

Reading Coffee Grounds

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My eccentric aunt, now in her mid-eighties and who finally quit smoking last year after a bout with pneumonia and colon cancer, sits and watches TV around the clock in her bedroom at her daughter's house, fanning herself with a funeral home fan adorned with the owner's photo. McLane is a lean, dark-haired fellow sporting a two-piece poplin khaki suit, two-toned bucks, and a madras tie. "We care for the whole family" is the slogan on the fan, and while most of us cynics recognize the not-so-subtle marketing concept, my aunt has long passed the slogan and has established a relationship with McLane. She has lengthy conversations with him, telling him about her life, apparently hearing about his. When winter finally arrived, my cousin took the fan one day when my aunt dozed, and she cried and thought he'd left her, as her two husbands had done. My cousin, who my aunt believes is a friend from childhood, brought the fan back to her and my aunt scolded her and held McLane close. The dementia has pushed my aunt one step closer to visiting McLane's business.

Knowing my aunt--and the rest of us--will one day pass doesn't make accepting death any easier. When I learned my aunt's friend and one time neighbor Jackie had passed, from Facebook of all places, I had smiled, not because she had passed, but because of the reading of coffee grounds by her twenty years ago, which left a lasting impression.

Jackie was a twin to Jill and both women were plump, had beautiful soprano voices, short-cropped gray hair, and what fascinated me most was that they were missing several of the same teeth. They seem to always wear what my mother called homemade tent dresses and sandals--tennis shoes or boots in the winter.

Jackie and Jill lived on the property to the West of my aunt's, set back further off the town street and nestled behind a stand of cedars. From the road, passersby could not view the unfinished ranch house wrapped in tar paper, or the engines, old cars, a boat, appliances, and other non-functioning things dispersed about the property. Jackie and Jill's father, I was told, was an engineer who had once worked at NASA, but as I looked about the place, I couldn't imagine it true. Jackie and Jill both had several children, with no visible fathers, and seemed simple and captivated by us. My siblings and I only came to visit for a day or two out of the year. Likewise, we were fascinated by them, by the way they lived, and by the way they acted happy despite their poverty. My siblings and I were afraid of them, as if associating with them would pull us into their world and keep us prisoners. We imagined them lurking outside my aunt's house at night, trying to get in and steal us away. That, combined with my aunt's unpainted clapboard siding in the dark, made for some imaginary evil.

When I was in college, I was passing by the small town just off the interstate where my aunt lived and decided to stop. I forewarned my friend who was with me that my aunt was a bit strange. Her car was parked in the shade of the Live Oaks in the circular dirt driveway. She was sitting on the screened side porch drinking coffee and smoking. "Hey, hey," she yelled. "I'll be damned. I thought I'd never see you again." That was her guilt trip and I laughed and shifted the conversation, introducing my friend Grant. We visited awhile, and she talked about the power of crystals, spirit guides, and herbal healing when we heard some rustling in the hedges and then a "Yoo-hoo, anybody home?"

"Jackie, come look see what dragged up," my aunt yelled. "You recall my nephew Kevin, and he's brought his smart college friend Grant with him."

Jackie giggled, “I sure do. How you doing Kevin? Good to meet you Grant.” Jackie had on a tent dress, sandals, and held a Bible in her hand with all sorts of papers stuck in it.

“Victoria,” Jackie said to my aunt. “I’ve found some verses I wanted to share.” Part of me wondered if Jackie was witnessing to my aunt, but my aunt’s rolling her eyes indicated to me she tolerated the visit because she had nothing else to do and certainly tolerated her more than the Jehovah Witnesses who she had threatened with her machete if they didn’t get off her property.

“Get in the porch before the bugs tote you off. Why don’t you get some coffee and give Kevin and his friend a reading.” She turned to me and Grant. “I’ll get you a cup and you sip it. That will help Jackie sense you in the grounds.”

I looked at Grant who had a perplexed look on his face, and I could tell I would hear about this later. Aunt Victoria returned with cups, both fine ceramic-ware giveaways from local businesses. We sipped coffee while Victoria and Jackie gossiped about other neighbors and community members. When we finished, we were directed to place our mugs upside-down, so the grounds would dry and create a pattern. Apparently, the pattern would give Jackie psychic information as well.

Jackie picked up my cup and stared into it, smiled, and said, “Oh, this is interesting. I see eagles flying high above a mountain city; you’re speaking to a crowd of people below. I see you are surrounded by the wise ones, guiding you.” She stopped and put the cup down. “I think you are an old soul,” she said, “and you’ve done this all before.” I didn’t know what I thought of reincarnation then, but it seemed unlikely to me. She did a different reading for Grant, seeing motifs and totem animals and talking more about adventures. When Grant and I said our goodbyes, I knew it would be a while before we visited my aunt and her friend Jackie again. In fact as the years passed, I only saw my aunt a handful of times at funerals or reunions, and I

didn't see Jackie again. All these years later, I wonder about the readings and the reality. Truth is, I went on to graduate school and worked in colleges and gave talks to large groups and Grant traveled the world, becoming a pilot, and had a great deal of adventures, including safaris. Coincidence, planting seeds that germinated and grew, or reality, I didn't know, but the reading was interesting and fun. I still wonder if someone has the ability to see the future, why she wouldn't change her own?