voice indicated.

“This is Sydney Madrid....I got your number from Mildred Dolittle, who assured me it was okay to call...but I can call back another time...uh....

“It’s all right, I am glad you called,” said Pat’s voice.

“So far, so good,” I thought.

And a nice voice it was. Rather serene and mellow, as if he were contemplating each word. He would draw out the vowels, as if they contained the core of the message he was wanting to share. And when the topic turned to something that excited him, the voice would get melodious and the pitch would go up, sparkling with joy, like that of a child who was describing a new discovery. And then there was always that hint of a foreign accent. It turned out that Pat was indeed a doctor, but not of the kind that Mildred and Jay had thought. Pat explained that he was a European post-doc ecologist specializing in desert biotopes. For his dissertation he had spent a year in the Mojave. He called it his ‘desertation’.

After we had said good bye, I looked at my watch with surprise. We had talked for almost an hour.

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Pat and I talked about every other day. Sometimes, he had to travel out of town for a few days, but he always called me when he got back. I found myself looking forward to our conversations. I waited for his accounts of everyday experiences which he somehow converted into magic tales. I was beginning to really like him. Or, perhaps I should say I liked his voice and his mind, because that was all Pat consisted of at this point.

So, one day, I asked him: “What do you look like?”

“Go and find out for yourself,” he said jokingly. “My picture is on the website of our department.”

I found Pat’s picture linked to the descriptions of several courses he was teaching at the university. The picture was in black and white and I noticed that I felt neither shock nor amazement. Pat just looked like Pat. He was indeed handsome, in an unobtrusive kind of way, but what made him really attractive was his apparent lack of stress. Two calm, intelligent eyes looked right at me. They were set in a long, friendly face with a distinct nose and chin and a mouth that always seemed to smile. The face was flanked by long blond hair that had begun to recede a little at the top of his forehead. Now that Pat had taken on physical form, I knew it was becoming inevitable that we should meet in person. Pat did not seem to mind that I was taking charge.

The next time I talked to Pat I brought up the looming rendezvous, which I had given a great deal of thought. I had determined that meeting in a bar or restaurant was asking for trouble, spilling soup and such. Then there was the possibility of a city park, but what if it rained? No, I had to do better than that, and I finally decided on the art museum for the place of our blind date. The local museum of art is classy.

It is a modern structure set back from the road on a hill, in a rolling landscape of trees and shrubs flanking open spaces that display various sculptures. It has a varied and pretty impressive collection of classical and modern art paintings, as well as small exhibits on Asian, Polynesian, and African culture that are clearly geared toward education of the many school children that visited during the week. Pat and I would be able to leisurely stroll around, allowing variable distance between us. Whenever the conversation would stall, either of us could casually point to some artistic object and inquire if the other had seen it too, thus avoiding those awkward silences that can occur between two people that are trying to become acquainted. There also was a small café where we could stop for a drink or snack.

Pat concurred. "That sounds cool! I love art and I don't think I have anything planned for Saturday afternoon. But how will I recognize you?"

That was a good question, one that had entirely slipped my mind. From the picture, I knew what he looked like and realized I had an unfair advantage. I thought about this for an instant,.....I wasn't going to walk around with a silly carnation on my blouse, or wear a red baseball cap. Nor did I feel secure enough to give him an ad-hoc account of my physical features.

"Uh,...well," I stumbled, feeling my palms getting sweaty. I had to come up with something unique fast, something that would be subtle yet easy to recognize.

"I'll be wearing the blue cowboy boots!" I blurted out. I actually do own a pair of blue boots, left over from my Santa Fe days.

The phone remained silent for a few seconds and my palms got very sweaty. I tried not to imagine Pat's face on the other end of the phone line: eyes rolling to the ceiling and his mouth dropping open. I saw images of myself in a pink mini-skirt, a sleeveless top, and my black hair stacked high to the ceiling, my lips under a solid, glossy coat of red paint. Just perfect for an academic type!

But then he replied cheerfully, "All right, I'll see you at two on Saturday then." and the phone went dead.

The week took its course and Saturday slowly rolled around. This was the big day when Pat would become flesh and blood, for better or for worse. I jumped out of bed and opened the curtains. It was chilly and rainy, a cold front from Canada had moved in. I spent the morning sorting through mail, paying bills, and drinking loads of tea. After that, it was about time to get ready for the big event. I had given some thought to my wardrobe and had optimistically assumed it would be a pretty spring day. Obviously, it wasn't going to be and impromptu adjustments were called for. I found a dark blue turtle neck, pulled a blazer from the back of my closet, put on jeans and my blue boots, grabbing my umbrella as I ran out the door.

The museum had a beautiful spacious foyer. Subdued light filtered in through a series of windows scattered in various configurations near the lofty ceiling. The walls were of exposed brick, while the floor was made of large stone tiles. In the center, there was a wide staircase leading down to the exhibits and the little café. To the left there was the inevitable gift shop, and to the right a desk with friendly volunteers full of information. But I did not want information. Instead, I went to fix my hair, and positioned myself strategically near the gift shop, ready to examine the Saturday crowd. Scholarly individuals of various ages commingled with baby-boomer families that vainly attempted to raise artistic awareness among dragging offspring. It felt as if I were watching a movie, where multiple detached characters passed the review. But none of them even remotely looked like Mr. Pat. As time went by, I got more nervous. It was now ten minutes past our rendezvous time.

"This guy is not standing me up, is he?" I asked myself and felt a tinge of anger creep up inside me. But then I remembered the many conversations we'd had during which he had expressed what seemed genuine consideration for me and my stories, and my anger quickly changed over into worry.

I decided to give it another ten minutes and went inside the gift shop to see if Mr. Pat could have slipped by me without noticing. After all, I knew what he looked like and not vice versa. I walked over to a bin of various colorful gadgets that appeared to have come straight from a tropical bazaar. There was a little drum on a stick with two corks on strings attached to it. When you rotated it in your hands, the corks would swing around and make a drumming sound. Then there were small wooden birds in all colors of the rainbow, as well as little necklaces, wristlets and puppets. Still no Mr. Pat. I took a step back from the bin and glanced around once more.

I felt a shiver run up my spine.

"Oh no! It isn't the boots, is it?" I asked myself. I remembered Pat's rather emotionless reaction, when I told him I was going to wear my wild boots. And I immediately wished I had been less of an extravert. He must have decided I was too crazy for him. I looked down at my boots. They did look awfully flamboyant.

Then, I noticed a small bracelet lying on the ground. I picked it up and studied it. It did not look like any of the other items I had seen in the bin. It had a series of irregular flat beads, some oval, others round or polygonal. Most beads were white, but others were gray or even black, held together with a rather coarse string, knotted together. On each end there was what looked like a tiny, polished nut. I checked the bin, once more, but I couldn't find anything that looked remotely similar.

"Someone must have dropped it," I thought and walked over to the counter, where an eager volunteer pounced on me. It was a middle-aged woman with a round face, round glasses, and a big smile.

"Are you finding what you need?" she asked.

"I found this on the floor." I said to the woman and handed her the wristlet.

"It doesn't have a price on it. Let me find out."

I opened my mouth to say that I really did not want to buy the wristlet, but another, younger woman had already come over to help. Her name tag read "Julie. Museum Store Manager."

Julie's eyes lit up when she saw the bracelet. With a swift motion she took possession of it and examined it eagerly, moving her fingers across the irregular beads.

Then she proclaimed, "That isn't an ordinary bracelet. It certainly isn't one of ours. But it's pretty. It looks Polynesian to me, with the little fragments of sea shell. Only last month, a young lady came in here with a whole set of kauri shells from New Zealand."

Apparently, Julie saw herself as a type of anthropological shell expert and I suddenly felt an urge to get out of the store.

"Polynesian sea shell fragments. Thank you." I said.

I grabbed the wristlet out of Julie, the museum store managers hands and headed for the exit. In the foyer, I searched once more for my blind date.

"Ex-pat!" I said out loud and strode out of the museum.

The bracelet was still in my hand, dangling around. Without paying attention, I put it on. It fit.

When I got home, the answering machine was blinking aggressively with its beady red eyes. There were two messages from Pat. In the first message he explained that right when he was about to leave, a friend had called to say that he had been in a car accident. He had rushed to check up on him. Luckily, the accident had been relatively minor and no one got hurt. But Pat had decided to keep his friend company for the rest of the afternoon, just to make sure. He was very, very sorry. The second message was an invitation to dinner for next Saturday, under one condition.....I had to wear the blue boots.

I laughed and felt myself relax. But the same couldn't be said for my feet. The boots may have been unique, they sure were uncomfortable. When I sat down and bent forward to wrestle them off, I suddenly noticed the bracelet again. I had forgotten I was wearing it. Its tiny little seashell fragments felt warm to the touch and glistened against my skin. It was as if it belonged.

"How strange," I thought, considering that I never wore jewelry.

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On Friday, I got home early and found a note from Mildred. A handyman was going to do some work and there was a polite reference to a new rake that I could find behind the house. I blushed. It was late spring and I had hardly done any work in the yard yet, even though I had promised her to do so in exchange for a portion of the rent. There was still plenty of sunshine, so I put on some jeans, found a hat and set to pulling weeds from the front flower bed. I always found pulling weeds satisfying work. I could clearly see immediate results and there was no need to think about anything. The earth felt good between my fingers. It was moist, dark, and soothing. Even the weeds themselves were interesting close up. Some had tiny little flowers that were blue with a miniature heart of bright yellow. Others had leaves with strange shapes and curved edges. I almost felt sorry to pull them out. After about an hour of weeding, I figured I could call it a day and sat down on the porch steps to admire my work.

"Do you know that the flowers and plants that you humans prefer over weeds, were once weeds themselves?" a familiar voice asked.

"Hi, Mantis, what a surprise!" I said.

"You are the god of the flowerbed." Mantis spoke. "You rule and you get to decide who lives and who dies."

I had to laugh and added: "I also get to decide between beauty and ugliness."

"That's right. It's all in the eye of the beholder!" stated Mantis.

Mantis installed himself on a porch post. He stretched his hind legs one after the other and made a noise that sounded like he was clearing his throat.

“Here is another assignment for you. It’s to formulate the fundamental question for humanity.”

I had no clue what he was talking about and wondered if my friend always had to be so darned enigmatic? Mantis certainly remained a strange compaignion and the situation was no less strange. Here I was. At the direction of an insect, I was trying to come up with a question that supposedly summarized what humans so desperately want to know.

“What on earth am I doing here?” I thought.

“Exactly!” said Mantis. “That is the question!”

I looked at the insect as if he had gone mad and burst out laughing.

“Well, that was easy.”

Mantis continued: “The cardinal question for all humans is indeed: what am I doing here, and moreover, who am I? Who am I in the context of this universe? Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I guess so,” I answered.

“What is it that humans long to know deep down in their hearts? ..... They want to know the purpose of their existence. If humans know their purpose, they will also be able to find better ways of living up to their true potential and their responsibilities.”

Mantis had lowered his voice to emphasize the last three words...”And their responsibilities!”

“This is not just what humans want to know,” he continued. It’s also what they *need* to know if you and I are to survive. For, as I said before, things are not going in the right direction here on this planet.

“I am going to teach you what humans need to know. First, to make sense of your own existence. You need to understand how the world operates as a whole, and why you are here in it.”

Mantis paused and looked at me intently to see if I was following him. He concluded that some further clarification was warranted, because he went on to explain: “By world, I mean everything around you: the yard, the environment, the Earth, and ultimately the whole universe with everything in it.

“That’s a whole lot.” I said.

At that point Sonny climbed up on the porch. Mantis saw him and started scurrying up his post.

“I think I am going to do some praying.” he said, making sure he was well out of reach of the playful cat.

I laughed, remembering that he was a praying mantis and asked: “Are you going to pray for your life or for your soul?”

“One doesn’t exist without the other!” he declared, cryptically.

By then, Sonny was climbing on my lap and I took him inside to find some milk. But the words of the mantis rang in my head.

I had always thought there was more to our existence than what the main scientific and religious teachings offered. On the one hand, there was the Darwinist scientific explanation that life was some kind of biological fluke. And on the other hand, we were told we were here as part of a divine creative act that happened long ago. But why? None of the mainstream theologians ever gave an adequate answer. Instead, they mainly talked about was how to behave oneself while preparing for the afterlife somewhere far away. Could it really be that Mantis was going to reveal the secret of the purpose of our existence?

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