

Bump

The print was small, so Stan urged, “Mama, go faster so I can read it.”

“I can’t get close enough for you to read that,” she replied. “It wouldn’t be safe.” But when they came to a stoplight, he urged her to move closer, and she did. The bumper sticker read:

If you can read this, you’re too close.

Stan smiled. Reading bumper stickers made being in the car more fun. The first bumper sticker Stan stuck on the VW his mother bought him said simply:

49ers

He knew all their stats and was loyal even when they were in a slump. He placed the red and gold decal in the center of the rear bumper. It was soon joined by a second sticker, a takeoff on the name of Jesus—shaped like a fish but with legs. It said:

Darwin

Stan trimmed his car with stickers, arching over the wheel wells from front to back on both sides and above the windows. He gained some notoriety when a newspaper reporter did a feature about him and his VW.

To make the shot more interesting, the photographer had said, “Get in the car and hang out the window.” In the picture, Stan’s upper body was sticking out of the window and his left hand was making a peace sign. The wind had lifted his long hair off his neck and his grin showed a perfect set of teeth. Neighbors who read the story had already given him a nickname, *Bump*, from his bumper stickers. His best friend Dave teased him, that he was about as useful as a bump on a log.

Stan attached his third bumper sticker along the bottom of the driver’s side and began parking on the far side of the double driveway to avoid his mother’s eyes. This one read:

SHIT HAPPENS.

Stan had never seen a bumper sticker that said: **GRACE HAPPENS** and if he had, he wouldn’t have put it on his VW. That wasn’t life as Stan saw it. Years after dropping out of school, Stan still lived at home with his mother. He would move out tomorrow if only he could afford it.

From his room, he could hear his mother trudging down the hall with her sample cases. The cosmetics were heavy, so he went to help her. He arranged the cases in the back of her SUV, and she came out carrying an umbrella. It might rain.

The phone rang and Stan rushed to check the caller ID before his mother got to it. When he saw who was calling, he let it ring. “Who’s that on the phone?” his mother yelled.

He didn’t answer. Instead, he said, “I’m going over to Dave’s to hang out till he goes to work.” He got in his van and left before she did.

Dave, in pajamas and with bare feet, answered Stan’s knock at the door. His hair was mussed; it always was. It had a weird natural wave so whether it was long or short, combed or not, it looked messy. His boss at Jack-in-the-Box made him wear a hairnet from the time he came in the door until the time he checked out.

“Hey, man,” said Dave, “where’s the fire?” Dave’s mother, like Stan’s, was at work, a clerk in a department store. Dave started coffee.

“I think I’ve got a job. I’m not sure, but it looks good. Mother will explode when she hears what it is.”

“Explode? What is it? Robbing banks?” He could not suppress a smile.

“It’s reading tarot cards for people over the phone—working for a psychic hotline.”

“You’re kidding. They’ll pay you to do that?”

“It’s part-time, \$12.50 an hour. My problem is I need a phone line. I’ll have to ask mom for help. I don’t know how much it will cost, but when it’s up and running, I’ll be raking in the dough—I hope.” Dave poured coffee for both of them. “I’m not like you. You know my brain won’t work without a caffeine jump start.” He took a sip. “That’s better.”

Stan said, “Just think. We could move out, share an apartment as we’ve always talked about.”

“Apartments are high. Just paying half the rent would be a stretch for me. Every time I’m ready to ask my manager for a raise, they change managers. I’m still stuck at minimum.”

“Let’s wait and see how much I bring in.”

They talked all day till it was time for Dave to go to work. “I hear Jack calling, ‘Come flip my burger.’”

When Stan arrived home, the house was empty and silent. He made himself a baloney sandwich. His mother bought good baloney. He liked it with Jack cheese and lots of mayonnaise. With a glass of iced tea, he had just sat down to eat when he heard his mother’s SUV pull up and the motor stop. He sat in place at the kitchen table and waited, hearing her drop her sample cases in the spare room. After a hard day pushing cosmetics, she was tired and resentful at pulling the whole load at home.

The minute she spied him in the kitchen she began. “Did you look for a job today? Did you even apply? You can’t live like this forever. I’m going to die someday, you know.” It was like a mantra. Her eyes looked tired, but she mustered up the energy to say, “You’re a nice boy. If you’d get a haircut and show as much interest in getting a job as you do in bumper stickers, you might get someplace in life.”

He was keenly aware that by her estimate, he had not gotten anywhere in life. Stan had worked several jobs since high school. He laid carpet long enough to get pretty skilled, including carrying heavy rolls of carpet and padding, alone when necessary. His knee still hurt from using the kicker to tighten carpets at the edges. He might still be doing it, but when he tried to make a few suggestions to his boss, a few too many his mother suspected, they let him go without notice. He was glad enough. He might have injured his knee permanently.

He washed dishes in a high-class restaurant, but they wanted slave labor for minimum wage. The restaurant catered to a classy clientele, but there was nothing high class in the kitchen. There wasn’t enough ventilation to keep the air healthy, and the large vats he cleaned with caustic substances might have affected his lungs. Stan wasn’t going to kill himself for what they paid. He tried other jobs, but none of them had lasted. *Bad luck*, he thought.

He waited for his mother to pause for a breath, and then said, “As a matter of fact, I got a job today.”

She spun around like she had won the lottery. “You did? What is it? When do you start?” Then her eyes narrowed. “Exactly what job did you get?”

“I’ll be making \$12.50 an hour working part-time. I figure at \$12.50 an hour, minus taxes, I should clear about \$1,700 a month, over \$20,000 a year. I could get an apartment, and even start paying you back. That’s more money than any of the other jobs I’ve had.” His reference to moving out might soften the impact of his answer to her question.

“What’s the job?” she repeated.

“Reading tarot cards.”

“Oh, my God!” she said. “Another hair-brained scheme.”

“I got a job reading cards for a psychic network.”

She was still shaking her head.

“Hear me out. All I need is a phone to take calls. I can work here at home. You’ll have to help me with a new phone line, but I’ll pay you back out of my first check.”

“Tarot cards? What do you know about tarot cards? Is that the scam of the month?”

“Let me explain,” Stan calmed her. “I’ve been reading cards for years. My friends say I’m pretty good. I’m usually right about their problems.”

She was still trying to take it all in. “How on earth did you ever find a job like that?”

“I saw an ad in the newspaper for a part-time reader. It said: ‘Wanted: card readers: \$12.50 an hour, 25 hours a week part-time,’ and gave a phone number. I couldn’t sleep for a whole week thinking about it, so I called.”

She stared directly at Stan but did not move.

“Their machine said to leave a name, number, and a message, if you’ve had experience, or if you’re calling for a trainee position. The next day a coach named Heidi called from the Psychic Power Line. She gave me a time to call back and give her a sample reading.”

With a sigh, his mother folded her arms under her breasts and her lips tightened like a child refusing to take medicine.

“The next day I did a reading for her. She explained the job and said I’d be working from home. I got a contract in the mail that said I would be giving ‘massages’ over the phone,” he laughed at the typo, “but I think they meant messages. I thought it was cool, so I signed it.” He added, “But I need a phone.”

“And you expect me to pay for it? Do you know how much a new phone line costs? If this doesn’t last any longer than other jobs you’ve had, that’s money down the drain. Can’t you find something better?”

“You’re always bugging me about getting a job, so at least let me give it a try. We’ll never know if I can do this unless you help me.” Stan was sliding home. “Maybe this is a chance to get me out of your hair.” He grinned. He knew she would say yes.

“Okay. I give up. I’ll do it,” she said, “on one condition. We get a speakerphone. As long as I’m paying the bill, I’m entitled to know what I’m paying for.” She shook her head and mumbled as she turned to leave, “I must be crazy.”

The lineman from the telephone company installed the new line three days later. Stan bought a white Slimline phone with caller ID and a callback feature, in case he needed it—and a speakerphone. It sat on a small table by his bed. As quickly as the lineman left, Stan dialed the psychic hotline to give them his number.

They said, “Now it’s only a matter of time. You can sign in this afternoon, then wait for your first caller. Good luck, Stan.”

At 9:00 P.M. he logged in. A recorded voice went on for several minutes, a generic speech to all readers. “What a marvelous job you’re doing! Thousands of people have been logging on, and we expect to be busier tonight than ever before. Go get ’em, team!”

Stan hung sat on his bed waiting. He could see his mother across the hall, watching TV, listening for the sound of the phone. Five minutes passed before the phone rang.

Stan picked up the receiver and recorded the time. “Good evening. Welcome to PPL. How’re you doing?” His mother walked in and sat in the only chair in the room, her hands in her lap. A female voice asked, “Is this part of my five free minutes?”

“Yes. My name is Stan and my extension is 40667 in case we get cut off. May I please have your name and will you spell it?”

“Melissa Perls, P-e-r-l-s.”

“And Melissa, when is your birthday?”

“December 24.”

“And the city you’re calling from?”

“Charlotte, North Carolina.”

“How ya doin’, Melissa?”

She didn’t seem to know how to proceed, so Stan said, “I’m a card reader. Do you have a question for me?”

“Yes,” she said. “I don’t quite know how to put this.”

He guessed. “Is it a marital problem, Melissa?”

“How did you know?”

“I must be a bit psychic.” They both laughed.

“Melissa, here’s what I want you to do for me: Close your eyes and concentrate on your problem. I’ll begin shuffling the cards. When you have the problem clearly in mind, you say stop.” He began to shuffle and she stopped him during his third round.

“Okay, now I’m going to cut the deck into three stacks. You choose which stack you want me to use for your reading.”

She chose stack two and he said, “Just give me a few seconds to lay out the cards, and we’ll begin.”

His mother watched as he placed the cards in a clock-like pattern, the first two in the center, and two each at 6:00, 9:00, 12:00, and 3:00. The remaining eight cards went two each at 4:30, then 7:30, 10:30, and 1:30. Stan had discovered from experience changing the order fouled up the messages he got from the cards.

Melissa interrupted, "I think my five minutes are up. I have your extension. I'll call you right back."

The phone went dead and he recorded the time: 9:11. He was sorry he had spent so much time shuffling and dealing the cards, but he couldn't vary from his procedure.

With brows furrowed, Stan's mother looked skeptical. "Do people believe they could find out anything important about their lives from a stack of cards?"

Stan fidgeted with his pencil and notepad, but he didn't touch the card layout. The phone rang. It was Melissa.

"I wasn't sure I was going to get through to you. I had to dial twice."

"Well, Melissa, I guess you're just lucky." Stan was moving into familiar territory. He began his reading by turning over the two cards in the center. "Melissa, I see the Fool and the King of Wands inverted." He said, "It looks like you're at a crossroads with your marriage. Something's happened to give you doubts about the relationship. It appears you and your husband are not fighting, but it looks like you're more friends than husband and wife. Is that correct?"

"That's pretty close," she replied. Stan glanced at his mother who shook her head. Stan looked at the cards at the 6:00 position, the King of Cups inverted and the Devil. "I see another man trying to enter the scene. Is that correct?"

"You're right," she said. "You're amazing."

"This other man looks like maybe an ex-husband. He's still interested in you but only physically, not so much for who you are." At the 3:00 position, he turned over the Five of Wands and the Ace of Discs. "I'm also seeing there's a trip in question? Are you wondering if you should go?"

"You nailed it!"

Stan knew he had the option to stop reading the cards and simply discuss her problem, but he believed the cards. He had read cards many times, and every time he did, he found some reason, great or small, to re-affirm his faith in them.

"I just separated on fairly peaceful terms from my husband after seven years. We thought our marriage was going nowhere. We're still talking, and we have no children to consider—neither of us wanted any. Now my 'Ex' has called, asking me to go with him to a cabin in the mountains for the weekend."

"Why do you think he's suddenly interested in you?"

"While we were married I got a little on the heavy side, but since divorcing him, I've been working out. I ran into him in the supermarket. He didn't recognize me till I tapped him on the shoulder. He said he couldn't believe how gorgeous I was."

Stan picked up the cards at the 4:30 position—the Queen of Wands and the Lovers inverted. "He's only interested in you because of your good looks. He doesn't want to get married; he just wants the honeymoon."

Stan's mother left the room. It was time for her nightly bowl of vanilla ice cream with Hershey's chocolate topping. When she returned a few minutes later, ice cream in hand, Stan was still talking to the same person, and they were still on the same topic.

Melissa said, "He's invited two friends for the same weekend, and I'm not sure if they'll bring girls with them. I don't always get along with other women."

The cards in the 10:30 position were the Nine of Swords and the Ten of Swords. "Melissa, I'm going to be completely honest about what I see in the cards."

"Please," she said, "be honest. Don't hold back."

He warned, "There are signs there could be an element of danger in the trip. It might be a good idea to find out if there will be other women present."

"I trust my ex-husband. I've never had reason to mistrust him."

"Still," Stan said, "the cards indicate an element of danger. Don't totally ignore the possibility."

"Oh! I've been on longer than I should've. This might break my bank, but thanks for the reading, and most of all, thanks for being upfront with me."

The call had lasted 60 minutes. "Boy!" Stan said putting the phone down, "Is she going to be mad when she gets the bill! At \$3.99 a minute, that'll add up big time."

“Doesn’t she know she could see a therapist for a lot less money?” Stan’s mother blurted out. “I can’t believe she told you all those private things. What sort of people take advice from fortune-tellers about their personal lives?”

Stan was not deterred. “I’ve done this a lot of times with friends. I thought I had to be face to face to do a reading, but I guess not. This is the first time I’ve tried it on the phone.”

Stan felt confident. He thought, “*I’ve finally found something I like to do, and I’m making money at the same time.*”

At the end of his first week, Stan got a call from Heidi, his psychic line coach. “Hey, Stan,” her voice had a smile in it. “You’ve logged a lot of time your first week with PPL. You’re great. I’m just calling to point out something you need to remember. You got a lot of calls, but most of them were short. Remember, we average your minutes by the number of calls. If you have a high average, our machine automatically sends you more calls. If your average is low, you don’t get as high a priority.” “I understand,” he said—and he did. The longer people are on, the more money the company makes. Heidi continued, “With free minutes for first-time callers, we go in the hole on short calls. We want you to give people answers to their questions, but remember, every minute you keep them on helps your average.” She laughed. “Maybe you could just give them their answers a little more slowly.” “I’m not sure I can. Sometimes the question is simple, and I can find an answer for them in a few minutes.”

“True, of course, but callers like friendly readers. Sometimes they just hang around to chat for a while. If they like you, they’ll call back and ask for your extension. At PPL we call it ‘filling your stable.’”

Stan understood the term. His mother had a “stable” of cosmetic clients. He guessed she kissed a lot of ass to sell as much as she did, but that wasn’t for him. Dealing with people’s lives was serious, not a scam.

He got a call toward the end of his second week. “Whatever you’re doing must be right, Stan. Your average has gone way up. Good work. You’re on the priority list. You should be getting a stream of calls.”

And Heidi was right. The calls came thick and heavy.

Stan logged in each night about the time his mother’s favorite TV shows came on. She liked Jessica Fletcher and Andy Griffith. She didn’t like shows with a lot of sex and violence. The door to Stan’s room stayed open, but she tried to keep the sound down.

One night Stan’s mother was walking past his door when she stopped. Stan got a call from a man in the military stationed in Hawaii. When she heard the caller say he was having sex with a married man, an officer who was still in the closet, she stifled a little gasp.

“When we’re together, we’re really intense,” the caller said. “We really hit it off. Physically, we really communicated well for a month or more, then he stopped taking my calls. I know he’s busy, but I guess it was just an affair, and he’ll never call again.” Stan’s mother walked out of the room and closed the door behind her.

Stan told the man to wait while he shuffled and laid out the cards. He reasoned that cards don’t care if people are straight or queer.

He turned over the first two cards and began. “It might be you’ll never hear from your officer friend again, but the cards indicate you’re going to come back together. There’s a social function I see you’ll be attending.”

“Right,” he said. “He and his wife will be there.”

“Play it cool,” Stan said. “Act as if nothing has happened, and let nature take its course.”

When Stan’s first paycheck came in the mail, he was so excited he just held it in his hand for a while. In his mind, he could see his dreams coming true. He could be his own person and no longer an appendage of his mother. This was the first big step on his stairway to freedom. However, when he saw the amount, it looked more like half a step. He called Heidi. She explained, “There are deductions—and the checks are always a week behind real-time. Remember, you’re being paid by the minute. The in-between minutes are on your own time.”

Still, his check was large enough so Stan could say, “Hey, mom, here’s \$75 for the phone line and a little rent.” He treated Dave to a meal at a place where people ordered off a menu rather than looking at a wall.

The next day Stan and Dave went apartment hunting. They began their search in a large complex. The manager ushered them into just what Stan had in mind, a two-bedroom, two-bath apartment with a large living space.

When she told them the rent, they glanced at each other in disbelief. “You have to pay your first and last month’s rent, plus a cleaning deposit which you get back if the apartment is in good shape when you leave. We pay for cable, water, and garbage. You pay for your electricity and phone.”

They thanked her and retreated to Stan’s car. “Wow!” said Dave. “If we get an apartment, it’s not going to be here!”

Stan said, “I never realized how much cash it takes upfront to get into an apartment. The deposit, first and last month, telephone, utilities, plus furniture. I’m way short.” His eyes twinkled as he turned to Dave. “Why don’t we ask the cards?”

He would have read the cards right then, but the only time he had read for Dave scared the shit out of him. He had told Dave, “I see you’ve seen someone recently about a health-related sexual problem, and he told you not to worry. Is there anything you want to tell me?” Dave had blushed.

“I see some danger coming into your life very soon, but it won’t be fatal.”

On his way home, Dave had been broadsided by a girl driving a Dodge Neon. She went to the hospital, but Dave walked away from it. After that incident, whenever Stan offered to read for him, Dave declined. “The only future I want to know is if I’m going to win the lottery!”

Dave was not hopeful. “Jack pays minimum, and only 10 cents extra for swing shift.”

“But at least, it’s steady,” said Stan. “Imagine being free of our parents. We could invite a couple of ladies over, barbeque on the patio, and do what comes naturally.” He felt like a bird perched in the open door of a cage. The thought of flying free excited him. Stan had a bumper sticker from “In and Out Burger,” and as many others had, he cut the “B” and the “r” off of Burger before he stuck it on his VW.

In-n-Out urge

Stan needed money, lots of it, so for the next month, he worked long shifts as many days as he could. He kept a careful record of his minutes, but by the time he had talked off and on for hours, his brain felt like it had been pureed and his body was ready for the rag box. Things sometimes weren’t clear to him. One day when he dozed off, a loud bang brought him to his feet. “What the hell!?” he yelled.

“The wind blew the door shut,” his mother said. “You’re right on the edge. You’d better take a break.”

At the end of the month, Stan’s check was again smaller than he expected. He called Heidi and demanded to know why.

She said, “Don’t get excited. Let’s go over your phone log and check the figures.”

They found discrepancies, but not many.

She said, “Lately your calls have been shorter. You need to keep reaching for those longer calls.”

“I’m doing the best I can,” he said. “I tell people what I see in the cards. But I don’t like being shorted on my time. I’ll keep reading, but I’m unhappy with the situation.”

“Stan, you’re doing a good job for us, but you’ve got to see our side of it. We have a lot of readers and we’re bound to make some mistakes. That’s only natural. We straighten things out as much as we can, but we have policies about who gets priority calls, and I can’t change that. So, when you are on a call, keep your average in mind.”

Stan told his mother about the conversation. When he came to the part about average minutes, he defended himself. Sure, his calls were short, but he was proud of what he was doing. “I think I’ve helped a lot of people. Those people at the psychic hotline are just in it for the money. The coach is very critical of my minutes. She wants my average to go up—soon, she said.”

When his mother sensed the tension between Stan's desire to help people and his coach's business-like manner, she began to get a familiar feeling. Like a damsel tied to a railroad track, she thought she could see the headlights of an oncoming train.

"This is happening all over again. You never know when to keep your mouth shut. Just do your job. Tell people their fortune. The company doesn't pay you to tell people how to run their lives."

"I'm not strictly their employee. They call me an independent contractor. And I care if I help people."

Stan kept on putting in long days. A few people called back, some more than once, like a woman in Mississippi.

"Hello. Who is this?" Her words were slurred. She had called before. He knew she had called to talk. She had money—enough to make her feel she was the target of fortune hunters. "Every man I meet just wants my money. They never love me for myself. You'd never do anything like that, would you?" she asked. "I can tell you're someone I can trust."

Stan said, "Maybe you're just looking for love in all the wrong places."

"Men are all alike," she said. "I know I've got a drinking problem, but everybody has faults. I've been to every bar in town. Why can't I meet a man more like you?" She was mumbling. "I know two people like us could be happy together." She was about to repeat her invitation to him to come to Mississippi to meet her.

"My finances right now wouldn't cover a trip, so it's not an option," he said.

"I'll send you the tickets. Come for a week so we can get acquainted. No commitment or anything."

When he told Dave about it, Dave had said, "Hell, man, go! What've you got to lose? As long as you've got a return ticket, what's the problem?"

But Stan hesitated. A leap of faith is the act of a blind man, and Stan's eyes were not totally shut. He had a bumper sticker that read:

Ball and Chain

On the last day of his second month, Stan got a call from Heidi. She said, "Stan, you're getting a lot of calls, but too many of them are short. We have a lot of expenses we have to cover, so we need your calls to be longer. Is there any way I can help you? Do you have any problems we could advise you on?"

"I don't know of any problems I'm having. I just do what I've always done. I lay out the cards and read 'em like I see 'em."

"Could that be a problem?" Heidi said. "Most people don't like to get bad news. Have any of your readings been like that?"

"Look. I can't control what cards come up. Sometimes the news is bad. But, hey, that's life. If something bad's going to happen, you're better off knowing about it, aren't you?"

"I understand where you're coming from, but if a message shakes them up too much, they get leery and never call back. You're sort of slitting your own throat."

"I'm sorry. I can't lie about what I see. I always ask them if they want me to be upfront with them." If Heidi had a problem with honesty, that was her problem.

His next check should be just enough to get him into an apartment if Dave came in with him. He was sure he could put in at least enough time on the psychic line to cover his expenses. Dave would help move his stuff with his pickup, and Stan already had a girl in mind to invite over.

His check arrived the next day, and he got a call from Heidi. "Stan, you're costing the company money. We hope you can do something about your average. You should know your job is in jeopardy. The ball's in your court now."

Stan resented hearing the same words over and over as if he were a slow kid in school. What did they expect? He could not control what the cards said. He was helping people get their lives back together.

Stan felt frustrated. "I know what the hotline people would like me to say, but I only read the cards. I don't choose them. They can't stand the truth."

Even though he was feeling boxed in, he spent the day packing while his mother was making her rounds. In a couple of cartons, he had placed things he valued but did not use often—like his high school yearbook. He had dropped out near the end of his senior year, too late for them to take his picture out. He was on the page before Dave. It reminded him of his old gang although Dave was the only one he had seen in years.

Through his bedroom window, Stan saw his mother's SUV drive up. She popped the back end and began pulling her samples out. Stan knew the cases were heavier after she had wrestled them all day long. He heard her set them on the hall table with a plunk.

Stan shut the door and called the Psychic Power Network. He needed more hours, lots of them. The supervisor didn't take his call for several minutes. When he finally got through, Stan said, "I'm busting my butt out here trying to help people, and I've been putting in all kinds of hours."

"We appreciate your calling, Stan. We were just about to call you. We're going to have to let you go. Your averages have been too low for too long. We can't afford to keep you on any longer. We wish you good luck though. Your final check will be in the mail in about two weeks. Give us a call sometime." The line went dead.

"Money-grubbers! They're all alike." He was sorry, but it seemed to be out of his hands now.

A knock on his door startled Stan. His mother poked her head in and said with a tired smile, "I guess you can't wait to move out. I think it will be nice for both of us. Don't worry about the money you've borrowed. You'll need to get on your feet first."

She closed the door, and in a few seconds, he heard the sound of the ice maker in the kitchen spitting out cubes.

He sat on his bed and stared at the floor for several minutes without blinking. With his left foot, he slowly pushed the two boxes filled with his mementos into the back corner of his closet. He hoped there was space for other things that had suddenly become only memories: his job, his hope for an apartment, his dream of barbequing, the ladies, and the cage door, now no longer open.

He noticed his left sneaker had begun to separate from the sole at the toe. He guessed he would need a new pair soon. At the front door, his hand on the doorknob, he yelled to his mother, "I'm gonna hang out with Dave for a while."

To himself he said, "*I'll go job hunting . . . tomorrow . . . for sure.*"