

The fortune teller

‘Hey, where’s Neeraj?’

This was the question on everybody’s lips, after a new management trainee joined the office.

Neeraj was a tall thin bamboo pole of a fellow, competent in his field, was a nice and likeable guy with many good qualities, including a talent for anecdotes and mimicry.

But that wasn’t the reason why he was so sought after. The secret of his appeal lay in the fact that he was a fortune teller!

Well – a palmist, technically...he didn’t lay out horoscope charts, or have a parrot and cards or stuff – you can’t do that in an office, even in a crazy office like mine. He simply peered at your palm and told you stuff.

At first it would be all in good fun...we would all sit around together and one guy would show him his palm and we would all joke and laugh as Neeraj started telling him stuff. But it would start getting more and more serious as the bugger started hitting closer and closer to the mark. He could identify hidden personality traits, old love affairs, current personal problems, habits and personalities of close friends and relations...the list was endless. For palm reading to be an entertaining parlour game, it is very essential that the palm reader or fortune teller not to come too close to the truth. As long as he spouts generalities and good things, it is fine - But if hidden depths start getting revealed, then it becomes too close for comfort.

The guy getting his palm read would get his face red – if you get what I am saying – and start sweating and shifting uncomfortably in his chair. Soon he would beg off and walk off – but later would be seen sidling up to Neeraj to request a private palm reading in some deserted conference room.

I remember one colleague of mine, Jha, recounting his experience to me.

‘*Yaar*, at first I thought that he must be a faker. After all, most people’s lives are quite common. One is born, has personality traits, has love affairs, etc. If one knows the person whose palm is being read, one can guess various personality traits through observing his behaviour and then pretend that he has read them off his palm.

So I was quite cynical when he began reading my palm, and was determined to volunteer no information whatsoever if he started to ask leading questions. But he did not ask any such thing. He peered at my hand closely, and said that I had had a major life changing love affair when I was 18.

It was true.

But I tried to discount the fact – after all, lots of people must be having intense love affairs when they are eighteen. Puberty has hit, and hormones are flowing and you are in a mating frenzy. And such affairs rarely work out – hence they are unhappy. Big deal.

But then he told me her name ! he said that it would start with ‘S’ or ‘M’.

And that really zapped me! Because her name was Srijia Mukherjee!’

Neeraj was aware of this, and to do him credit, was a very responsible palm reader.

‘There is a rule in fortune telling’ he used to say ‘there should be only 4 ears present – 2 of the astrologer, and 2 of the listener. No third person is allowed to hear anything of what is said.’ Thus he used to be very clear that he would do serious palm reading only if he was alone with his client.

When surrounded by people, he used to be very careful to talk only generalities, and talk only good things, or only very mild bad things.

His fame went through the office like wild fire, and soon everyone wanted to get his palm read and fortune told by Neeraj. This was intensified when he made some really accurate predictions. The most famous one was the time he looked at Jha's palm.

'Arre! What are you doing here? You should not be here at all!'

'What do you mean?' Jha was startled.

'As per the lines of your palm, you should be in US!'

Jha was shocked. It was his dearest wish to go and live in the US, and it was his greatest regret that that he was not there as yet. But this was a secret wish of his, which he had shared with no one.

'U...U....US...?'

'Yes! I am absolutely positive. As per your hand, you should be in US by now, or you will be there very shortly. Have you given an interview – or started the process?'

'No...not at all...' Jha said, wonderingly.

But within a month Jha was all packed – job offer letter and passport in hand, with a Visa warming the passport from inside!

It was an unbelievable concatenation of events, wherein he got an interview call out of the blue, got offered some software sales job at a handsome salary– when he didn't know the first thing about software! Jha went off singing Neeraj's praises and Neeraj became the toast of the company.

Everybody seemed to want his or her palm read after that – management trainees, marketing managers, finance managers, secretaries – everybody. Once the venerable and crusty head of the department, Mr Gupte, saw a group of people clustered around Neeraj when they should have been working. When that crowd saw that old Gupte was glaring at them, they vanished as if dispersed by a riot squad and water cannon! Gupte brusquely summoned Neeraj to his cabin. Every person in the office watched out of the corner of their eyes as Neeraj turned pale and entered his cabin, popularly known as the 'Lion's den'. We expected Neeraj to get a boot up his arse for time wasting during office hours, but it turned out OK. Old Gupte also wanted to get his hand read by Neeraj and had called him into the office to get his hand read in privacy.

As time went by, Neeraj and me became close friends. Both of us were bachelors, and we had a lot of time. We used to meet up every night and chat till late in the night. He told me about how he had been learning palmistry and astrology from his guru for many years, and the kind of effort he had had to put in to become a good palmist. But just putting in effort would not suffice, he said, because to become an astrologer, one had to have a talent – a bent of mind – a kind of sixth sense.

'Sometimes when I read a palm, or see a horoscope, I get a sort of intuitive flash. ...an insight into the person – into his past, and to an extent – into his future. I tell you – I know so much about the people in the office - I can't tell anyone about it. It is essential for a palmist to be discreet and never betray a confidence or the knowledge he has gained about the person. It is also necessary for him to be a good psychologist.'

'Psychologist?'

'Oh yes. We have to see whether the person is capable of hearing the truth...what his personality is like...what his mental state is like. A lot of people...nearly all people, I should say – who come to astrologer, have come because they are in trouble – serious trouble – and are looking to know how long it will last, or how it can be solved. Sometimes, we have really to think whether to tell him the truth about his future or not.'

'Why is that?'

'I will give you an example. Once I was seeing a boy's palm, and I got a sudden intuitive flash that the boy is going to die within six months! Now...what can I say to the boy? After all, I may be wrong. And even if I am right, would I be right in telling him so? It would be

like killing him before his time. An unexpected, surprise death is better than looking at the calendar, then the clock – waiting for impending death.’

‘So...did you tell him then?’

‘No *yaar*. I couldn’t. I kept quiet.’

‘Then...what happened?’

‘Oh, he died within a few months, as I thought. Completely accidental. Got hit by a truck a he was crossing the road. I tell you – this fortune telling stuff can get very depressing at times. After all – does one really want to know what the future really holds?’ and he would look at his own hand pensively.

Thus time went by, and one day there was some happy news in the office. Neeraj had found a girl and was getting engaged. I had left the company by then, and found out about this later. He was a Marwari and got engaged to a nice Marwari girl called Seema. It was a formal arranged marriage, in the sense that the elders had got together and suggested an alliance, and it was modern in the sense that the children were allowed to meet and give a final go-ahead before the matter was settled.

It was quite an amusing couple – he was six feet tall and thin as a stick and she was tiny . We used to refer to them as a n ‘Amitabh and Jaya Bhaduri’ couple. ‘The long and short of marriage’ as someone punned. We used to make ribald jokes about the fact that he would get Spondylitis because he would have to bend double just to kiss her, and not to mention the difficulties in bed – he would be seeing only the pillow while they made love. So he could either kiss her or make love – never both at the same time.

Not just in height, they were different in temperament too – as we discovered during the year-long engagement. He would rather stay at home, while she would be wild to go to parties and socialise. He was laid back, where she was aggressive and dominating. He was a very *desi* guy, while she was a Page 3 wannabe. She used to dominate him like anything, and I could see that he was going to be really henpecked after marriage. She was cute and all, but I used to be scared off by her.

Finally the wedding happened, and we were invited to Pune for the lavish wedding celebrations. It was really a grand affair, as the girl’s family were really rich, and they really lashed out on the wedding. The guests were put up in one 5 star hotel, while the wedding was in another 5 star. Money flowed like water, and everyone had a good time. It was my first time at a moneybags wedding, and I was duly impressed. Neeraj had caught a big fish here. I was pretty busy after that for a few months, and was out of touch for some time.

So imagine my shock when I heard that Neeraj and Seema were separated and getting divorced! After just a few months of marriage!

Neeraj went through tremendous mental trauma, and presumably Seema did too. I never did meet her, but I used to follow her blog and could see that she was also affected.

It was difficult to meet Neeraj after that, because he withdrew into a shell, and became a sort of hermit. He was emotionally burnt out, and tried to avoid all human company. Let alone meeting people, he did not even talk on the phone to anybody. He used to keep his mobile switched off and disconnected his home phone. Like a wounded animal, he wanted to crawl into his cave and lick his wounds until they became better.

I used to talk to him a few times, and try to keep his spirits up. Whenever we had get-togethers, we used to call him; and one the rare occasions that he did come, we used to try and cheer him up as much as possible.

As the months passed, time the great healer exerted his influence, and bit by bit he came back to normal. One could see the troubled, vacuous look vanish from his eyes, his voice took on a new confident timbre, his shoulders changed from being in a listless stoop to a square position. He again became the cheerful and confident extrovert he was earlier. The earlier

innocence of his personality, which we used to find so appealing, was gone. But that was but a small loss – considering that he had got the rest of his persona back.

After he had recovered, we met up at his place for a drink. As we mellowed under the influence of alcohol, we discussed various topics under the sun. Somehow the subject turned to astrology, and I couldn't control the question that had been haunting a lot of us over the past year.

'Oy Neeraj, tell me one thing. You were such a renowned fortune teller – you made so many accurate forecasts...why didn't you look at your own palm and check the compatibility between you and Seema before you got married? How could you inflict so much pain and misery upon yourself and your family?'

Neeraj sighed and looked up at the ceiling. We were more than halfway through the bottle now, and we were quite relaxed and sprawled out on his comfortable sofa. He sighed again, and took another pull at his glass and answered.

'*Arre yaar* – An astrologer is not supposed to read his own palm, or that of his close family members.'

'Don't give me that crap. You always used to be staring at your own palm.'

'True. True. I just said that an astrologer is not supposed to read his own palm. But I did. Therefore I knew what was going to happen to me...the lines for a traumatic first marriage and separation were quite clear.'

'You knew?!' I sat up with a jerk. 'What are you saying...you knew? Then why...what...why...why didn't you do something...?' I was shocked.

'What could I do? I tried to tell my parents, but they said that I was nuts. I had suggested some *pooja* and mantras, but they said that it was all superstition and vetoed the idea. Not that I was very confident about it as a solution, but it was a thought.'

'But then, why on earth did you agree to marriage? Why didn't you read Seema's horoscope and check whether it was compatible to yours?'

'*Arre bhai*...the problem was in my horoscope, not the girl's. Whichever girl I married, I was due for marital problems anyway.'

'But...but...' I couldn't think of anything logical to say.

'So...' continued Neeraj 'I did the next best thing.'

'Next best? What...' I asked wonderingly

'I picked out a girl I did not like much anyway, so the marriage would not be a complete loss. And she was a cute piece too...a good screw, while it lasted.'

'Eh?!'

Neeraj became silent at that point, and I couldn't think of anything to say. In that uncomfortable silence, I looked around his room – the big two door fridge, the huge Sony TV, the expensive music system and home theatre, the huge Mac, the fancy AC....

'Yeah...a good screw...and a nice dowry into the bargain...'

Neeraj sipped his drink and looked dreamily at the ceiling.

'The wealth line on my palm was always good...'
