

I should have trusted my instincts.

Earthsong. It sounded like a progressive music camp where hippie parents send their kids to learn to meditate and play the bongos. The way I was feeling, I had no business coming anywhere near a restaurant called Earthsong. But it was Diego's party. He was my best friend.

"Come on, you can put up with vegan finger foods and movie industry people talking about karma for a couple of hours, can't you? Emily's coming. And it's open bar." Diego can be very persuasive.

Just ten minutes from Malibu, tucked away in a quiet fold of Topanga Canyon, Earthsong billed itself as a spiritually-minded retreat from the crass commercialism of LA. As if to keep the material world at bay, a large statue of Kali guarded the entrance, waving swords and severed heads at me as I parked at the end of a row of Mercedes and BMWs. Edging past the god of death I descended a set of stairs and joined a well-dressed crowd scattered in groups on the restaurant's creekside patio among gnarled oak trees, fountains and oversized pottery. A faint smell of incense drifted through the warm June air. It was like arriving at the country estate of a wealthy Hobbit. A Hindu Hobbit. It could only mean trouble.

I felt the urge to sneak away again – I just wasn't in the mood for a party full of flaky strangers – but I shook it off and went in search of a drink. Two waitresses were carrying trays of wine glasses, but they both seemed determined to avoid me. One of them had just hurriedly shot the gap between a hyperactive scriptwriter and a large plant when I spotted Diego whispering into the ear of a pretty blonde. I hesitated, not wanting to butt in, but he waved me over.

"Hey Pete, how's it going?" Diego's smile was almost broad enough to eclipse his bald spot. I glanced at the girl. Clearly he expected to score.

"Fine, just fine. Nice party. The studio's really paying for all this?"

"Of course. Got to show some appreciation to the cast and crew. And to friends of the director of course... Speaking of which, let me introduce you, this is Stacie."

"Stacie Sullivan. Technical consultant," she emitted in a sharp, strong, controlled voice. "Good to know you," she added, as if as an afterthought, and held out a lean hand to shake.

"Peter McFadden," I replied, taking her hand and shaking it as firmly as it seemed to invite. "Party crasher?"

A faint smile lingered on her face as my attempt at humor bounced off her and clattered to the floor. Diego maintained a patriarchal silence for a second or two before he intervened.

"Pete's an old friend of mine. Computer animation geek, nothing to do with the film. Pete, you drinking the chardonnay or the pinot grigio?"

As if on cue a waitress appeared out of nowhere and handed Diego a glass of pale white wine, which he passed on to me like an aid worker handing out food rations. I couldn't help but smile. To me Diego would always be the sloppy twisted film student I'd shared a room with at UCLA, and this annoyingly smooth young Hollywood director he had become seemed like an imposter. Stacie was clearly taken in by it.

"Cheers then," said Stacie, holding up her glass. "Nice to actually talk to someone who doesn't work in Hollywood."

"Well, I have to admit, I did spend a couple of years in the business, sort of?"

"But you're sort of out of it now?"

"I'm sort of out of a job now." I did my best to smile and glance around casually, hoping to avoid the look. I would usually get one of two looks: either the smelly greeting card "I'm so sorry" look, or that tightening of the lower lip and quick nodding of the head which said "I feel your pain, but we've all got to hang in there sport." They both sucked. What I got instead was worse: an unobstructed view of Daniel, miserable evil you-got-Emily-and-I-didn't-you-bastard Daniel, giving the love of my life's perfect backside a lingering squeeze. I quickly looked back at Stacie.

"Oh, sorry to hear it," she said gently. "But you did something with computers?"

I glanced at Diego, who was elbowing me in an almost subtle and mildly painful way while waving over another woman. "I was doing CGI work for a cybergnat in Pasadena."

She stiffened slightly. "I'm afraid I don't know what that is." Something in her voice made me feel that this was my fault.

"Computer generated imagery, special effects kind of stuff," I answered, perking up at the opportunity to

explain possibly the only thing I'd ever been passionate about. I'd been proud of my job at Alcantrix, and not too bad at it either. Making monsters, building spaceships, designing planets to help fill the sitcom-bleached void that used to be the territory of children's imaginations – it was every boy's dream. Well, it was mine, at least, and it had come true. Until I screwed it up. That's an ugly story, best forgotten. It turned out that my boss didn't have quite the same sense of humor as I did, especially when it came to prank video clips involving him and several barnyard animals that a thoughtful colleague of mine accidentally forwarded to him. Not my proudest moment. Six months had passed, but the blood still rushed to my face whenever I thought of it.

Stacie encouraged me to get back into the saddle and wondered aloud if low self-esteem might be holding me back. This happened to me from time to time, I'd meet sensitive people who wanted to help me. Not that they wanted to give me a job – no one wanted to do that. They just wanted to talk to me, get to the root of my problems, help me think through my situation and visualize a positive outcome. It drove me nuts.

"I'm not worried," I insisted. "There are a lot of options out there." This was my standard line. Vague and positive. People love that.

"Excuse me," Diego interrupted as a tall, striking Chinese woman, 40-ish I'd guess, arrived in answer to his slightly manic hand gestures. "Lin, this is my best friend Pete McFadden. Pete, this is Lin."

We shook hands. "A pleasure," she said in a crisp, almost melodic English accent, eyeing me skeptically and waiting for Diego to explain his oddly placed enthusiasm. But Stacie was not so easily derailed.

"Peter here is unemployed," she remarked, as if this were good news. "I was just about to ask him his sign. If it's not too personal a question," she added, turning to me.

I gave her a blank look.

"You know, your star sign, in astrology."

"Oh, Leo."

"I thought so," she said, with a smug smile creeping over her face. "You're obviously really intense, energetic, assertive. Classic Leo. I wouldn't worry – you won't give up until you achieve your inner goals. Do you know your ascendant?"

I'd gotten used to this, too. Most people on the planet are content to read a horoscope, accept it if it's good, laugh at it if it's bad, like you do with fortune cookies or those eight-ball shaped fortune tellers you get in magic shops. But in California you inevitably get stuck talking to someone who takes astrology seriously and wants to discuss its finer points as a doctor might talk about the latest advances in gene therapy. And there's no arguing with them either. Point out that the system depends on a pre-Copernican view of the universe with the earth at the center, they will tell you "oh, they've adjusted it for that," as if it's a minor point that can be fixed with a little adjusting. Ask them how a random pattern of stars could affect our characters, they'll make vague references to the moon and the tide. Any excuse to convince themselves that they have access to answers that you don't, that they can know your weaknesses even if you are oblivious to them. Any excuse to be able to judge you. I was not in the mood to be judged that evening.

"Sorry, but I don't buy into astrology. Too medieval a worldview for my taste, destiny and fate and life being ruled by the stars."

She flashed a knowing look at Lin. "That's a common misconception. Astrology is not medieval. It's been practiced since ancient Sumerian times. In any case its ancient origin doesn't make it outdated, any more than it makes agriculture outdated."

It was my turn to glance at Lin. No response but a funny, concerned sort of expression on her face. Diego looked panicked. I realized that I was probably embarrassing his girl, maybe blowing his chance at scoring, but somehow I couldn't hold back. I was already in a bad mood, and "serious" astrology pissed me off. I'd made a living indulging people's fantasies just like astrologers do, but I never stood around at parties trying to make evolutionary arguments for the existence of three-headed dragons. I'd always found much simpler ways of embarrassing myself.

"Okay, but the constellations have changed since then. We've discovered new planets. The sun and stars don't revolve around the earth anymore, last I checked."

"That's been adjusted for." Her smug smile remained, but she was beginning to sound weary, like a mother telling her kid to brush his teeth.

A good-looking guy – late 50's, wearing a blazer and that classic Yankees baseball cap people wear when they're too old to be wearing baseball caps – drifted up next to Lin and took her hand. Diego narrowed his eyes at me and his head trembled a little. Stacie smiled at the newcomer but continued her argument with me.

“You see astrology, Peter, is actually very scientific.”

“Can we change the subject..” Diego began.

“But science is about observation and experiment and all that.”

“And three thousand years of observation isn’t enough for you?”

“People see what they want to see. They just want a little reassurance that they’re not messing things up. I even saw something in the paper the other day on consulting the stars when deciding where to go on vacation, like Jupiter cares whether I go to Tahoe or Tijuana. Trust me, astrology’s a con.”

Stacie looked pleased, and just a little bit vicious, answering “I teach astrology, both western and Vedic. I also work as a consultant on mind, body and spirit issues generally.”

“Oh.” Shit.

“If the article you read was the one in the LA Times in April, I wrote it.” She stared right through me as she might the remains of a bug on her windshield. Pathetic. I’d had months to cultivate an air of bitter middle class disillusionment, and it turned out I wasn’t even good at that.

“Of course there’s a big difference between the rubbish horoscopes you get in the Sunday paper and the experience of consulting a talented practitioner like Stacie.” Lin’s soothing voice, each of its elegant English syllables gently foreshortened by a hint of no-nonsense Chinese, seemed immediately to dampen any hostility that had crept into the conversation, but its contrast with my own made me feel all the more ridiculous for not knowing when to shut up. “I used to be very skeptical as well – of course in Hong Kong I grew up with Chinese astrology, but I never thought much of it – but then I met Stacie. I can’t claim to understand why it works, but in her hands, astrology works. Even Vasili can’t argue his way round that.”

She pulled her partner’s hand closer and gave it a brisk rub between her own, a sort of consolation for his inability to argue away her belief in astrology, or maybe a gentle warning not to try.

“The thing is,” I answered, determined not to give up, “of course it seems to work. It’s really not that hard to make a bunch of generalized observations and have a few of them turn out to be right.”

“But so many seem to be right, and so few wrong,” Lin objected.

“That’s because we remember the right ones and forget the wrong ones. It’s just a question of understanding human nature.”

“The best psychologist in the world couldn’t get the results I do.” Stacie was getting mad. Diego tried to interrupt again but I wouldn’t let him.

“He could if he dressed it up with some New Agey terminology, based it on something a little spooky. You don’t have to be the Bagwan Sri Rajneesh. Given a little time, I think I could do it myself.

Stacie scoffed. “Not a chance.”

“Can I, um, break in here for just a second.” Diego sounded stressed and irritated. “I just wanted to introduce you two..”

At this point Lin’s partner, who so far had listened silently to our discussion with a bemused look on his face, held out his hand to me. “Vasili Papayannis.” My hand shook his up and down, mechanically, but every other biological process in my body had frozen. Vas Papayannis. Damn.

The world of computer-generated imagery is a constantly changing one, but there are a few names that have stuck around right from the beginning. Everyone knows ILM and Pixar and those guys. But one layer down on the food chain there were a handful of animation studios doing amazing CGI work. And Vas Papayannis’ company IMaginInc was one of the best. The guy was a legend, and I’d have killed to work for him. Shit, I’d have killed to work as assistant to his PA’s secretary. Getting this bastard his coffee in the morning would have been a good career move for me even when I had a job. I’d sent his company my resume three times. And each time it had bounced back off his human resources department like a rubber ball. “Thank you for your interest in IMaginInc. Your credentials are impressive, but unfortunately do not suit our immediate requirements. Best of luck in your future endeavors.” Yeah, fuck you too.

“Er, Peter McFadden, nice to meet you, although I feel like I already know you. I mean, not, you know, know you, but, well..” Duh.

“Pete here is in your line of work,” Diego explained, smiling furiously at me and digging his heel quickly into the top of my foot.

“Really? Who you working for?” He was that type of overachiever who could act like your best friend in the way you might pet someone else’s dog.

“Well, I was an animator with a company called Alcantrix, but I..”

“Pete’s taking some time off to think about what direction he wants his career to take.” Good old Diego.

“Alcantrix, I know them. That’s Dave Abramovitch’s outfit, isn’t it? Hey, you ever see that barnyard video clip of him that was floating around the internet last year?”

I smiled weakly.

“So where you looking to go now?”

“I’m hoping for a bigger studio job. I, um, I’d like to work for you, to tell you the truth.”

This is where I expected the guy to look nervous, but he didn’t even blink.

“Never know,” he said casually, “when we get to a point where we’re hiring again. . . But listen, about what you were saying, how would you do it, make up your own system of astrology?”

That had to be one of the most pathetic changes of subject to avoid an awkward conversation I’d ever heard. Whatever, this guy would never give me an interview, much less a job.

“Well, first of all I’d decide on a handful of personality types, make them as broad and vague as possible, and then tack them onto something else instead of the positions of the stars. Come up with some kind of formula where you would plug in people’s birthdays, or the number of freckles on their noses, anything. Any excuse to assign them to one of the personality types.”

“And then?” Lin and Vas both watched me intently, as if something monumental depended on my answer. Stacie had turned her back to me and was involved in a whispering argument with Diego.

“I’d have to think about it a little more,” I said, becoming flustered. “You’d need some kind of spiritual-sounding pretext, I think, some reason why it was all supposed to work. Something to do with Mayan pyramids, maybe.”

“But what you’re saying is that there’d be no real connection, nothing genuinely causal. And then you’d just tell people what you think they want to hear?”

“Exactly! If you played it right, I think it could be just as convincing as astrology or tarot cards or whatever.”

Vas turned to Lin and raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve got to admit,” she said thoughtfully, “if someone could show me that that worked as well as astrology, it would be food for thought.”

“I think it would be a little more than that, Lin.” This was too good to be true. Vas was on my side.

“It wouldn’t actually prove anything, though. . .”

“So Pete,” Vas turned back to me, “is this something you’re actually working on, or is it just casual party bullshit?”

“Well. . .”

“Because I’d be really interested to see how it works. It’s kind of a running argument between me and Lin, this whole astrology business. I’d be pretty excited if someone could come up with proof like that. Lin’s very open-minded about it all.”

“It’s kind of a work in progress.” Yes, inspired. Brilliant. Completely nuts, but anything, anything to get this guy on my side, was worth a try.

“Great. Listen, here’s my card. When you’ve really got it polished, give me a call. Great stuff.”

Vas and Lin were dragged off by a few of the other guests – employed-looking sort of people – and Stacie broke off from arguing with Diego and rushed to join them. Diego just glared at me for a minute before administering a not-too-gentle smack on the side of the head.

“Nice people,” I offered.

“Well done, dickhead. Can you not possibly spend five minutes, just five minutes of your pathetic failure of a life, without opening your mouth and pouring out a bucketful of idiotic bullshit?”

“I think we hit it off. He found me interesting.”

“Sea urchins are interesting. They still don’t get jobs. Hopeless.”

“Yeah, well while you were battling it out with Mystic Martha, Vas gave me his card. Said to give him a call.” Diego’s eyes grew very wide, and then contracted again right down into two skeptical little pinpricks.

“Why?”

“He asked me to do him a little favor, and he made it sound like maybe if I succeeded he might do me a little favor in return.”

Diego shifted gears from scowling to beaming in 0.6 seconds. After a few Yes’s and high fives – he’d really been trying his best for me – he asked me what the favor was.

“Well, he was just hoping, um, all I have to do is disprove astrology.”

Diego stared blankly at me. “Oh, is that it?”

“Yep.”

“Disprove a system of thought that is more widely believed than Christianity? Sure that’s all?”

“That’s all.”

He nodded his head slowly and, with less conviction this time, hit me in the head again. “Sorry, man.”

He was being called away by some of the other guests and slowly turned to go.
“Hey Diego?” I called after him.
“Hmm?”
I just stared stupidly back at him, the words not coming.
“Don’t mention it,” he muttered, and left me alone in the hum of the crowd.

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