

Auras

Celeste pushed the shower curtain to the side, drops of water trailing from her wrist. She saw Evan standing just inside the doorway, offering her a fluffy cotton towel, but she ignored him, ignored his smile, ignored the stubble shading his jaw even though she normally found it sexy. The only thing she noticed was the pale mauve aura shimmering around his naked body. She froze, one foot inside the tub, the other on the bathmat. A subtle pain rumbled through her stomach, not from hunger, but from nausea, because she knew he was going to die today.

“Do you think I’m your personal towel rack?” He waved the dark green towel in front of her, its loose end swaying from side to side.

“What?” The flash of green distracted her, even if it didn’t block out the death nimbus that surrounded him. “Sorry.” As she reached for the towel, he released his grip, but her fingers failed to close, and the towel fell to the floor.

Retrieving the towel, he placed it in her hands. He looked into her eyes but couldn’t connect with them because they kept scanning the empty space around his body. “Are you all right? You seem distracted.”

She nodded, expressionless. As her eyes focused on his face, she smiled. “Have you noticed the corners of the ceiling? They’re loaded with dust-bunnies.” She glanced over his head to convince him that she had been studying gray wispy cobwebs on the ceiling.

“You’re sure everything’s all right, Celeste?”

“Yeah. We got a shipment of new novels yesterday, and I was just wondering if Angie had prepped them for circulation.” Her nausea intensified. She couldn’t remain in the bathroom.

“If that’s it, then let me have the bathroom. I don’t have all day.”

No, he didn’t. She wanted to acknowledge this truth for him, but she couldn’t accept it herself. She wrapped the towel around her shoulders and hurried to the door. “All yours. Just don’t forget to clean the hair out of the drain.” She couldn’t believe she said that. It would torment her days later when she would be riding in the black Lincoln

town car that followed the hearse to the cemetery.

As she stood in the bedroom drying herself, he called to her. “Don’t bother making me breakfast. I have to be at work for a 9 o’clock meeting, so I’ll just pick up a bagel and some coffee on the way there.” She pictured him standing before the mirror, shaving, white foam covering his face and neck, a swath of stubble-less flesh peering through the lather.

“Sure, hon.” She hoped he would live until dinnertime. Breakfast wasn’t an appropriate final meal. A bagel couldn’t compare to filet mignon or lobster or even a medium-rare burger. She thought about where they could dine that evening to give him a decent farewell. She stopped. Evan wasn’t one of the hundreds of nameless people she had seen sporting the death nimbus. He was her husband, someone she loved. She wanted to feel some emotion—sorrow, anger, pity. Celeste threw the towel on the bed, put on her bathrobe, and went downstairs.

She entered the kitchen. Bright summer sun spread across the cream-colored tiles on the floor, filling the room with warm ambient light. Plucking an apple from the wire fruit basket and removing a paring knife from the wooden block, she began slicing the apple on the faux-granite countertop. After three cuts, she paused, the blade pressed against the apple’s skin. She wasn’t hungry; she was just mindlessly following her morning routine. She stared at the knife. She could see her elongated reflection on its blade, through the drops of apple juice and flecks of pectin.

She remembered cutting her thumb a few months ago. On that morning, as she carved a crisp jonagold, the apple rolled. The tip of the knife slipped free, and its sharp blade sliced her thumb. She instantly knew that the wound would bleed and it would hurt. Pressing gently near the wound, she peered into the reddish gash, surprised that she felt nothing. Her body was still in shock, in that brief moment between inflicted wound and searing pain.

As she stood in the kitchen now, looking at the three sections of apple on the countertop, she understood. She was in emotional shock. She knew she should appreciate this moment because once she begun feeling the sorrow, she would suffer for months, probably years.

Resting her hands on the cool countertop, she analyzed the situation. Evan’s mauve aura indicated that he would die in an accident, its light shade that the accident would be beyond his control. Had his aura been a richer, deeper mauve, the accident would have been one that he could have avoided by making different choices.

His light mauve aura comforted her. The meticulousness that made him a good editor infiltrated all aspects of his life. He approached every task and situation from a

rational, analytical perspective. Even a simple trip to buy groceries required a detailed shopping list arranged according to the order of the aisles in the store: fruits, vegetables, canned goods, cereals, paper products, meats, dairy, frozen foods. She appreciated this quirk. It saved him from behaving irrationally, but not from dying accidentally.

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Celeste saw her first death nimbus at the age of six. She sat at the table in her parents' kitchen, dipping her grilled cheese sandwich into a bowl of canned tomato soup, when her grandfather entered through the back door. He was carrying a long plastic tray laden with seedlings, their pale green tops rising above the tiny black cups that contained their roots. Even though he wore a baseball cap to protect his thinning hair from the April rain, beads of water dotted his face, and one large drop clung to the tip of his nose. Subtle purplish circles underscored his eyes. His skin seemed almost colorless.

He wiped his shoes on the throw rug at the threshold of the kitchen and tilted the tray toward Celeste's mother, who stood at the sink washing dishes.

"Hey, Clara. I brought those tomato seedlings for you. You need to get them in the ground soon, or their roots will choke in the pots." He noticed Celeste sitting at the table. "Hey, there, Pumpkin. How are you?"

"Hi, grandpa." Celeste focused on the red-orange aura that engulfed his body. Its color resembled the mix of tomato soup and American cheese on her sandwich.

Clara glanced over her shoulder, her soapy hands poised above the sink. "Are you feeling all right, dad? Your face looks drained."

"I'm fine." He placed the tray on the floor. "I'm just tired. I didn't sleep good last night. I kept waking up with heartburn. Your mother made some lasagna for dinner, and I don't think the sauce agreed with me."

"Mommie, why is grandpa orange?"

She looked toward the table. "What do you mean, dear?"

"Grandpa's orange today. He's usually blue, like you. Sometimes he's yellow, like you're yellow when you feel sick, but he's orange today. I've never seen anyone with orange lights."

Clara and her father stared at each other. After a moment, he shrugged. She turned to Celeste. "Honey, what orange lights do you see?"

Celeste frowned. "You know. Grandpa's light that's coming from inside him." How could her mother not see the bright reddish-orange glow? It resembled the gas flame that flowed from the burners on the stove—the glow didn't touch him but hovered just above his skin, fanning outward an inch or two before dissipating.

“Orange light is coming from grandpa?”

“Uh-huh.” She shifted her attention to the bowl of soup. “And you’re making blue light today.”

“I’m making blue light?”

Smiling, her grandfather sat in the chair opposite her. “It’s because we have rainbows inside us, and you can see the colors when they escape.” Even though he attributed Celeste’s comment to an overactive imagination, her conviction seemed a little too strong.

“Don’t lie to her, dad. He’s just making that up, dear. Don’t listen to him.”

“I’d never lie to Celeste. Did I ever lie to you when you were young?” He was relieved to change the topic. If she really could see these lights, he preferred not knowing.

Her grandfather passed away that evening while watching television. In the days following the funeral, Celeste suspected the change in the color of his aura somehow foretold his death, like a traffic light switching from green to yellow indicated that the cars would soon stop. She had already noticed that when people fell sick, their normal electric blue light shifted to some shade of yellow, so she surmised any variation from a blue aura implied some change in a person.

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Three years later, during a fieldtrip to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Celeste saw an early Italian Renaissance altarpiece that depicted the Assumption of the Virgin by Andrea di Bartolo. Stopping beside the large panel, the docent who guided her class’s tour explained how Christians believe that Mary’s body and soul ascended into heaven.

When Celeste looked at Mary and the angels that attended her, she noticed the radiant gold circles behind their heads. She raised her hand and pointed at the altarpiece. “What are the circles around them?”

The docent glanced at the painting. “Good observation. The circles called are nimbuses. A nimbus is a halo of light painters used to put around Jesus, Mary, and the saints to show they were special. It told people who the important figures in the painting were.”

Celeste liked the word nimbus. It sounded ethereal, like the auras she saw. She adopted it for the conditions she had learned to identify: normal nimbus, happy nimbus, flu nimbus, headache nimbus, death nimbus, life nimbus. Although she liked the names, she really couldn’t use them because no one else could see nimbuses, so she dropped them, except for the death nimbus and life nimbus. Death and birth seemed special enough to warrant names.

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One October morning, as a sophomore in high school, Celeste sat with her friends at a table in the cafeteria, waiting for the first bell to signal the start of homeroom. As her friends debated who was the cutest guy on the football team, she watched two boys and two girls at another table, talking quietly among themselves. Dark mauve lights shimmered around their bodies.

She nudged Ginny Huang. “Do you know them?” She motioned toward the four students.

Ginny glanced toward the rear corner of the cafeteria. “The kid in the blue sweater is Jason Krowski, and that’s Renee Higgins next to him, with the blonde hair. I don’t know the other two, but I’ve seen them around. I think they’re in the band.”

“What do you know about them?”

“They’re all seniors. Why? You hot for one of the boys?”

“No, I just wondered who they were.” Celeste had never seen dark mauve auras before, but she couldn’t explain that to Ginny.

At the end of the school day, Celeste walked through the main hallway to catch her bus, her backpack hanging from one shoulder.

Ginny ran toward her from the opposite direction, weaving among the students who crowded the hallway. “Celeste, you’re never going to believe this. You remember those kids you saw in the cafeteria this morning? Jason Krowski and his friends?”

“Sure. Why?”

“Guess what? I was in Principal Hadley’s office during last period, waiting for Mrs. Alexander to sign some papers, when two state police came in. They went into Hadley’s office and closed the door, but they were talking so loud I could hear everything they said. They told him Jason and his friends had been killed in an accident on Windermere Road.”

“How? We saw them in school today.”

“They cut class this afternoon to go to the mall. Jason was driving his mother’s minivan, and from what the police could tell, he was speeding, lost control, and hit another minivan head on. Everyone in the other car died, too, except for this toddler in the back seat.”

“Are you serious?” Goosebumps rippled across Celeste’s arms and back.

“Yeah, and I bet we get the rest of the week off. Hadley wanted to keep everything quiet since it was the end of the day, but I heard one of the police say it might be a good idea to cancel school tomorrow, and Hadley said we’d probably need two or three days to get over this.”

Celeste wondered if she could have predicted the accident had she been able to interpret the meaning of the mauve auras. She thought she might learn how to predict people's fates if she studied their auras and figured out what each color meant.

She constructed a circular chart, like a color wheel, based on what she knew from observing people and their behaviors. An electric blue implied a balanced healthy person, pale blue happiness, navy sadness. Canary yellow indicated sickness—faint yellow mild illness, gold serious disease. Shades of green hinted at a mental illness—aqua a neurosis, chartreuse a psychosis. A silvery blue aura around a pregnant woman meant she would deliver that day. Colors with red mixed into them signaled death—orange a nature death, mauve an accidental death. Although she had never seen a bright red aura, she suspected it existed, guessing it meant a violent or painful death.

She observed that only people had auras. Inanimate objects like rocks and water didn't emit them, which made sense to her. Neither did flowers, trees, fruits, and vegetables, which she could accept because even though they were alive, they really weren't sentient creatures. But animals didn't have auras, which puzzled her. Why did people have auras, but not animals?

This difference wouldn't have bothered her, except she didn't seem to have an aura either. Whether she looked at her stomach, arms, legs, hands, feet or at her reflection in a mirror, she couldn't see a wispy, solar-wind-like glow emanating from her body. She couldn't tell if she was sick or sane. She couldn't read anything about herself, not as she could with other people. This initially irritated her, until she realized she could never predict her death; it would simply come to her unexpectedly as it did with everyone else. That comforted her. She didn't want to wake up one morning, look at herself, and know it would be her final day on the planet.

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Leaning against the faux-granite countertop in her kitchen, Celeste realized that Evan would be the first loved one she would lose since her grandfather. She suddenly felt weak. Had she not been supporting herself, she would have succumbed to gravity. Her vision blurred as tears welled along the rims of her eyes. Once he left the house, she would see him again only as a corpse.

She wanted to run upstairs to enjoy their final moments together. She didn't care what he might be doing—getting dressed, brushing his teeth, applying deodorant—just as long as she had some lasting memory of him before his death. Before his death. Evan was still alive, and the pale mauve aura implied death in an accident that would be beyond his control. Beyond his control. What about her control? Could she somehow intervene and prevent his accidental death?

She had never thought about this possibility. Was the death nimbus unstoppable? Clearly, its appearance was inevitable because no one lived forever. But could the foretold death be delayed or postponed? She believed she could do it—as long as she kept Evan in the house, in bed, the entire day, and not let him do anything that might result in an accident. She would only have to convince him to stay home, but that would be nearly impossible because she would have to convince him that she really could see auras.

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Nearly fourteen and a half years earlier, Celeste stood in front of a door in a dimly lit hall on the third floor of the freshman dorm. The odor of freshly delivered pizza permeated the air. She stared at a sign, posted on the door and handwritten in green marker on orange construction paper, that read “Bethany and Alison.” Taking a breath, she knocked on the door, the sound echoing along the corridor.

After a minute, the door opened halfway. Bethany stood inside the darkened room, her fingers gripping the jamb. Even though dinner wouldn’t be served in the cafeteria for another hour, she already wore her night clothes—an oversized red t-shirt and gray sweatpants that had been cut off at knees. “Celeste. What’s up?” Her voice lacked inflection.

“Do you have a minute?” She studied the faint yellowish-green aura shimmering around Bethany’s thin body.

Bethany wrapped the hem of her t-shirt around one of her fingers. “Yeah, I suppose.” She stepped backward and hit a switch on the wall. The overhead light sparked to life.

Celeste entered the room. She detected a slight smell, a mix of unwashed hair and sweat, like the stench of jeans that had been worn every day for a month without being washed. She noted the drawn blinds, the torn bag of stale microwave popcorn, the unmade bed on Bethany’s side of the room. She glanced from the crushed pillows to Bethany’s oily, mussed hair. “Were you still in bed?”

“I was just taking a nap.” Pulling the blue plaid sheets across the mattress, she sat on the bed. Her eyes half-closed, Bethany stared at the thin beige carpeting on the floor. “Look, I’ll be honest with you, Bethany. I’m a little worried about you. We all are. You haven’t been in lit class for weeks, and I haven’t seen you in the cafeteria for days. Some people told me you haven’t been to their classes either, and Alison says you’ve been sleeping a lot.”

“So?” She barely lifted her head.

“You’re withdrawing. You’re not eating. You’re sleeping all the time. Those are signs

of depression.” Celeste couldn’t mention the obvious sign of mental distress: the yellowish-green aura only she could see. Since they had returned from Christmas break, Bethany’s aura had gradually shifted from electric blue to teal to a few shades darker than chartreuse.

“When did you become a shrink?”

“I’m not, but you should consider seeing someone who knows about these things. It might help to talk to someone about how you’re feeling.”

“I feel perfectly fine.” She stared at Celeste, her face expressionless. “I’m just tired, so I’m really looking forward to spring break.”

“Where are you going?”

“To my parents’ in St. Augustine. It’s not Daytona, but it’s still Florida. I’m just going to lie on the beach and enjoy the sun.” She smiled weakly.

“You’ll be all right?”

“Yeah, I’m just sick of the cold and snow.”

Celeste didn’t know if she should believe Bethany. Auras didn’t respond like polygraphs; they didn’t flicker or dim when a person lied. They only revealed a person’s mental or physical state. But she could appreciate how the cold, bleak Maryland winters could depress someone raised in Florida.

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Late one evening, two weeks after spring break, Celeste returned to Bethany’s room. Someone had removed the handwritten sign from the door. Concerned, she knocked slightly harder than she intended.

“Just a minute.” She recognized Alison’s voice. The door opened, and a warm glow from the overhead light spread into the hallway. “Hey, Celeste.” Still tanned from a week in Cancun and wearing a strapped top that exposed her smooth shoulders, Alison stepped into the room so she could enter.

As she shut the door, Celeste saw the bare mattress on Bethany’s side of the room. A sweet lemony scent, from a candle or a cleaner, lingered in the air. She sat on Bethany’s empty desk, its sharp edge pressing into the backs of her thighs. “What happened?” Her voice echoed faintly off the undecorated wall above Bethany’s bed.

“To the room?”

“To Bethany. I haven’t seen her since we got back. Is she gone?”

“Yeah.” Alison flopped onto her bed, the springs of the metal frame creaking beneath her weight. “It was pretty weird. When she didn’t show up the first week, I wasn’t too worried. I just figured she was sick or something and took another week off, but when she didn’t come back by the weekend, I called her house.”

“And?”

“I didn’t talk to Bethany, but I talked to her dad. He said she was okay and she’d be back in a week or so.”

“If she’s coming back, why’s the room empty?”

“Last weekend, her dad showed up and took her stuff back to Florida.”

“Shit. Did she kill herself?”

“No, but she tried. Her dad wouldn’t say much, except she overdosed on sleeping pills. She’s out of the hospital and at home, but her dad was still really upset. He tried to hide it, but you could tell because he looked uncomfortable boxing everything up. I offered to help, but he wanted to do it himself. It was so sad. I felt like crying just watching him.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I promised Dean Schumacher I wouldn’t. After Bethany’s dad left, he showed up and said I shouldn’t say anything to anyone because the family wanted to keep it quiet. I think he was more worried about how it would make the college look.” Alison’s aura turned dark blue.

Celeste wondered if she should have done more to help Bethany. Suspecting that her ability gave her some greater responsibility, she reconsidered her career options—psychiatry, medicine, social work, any profession where she could use her powers to diagnose people and cure them or solve their problems. She decided to practice using her ability so she could strengthen it.

One Monday afternoon, she entered the reading room in the library and took a seat at a rectangular table near the newspaper racks. The room with its shelves of reference books and periodicals seemed relatively quiet even though nearly every sound in the library echoed off its high ceiling.

Opening *An Introduction to Anthropology*, she pretended to study while focusing on a girl who sat at the table behind her. Celeste pictured the girl as vividly as she could in her mind: curly auburn hair, a cotton sweater with green and gray stripes, low-rise jeans that exposed the white flesh of her midriff. She tried to sense the girl’s pale blue aura, but she could only think about the political ramifications of the Magna Charta. She had two days to finish writing a paper for her British history class, and the stress prevented her from concentrating on anything else.

Three days later, Celeste returned to the reading room without any impending papers or tests to distract her. She sat at the same table, in the same chair. This time, she focused on a boy at the end of her table. She couldn’t see him from the corner of her eye, but she imagined him sitting there: his unkempt strawberry blond hair, his baggy

mustard-yellow sweatshirt, his loose-fitting cargo pants. As she thought about him, a dull yellow light shimmered in the blackness of her mind, resembling a bleach stain on black blanket. She turned to her left. A sickly yellow aura surrounded the boy. She smiled to herself. By the end of the week, after practicing several more times, she could easily see people's auras in her mind.

One Sunday a month later, Celeste positioned herself on the library's patio, sitting on a white cast iron bench that overlooked a large lawn. She closed her eyes, as though she was napping in the warm afternoon sun that shone on the building's colonial facade. She formed a mental image of the concrete walkway that led to the library, the aluminum railings of the wide staircase, the privet hedges that lined the walkway and stairs. She concentrated on this image, tuning out all sounds and scents, even the fragrance of the yellow variegated tulips that bloomed in the flowerbed beside her. After two minutes, she envisioned three shimmering lights on the walkway—two blue, one yellow-green, the colors twinkling on the insides of her eyelids. She opened her eyes. Three girls approached the library, one sporting an electric blue aura, another a cyan, the other a yellowish green. The clarity of her mental vision amazed her.

She attempted this experiment a week later. As she sat on the bench with her eyes closed, a robin-egg blue light flashed through her mind. Then she felt a faint tingle in her stomach. She thought she imagined the sensation, but it slowly intensified, as though several ants were walking across her abdomen. Startled, she leaped from the bench and looked around. A boy wearing earphones strolled along the walkway, his head bobbing in time with the music, a pale blue shimmer flowing from his body.

Within days, she started to see shimmering colors in her mind without having to concentrate on the people around her. By the end of the month, she could feel their auras without any effort. The sensation reminded her of being at the bottom of the deep end of a swimming pool, the weight of the water pressing gently against her body. Each aura made her skin tingle in a slightly different way—she could feel blue auras through her stomach, yellow auras across her chest. She became so sensitive she could feel the aura of someone ten feet behind her.

By the end of her sophomore year in college, Celeste had overdeveloped her sensitivity. Any time she entered a crowd, either indoors or on the streets, she could feel everyone's aura pressing against her. The sensation felt like a tingling numbness, as though every nerve in her body had been pinched. The sensation wasn't immediately unpleasant, something like a cold draft wafting over her, but after an hour or so, the sensation grew into a noticeable ache, akin to having a piece of ice held against her skin.

She no longer dreamed of using her ability to help people. How could she help them

if she could barely tolerate the pressure of their auras for more than a few minutes? She convinced herself she really couldn't help anyone anyway. Look at Bethany. When Celeste approached her, she denied being depressed. Celeste figured if people couldn't admit to having problems, she couldn't do anything for them. She couldn't force cures on the unwilling.

By the time Celeste graduated from college, her hypersensitivity became a liability. She stopped attending concerts, movies, readings. Being around crowds flooded her senses with an overwhelming stream of information. Within moments, she knew who was happy, who was sad, who was sick, who was about to die. She knew so much about so many people, but she could only observe them and wonder what would happen once they vanished from her sight.

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Nearly seven years ago, Celeste walked through Dupont Circle, dreading the thought of spending a Saturday afternoon in the Sackler. She worked in the Library of Congress during the week, retrieving books from the stacks, so she rarely enjoyed visiting the Mall on the weekend. But Regina and Jane wanted to see an exhibit of Japanese ceramics. She agreed to join them because, by early October, the crowds of tourists had diminished.

As she circled the fountain, its cascading water glistening in the morning sun, she noticed a young man approaching from the south. She only paid attention to him because the gay men who sat on the benches around fountain were checking him out. She found him attractive: short curly black hair, light brown eyes, a hint of stubble on his face, and a slight bump on the bridge of his nose as if it had been broken. He even dressed somewhat stylishly: a black suede jacket, a button-down shirt tucked into his jeans, and loafers without socks. Then she realized—he had no aura. She had never met anyone who didn't emit some sort of color.

As he neared, she stepped into his path. "Excuse me. Do you know what time it is?"

"Sorry. I don't wear a watch." He tugged at the left sleeve of his jacket and exposed his bare arm.

"How do you know what time it is?" She felt foolish for asking such an inane question, but she wanted to engage him in a conversation to discover what had happened to his aura.

"I just look at other people's watches. I've perfected the art of peeking at wrists."

"Now that's a talent." She realized if she hoped to learn anything about him, she would have to pick him up. She didn't mind; he was attractive, and he dressed well. After a handful of dates, she could cut him loose. A glint of sunlight on his right wrist

attracted her attention. “Wait a second. You are wearing a watch.”

He smiled. “Caught me.”

“Why did you lie to me?”

“I thought you were one of those crazy environmental people. I’m sure you’ve run into them. They stop you on the street and ask if you care about the planet, and of course, you’re going to say ‘yes’ because you don’t want to look like some jackass who hates the world. Then they start hitting you up for money, and the only way to get rid of them is to tell them you’re a penniless graduate student.”

“And that works?”

“Usually. But if I feel like messing with them, I tell them my dad works for Exxon or one of those chemical companies, and then they run away.”

Attractive with a sense of humor. She liked that, and she enjoyed talking to someone whose aura didn’t imprint itself on her. “Do you want to catch a cup of coffee at Kramer’s?”

His name was Jamie, but Celeste would remember him as the Man with No Aura.

As they sat in Kramer’s that morning, she was surprised that someone so attractive didn’t have a girlfriend. “You’re gay, aren’t you?”

He looked at her, the sun coming through the skylights of the café casting a shadow across his face. “A single guy can’t live in Dupont Circle and not be gay?”

“I live in the neighborhood, and I’m not gay.” She sipped from her coffee mug. “I’m just shocked you don’t have a string of women chasing you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, even if it is completely backhanded.”

“Why aren’t you in a relationship?” She pressed the issue to see if his being single was somehow connected to the absence of an aura.

“I haven’t found anyone interesting enough to date for more than a few weeks. I meet lots of women, but they’re just so boring and unimaginative. All they can talk about is themselves, their friends, and their clothes. I want an attractive woman with a brain in her head.”

Celeste liked that answer—not because he was interested in dating intelligent women, but because he seemed arrogant enough that she could do her research and move on without getting attached to him.

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Three weeks later, they had dinner at La Madeleine, a cafeteria-style French restaurant in Georgetown. Although neither the food nor the atmosphere was spectacular, a steady crowd frequented the restaurant, and Celeste felt safer being with Jamie in a public place.

After meeting at the nearby Barnes and Noble, they entered La Madeleine together, the air heavy with the odor of baking au gratins and crepes. They selected their food (she a croquet monsieur, he a chicken frittata), paid for it, and sat at a clunky wooden table along the front of the restaurant. They could see people passing on the sidewalk just outside the mullioned window.

As she finished her sandwich, she started the conversation she had been planning since that morning. “The other day, I was reading about the Three Gorges Damn project in China, and the article blamed the World Bank for creating some of the overruns because it doesn’t require borrowing nations to account for the money they receive. Is that true? Can countries just borrow money from the World Bank and not be held accountable for how they spend it?”

He looked at her, a chunk of frittata stuck on the tines of his fork. “Why would I know anything about the World Bank?”

“Don’t you work there?”

“No. I work at—” He pushed the piece of frittata into his mouth. She waited while he chewed. Once he swallowed, he continued. “I told you I work at the National Gallery.”

“You told me that the afternoon I met you, after I told you I worked at the Library of Congress, but I’m positive the other day, you told me you worked at the World Bank.”

“You must’ve gotten confused. I said my friend Al works at the World Bank. He does credit risk analysis for them.”

“No, you said that about yourself. Wait. I remember. You’re right. Two weeks ago, you told me worked for the World Bank. The other day, you said you worked at the IMF.”

“Did I say that?” He seemed momentarily flustered.

“You did. You also claimed to work for a senator, a congressman, the White House, the Kennedy Center, and the Holocaust Museum. Every time I meet you, you seem to have a new job at some high profile place. What do you really do?”

“Would you believe I’m independently wealthy and don’t have a job? I just say I work so people won’t think I’m weird or lazy.” He reached for his wine glass. “And you’d be surprised how many people are attracted to me just because I have money. I want women to like me for who I am, not my bank account.”

She rested her elbows on the table. “I suppose you live in a mansion in Potomac or Great Falls, and you don’t want people to know that either.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because every time we’ve met, you said you live near where I live. When I said I

lived near Dupont Circle, you said you did, too. When I said I lived in Georgetown, you claimed to live here as well. You said the same for Bethesda, Adams Morgan, and Capitol Hill.”

“I never said any of that. You must be confusing me with someone else you’re seeing.”

“Then tell me where you grew up. Where you really grew up.”

“I’ve already told you.”

“You’ve named six places. San Francisco, Richmond, Anchorage, St. Louis, Tampa, and Houston. Wherever I said I grew up, you either grew up there or near there.”

He glared at her, his pupils shrinking into tiny dots in his light brown irises. “Why are you attacking my credibility when you’re clearly the one with the problem? You lied about where you live. You lied about where you grew up. Have you ever told me anything that’s true? Is your name even Celeste?”

“I’ve just been testing you to see how your answers change. You fabricate a new life story every time we meet.”

“So says the pathological liar.” He pointed his fork at her. “Now I know why you can’t keep a boyfriend.”

“I can’t keep a boyfriend? Where did that come from? I’ve never told you anything about my personal life.”

“So you admit you made up everything you’ve told me about yourself.”

“I’ve never told you anything about myself because I don’t trust you.”

“Why? Because you’re a paranoid schizophrenic?”

“Because the first time I met you, you lied about not wearing a watch, and ever since then, I didn’t trust you.” She didn’t mention the real reason—his absence of an aura.

“If you’ve never trusted me, why did you go out with me a dozen times? That kind of behavior just screams psycho-chick.”

She laughed. “This is only our seventh date, and I might be a freak, but you need serious psychological help.”

“I don’t need help, and I don’t need your shit, you bitch.” He rose from the table. “I don’t want to hear from you ever again.” Without looking back, he hurried toward the door, the soles of his shoes clacking on the flagstone floor.

She settled into her chair, relieved that he hadn’t become violent. After their second date, she realized he was a pathological liar—and a fairly bad one at that. Still, she kept seeing him because she wondered if some traumatic event in his past had erased his aura, but she could never learn anything about his life because he never maintained a consistent story.

Her encounter with Jamie suggested that people without auras were unnatural in some way. She suspected they weren't necessarily evil or immoral, just sociopathic. Celeste had no proof of this, but she didn't care to disprove it. After Jamie, she avoided anyone without an aura.

* * *

Four weeks later, Regina and Jane convinced Celeste to attend an exhibit of Degas' horse paintings at the National Gallery West. She liked the show, but she enjoyed the nearly empty galleries even more.

After the exhibit, they sat in an indoor courtyard on an iron bench padded with a green-and-white striped cushion. A tall fountain crowned with a Cupid stood in the center of the courtyard, while cypress palms and ficus trees in cauldron-sized pots lined its perimeter. Despite the chilly temperature in the museum, a humid earthy odor permeated the air.

Regina removed her glasses and dropped them into her purse. "I'm starving. Let's get something to eat. There's that café in the basement here."

"And it has great food." Jane turned sideways. "You with us, Celeste?"

"I'd love to, but I have to run home. I promised my mother I'd call her this afternoon."

Regina laughed. "You're so funny, Celeste. You always have some excuse for ditching us. It's too cold outside. It's too hot. You have a headache. You have your period."

"She's right, you know. Halfway through any plan, you find some reason to bail out."

"I'm not that bad." She wished she could explain that she would gladly spend more time with them if they avoided crowded places. "I've always gone hiking with you when you go to Sugarloaf or Great Falls."

Jane nodded. "True, but when was the last time you went clubbing with us?"

"I don't think I've ever been clubbing with you."

"Exactly." Jane twirled a strand of her long red hair around her finger. "You hang out with us at dinner, but as soon as we pay the bill, you run home like you can't stand to be around us for more than an hour or two. You need to come out and have some fun some time."

"But I'm tired on the weekends because I get up so early for work."

"No one forces you to get up at five in the morning to beat the morning rush hour. You can't be so neurotic you have to ride in an empty train everyday."

Slinging her purse onto her shoulder, Regina stood. "And how do you expect to

meet anyone? You have to get out there and mingle.”

“I’m mingling now.”

“But you won’t meet anyone here.” Jane pushed herself off the bench. “Come on and join us. It’s only lunch. It won’t take too long.”

“I can’t. I really have to call my mother.”

“Okay, but you owe us.”

“I know.”

After watching her friends cross the courtyard, Celeste headed toward the eastern side of the gallery. She rode the escalator to a large landing situated between the first and ground floors. Stepping off the escalator, she stopped, surprised to see Dali’s Last Supper covering the far wall. As she studied the painting, she sensed someone with a strong aura approach her, and a pleasant tingle spread through her body. Even though the tingling made her lightheaded, she resisted the desire to see who could emit such an intense aura.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” She heard a deep, soft-spoken voice near her ear.

“Yeah.” She turned around. A young man with hazel brown eyes and slight stubble on his jaw stood beside her. He wore a crimson-and-yellow rugby shirt over his black jeans, a nylon windbreaker draped over his arm. He emitted a bright blue glow nearly four inches in length. “I didn’t realize this was here. Why would they hide it in a stairwell?”

“Who knows? But you should be glad it’s hidden because it doesn’t attract crowds that way. It could be like the Mona Lisa in the Louvre.”

“What about the Mona Lisa?”

“You can hardly see it because it’s this little tiny painting, in a little tiny gallery, packed with hundreds of tourists. Even if you get close to it, you can’t appreciate it.”

“You’ve been to Paris?” She didn’t pay attention to what she said because she could feel herself becoming intoxicated with the pulsing tingle that warmed her lower abdomen.

“Two years ago. I went there for a conference.”

“What a fabulous city for a conference. How did you get any work done?”

“It was tough, but I managed to attend a few sessions, when I wasn’t hanging out in the museums or restaurants.” He shifted his position, placing himself between her and the painting.

“What kind of conference was it?”

“A writers’ conference, held in the Latin Quarter, naturally.”

“You’re a writer?”

“No, an editor. Back then, I was working in acquisitions at an academic press, and I traveled to various conferences to find new authors.”

“Nice job. How do I get into that?”

“You don’t want to, too much pressure to generate revenue. That’s why I quit. Now, I’m just an editor for an association magazine. What about you? How do you pay the bills?”

The question forced her to concentrate on a response, not his gorgeous shimmer. “I work at the Library of Congress.”

“So you don’t know anything about art?”

“Not really, but I have a degree in library science. I know more about books than you could ever imagine.”

He switched the windbreaker to his other arm. “Can I impress you with my useless art knowledge.”

“You can try.”

“Okay. Do you know what makes Dali’s representation of Jesus unique? He painted Christ without a halo, which you usually see in traditional religious paintings to signify his divine nature. But if you look at Christ’s right hand in this painting, the light coming from behind him forms a cross, which signifies his impending crucifixion and resurrection.”

“I don’t think that counts as impressive knowledge.”

“What would you call it?”

“Being observant.” As she spoke, she observed his halo and relished the sensations it created in her body. “Do you have any real knowledge you can use to impress a girl?”

“I know all the best Ethiopian restaurants in the city.”

“Why don’t you try to impress me by taking me to one for lunch.”

As they walked toward the exit, she learned his name: Evan Francola. He lived in Woodley Park, near the zoo, one metro stop from her apartment. They spent the rest of the afternoon in Addis Ababa, a restaurant in Adams Morgan.

* * *

Seven months later, Evan accepted an editorial position with an association in the suburbs. Rather than make the reverse commute to Rockville, he decided to move from the city, and he asked Celeste to move in with him. The idea of living in the suburbs appealed to her. After four years of commuting on the metro, she needed to escape the city with its annual crush of tourists and their endlessly shimmering auras. Before she committed to the move and their relationship, she wanted to tell him about her ability.

On a humid July evening, they stood in front of the open window in her dark

apartment, drinking beer and watching cars drive along New Hampshire Avenue. Condensation dripped from the cold bottles and collected on the floor.

She turned toward him, the light that entered the window highlighting her cheeks and lips. “Evan, there’s something I have to tell you.”

“Should I guess?”

“You’ll never guess this one.”

“I’m usually pretty good at this. Is it personal?”

“It’s personal.”

“At least let me try the top answers. You have herpes. You’ve had an abortion. You used to be a man until you had a gender reassignment.”

“Evan, please don’t joke. I’m about to tell you something I’ve never told anyone else, and I’d really appreciate it if you’d just listen.”

“Sorry. I thought I could make it easier for you if I lightened the mood.”

“This does have something to do with lights.”

He smiled. “You don’t even want to know what thought just popped into my head.”

“I don’t. I’m trying to be serious.”

He detected the slight irritation in her voice. “Okay. You have my complete attention.”

“What would you say if I told you I could see auras around people?”

“What do you mean by auras? Do you mean like a halo?”

“They’re sort of like halos, but they surround the entire body, not just the head.”

“What do they look like? Thick golden bands like you see in Medieval paintings? Or are they more modern, like neon signs?”

“You’re not taking me seriously.”

“I am, Celeste. I’m just trying to visualize what you mean so I can understand it.”

“Have you ever seen a video of the aurora borealis? How it shimmers and ripples?”

“Yeah.”

“Auras look something like that, except they flow out of people’s bodies, and they’re different colors depending on how a person feels. Sometimes they’re shades of blue. They can be shades of yellow if you’re not feeling well.”

“What color am I right now?”

“You’re a sensual bright blue. Your aura’s very erotic. Sometimes, I get turned on just feeling it.”

“If you’re trying to seduce me, you don’t have to work so hard.”

She slapped his knee, the crack of her hand against his flesh filling the quiet room. “Damn it, Evan. I’m being serious.”

"I'm trying to take this seriously, Celeste, but it just sounds too fantastic."

"How can it be fantastic? It's just this weird ability I have."

"This might sound strange, maybe even illogical, but I don't doubt you. I have no reason to. But I have no reason to believe you either because I have no proof of what you're telling me."

"You can't take my word for it?" She shifted her weight, creating a small distance between them.

"Look, Celeste. I have complete faith that you believe what you're telling me. I have faith that you believe you can see my sexy blue aura. But I can't have faith in something unless I have proof. Whether it's as fantastic as you seeing auras or as simple as water freezing, I need proof to believe in it. At least I can see ice. I can touch it and feel how cold it is. I can watch it melt in my hand. Those are tangible facts I can believe."

"My ability is a fact."

"It might be, but you can't give me empirical evidence. I know we're living in a post-modern world where anything is possible and everything is relative, but I'm an Enlightenment guy. I want logic. I want rationality. I want my scientific method."

"I want you to believe me."

"I told you, Celeste, I don't doubt your belief."

"No, you just think I'm crazy."

"I don't."

"Then why do you need proof of anything?"

"Because I'm obsessed with logic."

"You're just obsessive-compulsive." Acting passive-aggressive made her feel better.

"Why do you think I'm such a good editor?"

"You're just lucky you have the sexiest aura I've ever seen."

Even though he refused to accept the possibility that she could see auras, she moved in with him. She loved living in the suburbs. She took a job at a community library. She could commute to work by herself in her own car. The car even acted as an insulator, blocking the auras of drivers and pedestrians. She engaged crowds only at the mall or the grocery store, and she could manage those excursions because of Evan's neurosis for preparing excessively detailed shopping lists.

* * *

Celeste decided to intervene, but to succeed, she would have to convince Evan to stay home, which meant convincing him that she could see auras. If he insisted on seeing tangible proof, she could only ask him to trust her.

Pushing herself off the faux-granite countertop, she left the kitchen. The tiles in the

hall felt cool against her feet. Diffused light entered the Palladian window above the front door, tingeing the foyer blue. She paused on the carpeted staircase and listened. She could hear the rhythmic splashing of water in the shower. The noise reassured her.

As she stepped into the bathroom, she inhaled the floral fragrance of soap that emanated from behind the shower curtain.

She leaned against the door jamb. "Evan, can we talk?"

"I knew something was bothering you." He spoke loud enough for her to hear him over the running water. "Is it something major?"

"You can say that."

"Let me guess. You're pregnant. You want a divorce. You're having an affair."

After five years of marriage, she had learned to ignore his guessing game. "It's nothing like that."

"Then it's nothing serious."

"It is." She paused. "Do you remember me telling you about my ability to see auras?"

"Yeah, you told me the summer we moved out of the city. Can we have this discussion tonight? I really don't have the time right now."

"That's the problem, Evan. You might not have any time ever again."

"Why? Has my sexy blue aura turned an unromantic black?"

She was surprised he had remembered that comment. The memory would comfort her when she celebrated their upcoming wedding anniversary alone. "Please don't joke, Evan. Your aura did change colors this morning, and it tells me you're going to die today."

He stopped moving. The warm water pounded his back. He wondered if she really could see auras, but he pushed that thought from his mind. "Today won't work. Could you reschedule my death for about 40 years from now?"

"I don't know if that's possible, unless we can find some way to save you."

Ignoring the jittery nerves in his legs, he resumed washing his thighs. "What's it going to be? A heart-attack? Rabies? Salmonella?"

"No, it's going to be an accident, probably when you're driving to work."

"I'm too good of a driver to have an accident." Lifting his left foot, he balanced on his right leg and began sliding the washcloth between his toes. He wobbled unsteadily as gobs of soap bubbles settled on the floor of the tub.

"But other people aren't."

She stared at the shower curtain, determining where he stood by the sound of his voice, imagining what part of his body he must be washing. The aqua curtain lurched

violently outward as though it had been punched from the inside, and three sounds mingled with the splashing of the water: a metallic crack, a solid thud, and a short yelp. She thought the yelp preceded the crack, or maybe they coincided.

“Evan?” When he didn’t reply, she walked calmly to the bathtub.

Celeste pushed the shower curtain to the side, spray from the showerhead hitting the front of her robe. She saw Evan lying in the glistening white tub, his eyes wide, his mouth open. A rivulet of bright blood seeped from the back of his head and mixed with the water before swirling down the drain. She noticed a slight, unnatural bend in his neck. He must have slipped, tumbled backward, and bashed his head against the facet. She glanced up. A tiny chunk of pink flesh pierced with a few strands of dark hair clung to the end of the tap.

Then she felt it. A faint tingle against her skin, like a down feather resting on her cheek. She stared at Evan. A faint gray shimmer engulfed his body. The glow weakened and faded. The only thing visible around him was a reddish pink aura of diluted blood.

She had always wondered what followed the death nimbus, wondered what happened at the moment when life ended. Satisfied, she turned off the water.