

# THE PROPHET

I WAS THE ONLY KID in my ninth grade class who still bought his clothes in the Boys' section. My classmates had all grown up and out, overnight it seemed, leaving me to be picked last for sports and dances and pretty much everything else. I secretly lifted weights in our basement, until an ambitious attempt at bench pressing left me pinned and helpless beneath the weight. The bar rested just below my Adam's apple, and it took two minutes of squirming and grunting to shift sixty pounds from my collarbone to my chest to my abdomen. When I finally sat up, I had sweated through my shirt.

An alternative arrived by way of public television. With my father dozing in his recliner behind me, I caught the last thirty minutes of a show on telekinesis. In grainy black-and-white Uri Geller sat at a plain square table and bent teaspoons, car keys and fountain pens with just the force of his concentration. I watched the screen from three feet away, without blinking. After, I stole a spoon from our kitchen sink. (If my mother were still here, that spoon would have been in a drawer, and she would have noticed it was missing.) I spent the rest of the night alone in my room imitating the way Geller would gently rub cold steel with his fingertips until it lay twisted like a broken limb. I squinted my eyes, and clenched my teeth, and whispered *bend, bend, bend*.

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I was the first at our library to borrow a book titled *YOU Can Develop Your Psychic Powers!* You could tell from Dr. Miller's picture on the flap that he was smart. He was bald, and wore glasses, and taught earth science at a community college. In his introduction, Dr. Miller argued that most people use only a fraction of their

brains—“Fractioners,” he called them—and that the mind, like any muscle, could be strengthened through practice. He said that I, through a progressive regimen of psychokinetic exercises, would join a Secret Elite who could read minds and see the future. As proof he devoted an entire paragraph to seers whom he left unnamed for their own protection. A reader in Texas had a premonition of a house fire that would have killed a family of five. Another refused to board a flight that eventually crashed in a cornfield. One man collected several state lotteries under different pseudonyms, and another wore a disguise in every casino in Las Vegas. I would look up from the book every few minutes to stare at my forehead in the mirror.

As instructed, I sat cross-legged on my bed that night and shuffled a deck of playing cards. I held each one at arm’s length and stared at its back, trying through intense concentration to predict its color: red or black. Dr. Miller didn’t like the word “guess.” Leave the guessing to the Fractioners, he said. You should *read* it, *predict* it, *know* it, but never, never guess. If you couldn’t actually see the answer in your mind’s eye then you had to think harder, harder, until it was as obvious as your own name. You started by predicting the colors, and after you had mastered that you could move on to the individual suits, and then finally to specific numbers. Dr. Miller provided a scorecard to track my progress, with a range of averages for Excellent, Very Good, and Good. (There was nothing below Good.) After one week of predicting cards with Excellent to Very Good consistency I could graduate to later chapters on reading minds and moving objects. Within a month I could picture myself

strutting into every quiz and reading the teacher’s mind for the answers. I saw myself throwing a football a hundred yards through the air. I imagined squinting at Cindy Harris until her blouse flew open, the buttons popping like ricocheted bullets.

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My average was inconsistent for the first week, sometimes dropping into the Good category for days at a time. I studied the elaborate pattern on the backs of the cards and worried that some had tipped me off to the suits behind them. I was often disappointed to turn them over and see something else.

Halfway through the deck, I was so deep in concentration I didn’t hear the latch turn on my bedroom door. I was startled to see my father standing beside me in his work shirt, the one with his first name stitched above the pocket. He never changed his clothes after a day at the garage because he rarely saw anyone but me. He was staring at the card at the end of my outstretched arm. “What the hell are you doing?” he said.

“I was trying...” I let my hand drop, returned the card to its place on the deck. My mind raced for some plausible purpose beyond the obvious one at hand. “I was trying to predict each card.”

“Why?”

“To see if I have ESP.”

“You don’t,” he said.

“I know. It’s just homework.” I held up Dr. Miller’s book as proof. My father took it from me, flipped a few pages. His frown deepened as he lingered over my scorecard from the past few days.

“You see how this is flawed, don’t you?”

I shook my head.

“As the deck thins, you’ll know if you’ve seen more clubs than diamonds. That’s not ESP, it’s simple card counting.”

I was so committed to developing what Dr. Miller called my “mind’s eye” that I hadn’t thought to cheat. I wasn’t surprised by my father’s skepticism, though. Dr. Miller wrote an entire chapter warning us against the Doubters. *They will block the path to the new you*, he said. I even saw my father’s face as I read it. My father snapped the book shut, tossed it on a dresser already crowded with model planes and comic books. “Why don’t you go outside,” he said. “Find some friends to play with?”

“It’s *homework*,” I said again.

After that I began to predict dice in addition to my work with the cards. There was no math in anticipating the numbers that would come up on the die, and it would accelerate my ability to move objects and force the results I wanted. On the first roll I concentrated on the number three. When a six came up I was disappointed, until I realized that the dots on the die were actually *two* sets of three, side by side. When I predicted six and rolled a two, I was still partially right, as they were both even numbers. I gave myself a full point when I was correct, and a half-point when I was partially correct. I did this for three hours a night, every night, with longer sessions on the weekend. Just as Dr. Miller predicted, my brain grew stronger as the weeks progressed.

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To begin my work as a Mind Reader, I was instructed to go to a public place, which for me was our school cafeteria. I sat with the

same group of boys every day, or not with them so much as beside them, without objection. From my vantage point in the corner I would watch the other students. I wasn’t interested in the majority who were talking and laughing because they were already expressing what they were thinking. Instead I’d watch the still ones, the kids who sat by themselves or pensively chewed their food, and try to read their minds. As I studied their faces I could sense their isolation, their confusion, and a weird, secret anger. The teachers especially seemed utterly alone at the ends of the room, their minds a million miles away as their eyes scanned the crowd. I recorded their thoughts on my scorecard.

On the fourth day, Billy Vogel caught me writing at the table. “Hey Einstein, what’s that?” he said, too loudly.

“Nothing.”

“No, really, what is it. Is it homework?”

“No.”

“Then lemme see it.” He lunged across the table and caught the corner of my notebook. He pinched it in his fingertips, trying to twist it free. After a brief struggle I placed both hands on the binder and pulled so hard I fell back on my behind. In one quick motion I snapped it shut, slipped it under my shirt, and charged out of the cafeteria with my arms pinned to my belly like a short-yardage fullback.

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My workouts continued on my father at night. He rarely went out since my mother left, and stayed home most of the time she was here. He would also let the phone ring off the hook, or pretend he

wasn't home if someone knocked on the door. We would kill the TV and sink in our chairs until their feet left the porch.

From the couch I would stare at the side of his head and attempt to read his mind. He would sit in front of the TV for hours, but I sensed he wasn't watching at all. He wouldn't laugh at the jokes, or gasp at the surprise endings, or cheer the winning touchdowns. He was thinking of something else. What was it? I rubbed my temples to facilitate the mind reading process until I heard my father's voice.

"What?"

"I said, 'Do you have a headache?'"

"Yes," I said.

"Well, don't rub it. You'll only make it worse."

I obediently clasped my hands in my lap. I lived with a Zen-like belief in a time when I would no longer need my hands. I would one day answer the phone with my mind. I would change the channel on the TV with my mind. I would open a jar of peanuts with my mind.

"Your mother called," he said.

I was so deep in concentration that his voice seemed foreign to me. "What?"

"Your mother," he said. "She was sorry she missed you. You can call her collect, if you want."

"Okay," I said.

"Her number's above the phone."

When I saw my father's handwriting I averted my gaze and tore the sheet from the pad. I folded the page into halves, then quarters.

I carried it up to my bed and lay there all night with my eyes closed. When I could predict the number, I would call her. I held the paper in my fist and concentrated.

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I stepped up my regimen that weekend, devoting entire days in my bedroom to the cards, the dice, and the spoon. I had stacks of Dr. Miller's score sheets mimeographed and catalogued into color-coded binders, with graphs and pie charts to track my progress. I sometimes worked so hard I forgot to eat. Before descending to the kitchen, I would touch my fingers to my forehead to predict what was left in the cupboard.

Between rounds I lay on my bed and imagined holding an exhibition of trick basketball shots for the entire school. I would make bank shots, hook shots, half-court shots, all the while cracking jokes to the shocked audience. I had even worked out my banter. "Now, I know what you're thinking. (Swish.) You're wondering, how can a guy (swish) who has never played basketball before in his life (swish) suddenly shoot so well. (Swish.) Well, I used to wonder this too. (Swish.) Until I realized that my thinking... was all... *backwards*. (Backwards, half-court, no-look swish.)" As they cheered wildly, they would have no idea that my brain was moving the ball through the hoop. I would never reveal to them that I had this power.

I don't know how long my father had been standing over me. When I opened my eyes he was at the end of my bed, frowning at the stolen spoon. "Did you call your mother?" he asked.

"The number was busy."

My father gave me a flat expression. “She has some news,” he said finally. He dug his hands into his pockets, took them back out. “Your mother,” he said, “is getting married.”

This didn’t make sense to me. Mom was already married. My father must have sensed my confusion, because he continued. “*Re-married*,” he said. “She’s going to marry the man she left with. She wants you to meet him.”

I didn’t know anything about any man. Although my father and I never discussed my mother’s departure, I think he assumed I knew more than I did. My throat began to ache, and my eyes welled up with thick, oily tears.

“Do I have to?”

“Yes.”

“But I have school,” I bawled.

He eyed the score sheets and binders spread across my bed. “I think you can afford to miss a few days,” he said.

In truth, I wasn’t too worried about school. I hated school. I didn’t want to interrupt my progress in Dr. Miller’s program. I closed my eyes and tried to see the future me, the me I wanted to one day be, the me with a secret gift, and a beautiful girlfriend, and hundreds of adoring friends. Instead I saw the orange darkness on the back of my eyelids.

When I opened them again my father was shaking his head over one my binders. I broke down then and confessed my plan to him, told him about Dr. Miller, the Fractioners, twisting spoons and reading minds. He frowned as I spoke, studied my face the way he watched TV, like he was observing me from a great sad distance.

“Why would you want to know what other people are thinking?” he asked.

I thought this would seem obvious, but I couldn’t provide a clear example. “I don’t know,” I said.

“Why read their minds? Can’t you just talk to them?”

“*No*,” I said emphatically. I thought he of all people would understand this. I was talking to him now and had no idea what he was thinking. Like the backs of those playing cards, I studied his inscrutable face every night and couldn’t begin to guess what went on behind it.

My father, full-time Doubter, king of the Fractioners, extended his hand palm up to the cards in my lap. “Give me those,” he said. I thought he was going to confiscate them. Instead, he stood over me, drumming the deck against his knuckles as he studied my face. Finally, he halved the deck and shuffled them with a crisp *rrrrrip*. With a swipe of his arm he cleared the book and the dice and the score sheets from my bed. He sat down beside me and tapped the deck on his knee. “Pay attention,” he said. He then began to deal the cards out in rows, one at a time. Like a life lesson, my father wordlessly spread the cards across the bed, and taught me to play solitaire.

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