

Sally takes a voice lesson in Seattle ...

The sun was shining when Sal left for his morning shift at Ling Bank. A weather front had worn itself out flogging the coast for several days, and everything was glistening. Sally lingered at the window and watched Sal leave. After pouring herself another cup of coffee she carefully removed a Seattle newspaper from the kitchen trash and sat down at the dinette table. Opening the paper to the classified section, she found the ad she had been looking for, and she circled it with a bright red marker:

VOICE LESSONS: My place only. 20 yrs. experience. Find your authentic voice. Sliding scale. Call Miss Finley.

The number was local but unlisted. Sally transferred it to a note pad and wrote “Miss Finley” at the top. She stared at the name and number for several minutes, then picked up the phone and began dialing, but she cradled the device before completing the call. This was repeated three more times. Finally, she took a deep breath, picked up the phone decisively and punched the Redial button. After three rings someone answered.

“Yes? This is Miss Finley.”

“Uh, hello?”

“This is Miss Finley. How can I help you?”

“Uh, well, I—I want to take singing lessons.”

“Why that’s wonderful, dear. And what is your name?”

“Sal—I mean, Sally. Yes, I’m Sally, yes.”

“How did you find me, Sally?” Miss Finley spoke in the patient, measured tones of a natural teacher.

“The trash. I found you in the trash. The newspaper, I mean. It was in the trash and I saw your ad when I dumped the coffee grounds. I had to iron it out ‘cause it was so wet. Sorry.”

“Oh, that’s okay, Sally. I’m just glad you found the ad and had the courage to call. It did take courage, didn’t it?”

“You bet, Miss Finley. I didn’t want to at first, but then I did.”

“Well, why don’t you tell me something about yourself, then we can decide *together* what to do.”

Sally was so accustomed to other people making decisions for her—Sal included—that she was shocked when Miss Finley said, “decide together.” Without realizing what was happening, the story of her suppressed longing poured out of her like water from a collapsing dam. She told Miss Finley of the songs she sang to herself as a child, the hours she spent with her ear to the radio on Saturday mornings, listening to the opera, the abuse she suffered at school whenever she sang aloud—the other kids laughed because her voice was so loud and high and it “jiggled,” they said.

“Let me hear you sing a note right now, Sally.”

“You mean now?”

“Yes, right now, over the phone. Just one note. I just want to get a feeling for what the other kids thought was so funny. Then we’ll decide, you and I, whether they were right or not.”

There it was again, that “we’ll decide.”

“Well, okay, I guess I can.”

“Go ahead, dear. Whenever you’re ready.”

Sally paused, quieting herself. Then she took a deep breath, opened her mouth and sang her note. The air around Miss Finley seemed to pucker slightly before plunging into the mouthpiece of the phone as if sucked into a vortex. Sally’s note sailed back and forth over the wires for several seconds. When she had finished and the air was still again, Miss Finley couldn’t speak. In a corresponding anomaly, a bird sitting on a phone wire outside Sally’s apartment couldn’t stop singing.

Sally was silent. Miss Finley cleared her throat. Oddly, the ensuing silence was not awkward at all. It was as if everything had been said, and there was nothing to add. Finally, of course, the spell wore off and Sally broke the silence.

“Miss Finley?”

“Oh. Yes, dear?”

“Was it okay?”

“Um, yes, dear, it was rather more than okay. It was exquisite.”

“What about the other kids?”

“Other kids?”

“Yes. At school?”

“Oh, them. Don’t worry about them, Sally. They’re ruffians and nincompoops.” Miss Finley hadn’t spoken so harshly for many years. “They don’t know what they’re talking about.”

“Boy, that’s a relief!”

“Yes, I’m sure it is. Listen, Sally, are you busy right now? Perhaps you could come to my apartment and we could have our first voice lesson this morning. I don’t have any students until 2:00. Could you do that?”

“Um, sure I could. But how much will it cost?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, my dear. No charge for today. I’m sure we’ll work out something. Just come. Here’s my address.”

Soon Sally was driving across Seattle toward the U-district, clutching in her hand the written directions she had scribbled down. She was on her way to the first singing lesson of her life.

Miss Finley’s second-floor apartment was located in a narrow Victorian brick building sandwiched between two glass-and-granite behemoths. Built in the early 1880s, Miss Finley’s building had elaborate cast-iron work along the street, plus two store-fronts housing a cell-phone outlet and a small pharmacy. To the side, a narrow stairway ran up to the second level.

Sally stood on the sidewalk at the foot of the stairs, looking up into the dark, ascending corridor. She might have seen it as an apt metaphor for what she was facing, had she been inclined to recognize metaphors. But Sally was sailing on something beyond words, not quite singing but still humming, as she lifted one foot and placed it resolutely on the first tread.

At the top of the stairs a sky-lit landing opened in several directions. Sally looked around and saw a small sign, hand-lettered in elegant calligraphic script:

Miss Finley. Voice Lessons. By Appointment Only. A potted palm against the dark Victorian wainscoting reached toward the diffuse light.

A round button-type doorbell had been wired next to the door, and Sally pushed the button. A musical chime sounded behind the door and she heard rapid, yet somehow halting, footsteps approaching. The doorknob turned and the door swung open.

Sally, who had briefly glanced down to make sure her shoes were not scuffed and were pointing straight forward, raised her head to greet Miss Finley.

“Hello, Sally.”

Miss Finley was a good foot taller than Sally and she had a refined air. Her hair came over her left shoulder in a long braid and she wore a taupe cashmere shift with a black leather belt and a long silk scarf. To Sally’s surprise, she carried a bone-handled cane, which explained the halting sound of her footsteps.

“Well, then, Sally. Please come in and let’s have a look at you.”

Sally stepped inside and Miss Finley closed the door.

Owl Man's attempt to reconcile reality and imagination ...

It was nearly nine PM when Jasmine opened the door and walked in with two bags of groceries. She carried them directly to the kitchen counter and began putting them away while Owl Man, practically oblivious to her presence, sat at his computer desk madly typing away on who-knows-what esoteric topic.

“Hello? Anybody home?” said Jasmine, more than a little miffed. The least Owl Man could have done was to acknowledge her presence. She didn’t expect him to stop what he was doing and leap to his feet to help her carry the groceries, or to kneel like a medieval knight before his *ladye fayre*. She was perfectly capable of carrying and putting groceries away, especially since she had advanced in her *karate* studies, and was therefore stronger—in the muscular sense—than Owl Man.

But at least he could, as mentioned, *acknowledge her presence*.

“Hello, Owl Man. Whom do you love most of all in the world?” she asked blithely.

“Jasmine,” replied Owl Man, and without looking up, continued typing.

“And where is ‘Jasmine’ at this moment?”

“At Tully’s, working,” blurted Owl Man, oblivious to the voluptuous young woman who stood before him.

At her best, Jasmine was full of loving passion and feeling, but on occasion her passions veered toward regions that sailors the world over feared the most—the Shipwreck Shoals of Feminine Rage.

It was for these reasons that Jasmine took a glass ketchup bottle from the shopping bag, held it by the neck with two fingers, and dropped it onto the hardwood floor, where the glass shattered, the red sauce splattered, and the entire room was instantly bathed in the glow of a kind of domestic *rubric*, like Bibles of old. *Rubrics*—the red-tinted texts one had better pay special attention to.

Owl Man twitched at the noise, didn’t seem to notice the god-awful mess, but at least he slowly looked up at his *ladye-fayre* and said, “Oh, hi Jasmine, I didn’t know you were home.”

On any other occasion, Jasmine might have given Owl Man a black eye, but tonight she withheld her wrath, because she knew her Owlie had been working on the crucial Active Imagination with Fex, which, just that morning, she had demanded he undertake as she rushed out to work.

Having lapsed into a more conciliatory mood, Jasmine asked, “How did it go in your Active Imagination with Fex this morning, Owlie?”

Owl Man blinked, his eyes opened wide, and he said, “What do you mean how did it go? You were here. You brought that delicious *espresso doble* and then, when we were done, you brought out the Lagavulin, the crystal goblets and the *amaretto biscotti*. You even spoke to Fex.”

“No, I didn’t, Owlie. You must be thinking of a different occasion. I didn’t have time to bring you any of those things, and I never saw Fex.”

“Jaz, my dearest, are you teasing me?”

“Of course, not. Why would I do that? I want to know how your Active Imagination with Fex went. Tell me about it.”

At this, Owl Man became momentarily disoriented. *Where am I?* he asked himself *sotto voce*. Then he became officious or ... bureaucratic ... or something ... and said, “Jasmine, my dear, please don’t tease me on a matter of such consequence.”

Jasmine fairly erupted, “Owl Man, are you going crazy on me? I just told you that *I wasn’t here this morning except for rushing off to work!* I didn’t bring you *espresso*. I didn’t bring you and Fex any Lagavulin. I never even *saw* Fex, much less heard him, so will you *please* tell me what the fuck is going on?” (This last phrase was delivered with special emphasis.)

Like a double-hulled, cross-braced Coast Guard ice-breaker, Jasmine was finally getting through the ice-field that was Owl Man.

He sat silently—his faced pinched, screwed, and skewed in fifty different directions. Jasmine stood and looked at him with an expression close to terror, as if Owl Man really were going crazy on her.

Then he said, calmly and quietly, “I see. Then I owe you a profound apology, my love.”

And with this, both Owl Man and Jasmine burst into tears and held one another until they had used the better half of a box of Kleenex.

After Owl Man had taken some time to compose himself, and Jasmine had whipped up a Mediterranean *tapas*-style snack with a bottle of Rioja Reserva Especial wine, Owl Man finally began his account of the “active imagination” episode with Fex.

“First of all, Jaz, it was *so real*. You were *really here*. Fex was *really here*. And, of course, the point of the whole exercise had to do with my desire to reach a “wider audience,” not in the esoteric way that Heron Man and I usually write. He and I had been talking about that. How do we write in a more ... uh ... commonplace and accessible manner ... so that we can “reach” more people? Then up pops Fex in a dream of mine in response to an ad, of all things, asking for a ‘Ghost Rider’. That’s why Fex showed up on that crazy huge horse—well, actually it was a *beautiful pinto horse* with a silky brown-furred muzzle—but they were both on the sidewalk in Seattle, no less, and Fex was dressed up like Tom Mix. Said he’d come up to ‘help me out.’”

Jasmine was puzzled, but she nodded her head, just to keep Owlie talking.

“So, after the dream—where you woke me up and gave me instructions to *dream the dream forward*, I started typing out the scene, *after you brought me the espresso*.”

“Owlie, my love. I already told you—I *didn’t* bring you the *espresso*. You either *dreamed it*, or else you *imagined it*.”

“Oh boy,” said Owl Man, but he plowed forward into the heart of his confusion.

“Well, the gist of it is that ‘Fex’—if indeed it was Fex—came here, or into my imagination, to help me find a simpler, more common way of *addressing folks*, so as to reach that wider audience I’ve been wondering about.”

Jasmine nodded wisely, with only the slightest frown on her forehead.

“And the result?” she asked.

“That’s the amazing thing, Jaz. *It worked! Fex really helped me!*”

“How?”

“He just *simplified* everything so that *any audience* could get it. No *Ouija board stuff*, as he put it so snidely—you know Fex.”

“Yes, I do know Fex.”

Jasmine re-filled Owl Man’s stem-glass with Rioja.

“So what’s the outcome, then?”

“The outcome”—and here Owl Man paused portentously—“is that, thanks to Fex, I know exactly what to do to reach my *wider audience*.”

The Bird-Brain Hotline ...

Heron Man always thought the contemporary disparagement of “bird brains”—in particular the sarcastic way Fex was accustomed to using the term—was unfair and unwarranted. Many birds, after all, were able to navigate over thousands of miles, some of them flying day and night, through weather, sometimes without alighting to rest, feeding in mid-air.

This in itself was a feat few if any humans could perform, without the assistance of compasses, astrolabes, sextants and the like—plus all manner of maps, transport vehicles, cities and watering holes, not to mention McDonalds, Burger King, Taco Bell, and the occasional Bud Light.

No, in Heron Man’s view, birds were at least as smart as, maybe even smarter than, many humans.

“They’ve been here millions of years longer than humans,” he noted aloud, then added: “Humans—the bumbling newcomers on Earth.”

There was a virtual global network of avian social groupings, all with their own elaborate codes and courtesies and survival methods—the very things humans take such pride in knowing. And if there is any looming end in store for those bird societies, it will most likely be a precise consequence of overweening human pride.

Thus, Heron Man gladly bore his name, which hinted that, in some strange way, he was Half-Man and Half-Heron, as one of his T-shirts declared. He supposed that the same thing was true for Owl Man—that he too was Half-Man, Half-Owl—to which Owl Man’s collection of “Parliament of Owls” T-shirts and sweatshirts bore dramatic, wide-eyed witness.

With such odd ruminations going on in the back of Heron Man’s mind, he decided to give Owl Man a call, to check in, to see what was on *his* mind. It had been a while since their last conversation, what with the dispersal of the “Hasty Heisters.” Their fiction project with the group had virtually collapsed, since all the characters, Foxy included—especially Foxy—had minds of their own and were off doing what *they* wanted to do, rather than dancing like string-puppets to the tunes the two “bird-brains,” Owl and Heron, tried to foist onto them.

So, he picked up his cell-phone and pushed the speed-dial button for Owl Man, who normally picked up on the first or second ring. This time, however, it timed out with no answer, only the gruff recording Owl Man had made long ago: “Hoot! Hoot! Leave a message before you fly away, and it had better be good!”

“HmMMMM,” pondered Heron Man. “Maybe he’s taking a mid-day shower or power-walk or something.” It was just past lunchtime, so there were any number of activities Owl Man could be engaged in, not available to talk. But still, Heron Man noticed a buzzing sensation around his head, a form of mental “goose-bumps” that usually indicated the arrival of some intuition in the “mail-box” portion of his brain—or body. So he ran down the list of intuitive possibilities, waiting for the first bell to ring.

“Ding,” rang the bell.

“Uh oh,” he said to himself. “Don’t tell me.” He went on in this fashion, in this one-man conversation, for some time, as the intuition began forming and strengthening, like a tornado beginning to suck all of his thoughts into the eye of the cycling vortex.

“Where’s Helen when I need her?” he said to himself, aloud.

“I’m right here, Heron, where did you think I’d be, off on Cloud Nine, or lost in the Pleiades? What’s the problem?”

“Oh, thank God you’re here, Helen. I don’t know yet if there’s any problem at all, but it’s Owl Man. He’s not answering the phone. I’m concerned.”

“Of course, you’re concerned, especially since you don’t know anything. Not knowing tends to foment anxiety, doesn’t it?”

“Well, sometimes it does. It depends.”

“Yes, that’s true. It does depend.”

Both Helen and Heron paused for a moment, then Helen spoke again.

“Would you like me to go find out what’s happening?”

“Can you do that?”

“Of course I can do that.”

“What about Jasmine?”

“My dear Heron, Jasmine is precisely the reason why I am able to go there and see what’s going on. You know that she and I are ‘connected’, don’t you?” Or, as people say these days, *entangled*.”

“Yes, of course I do. I must have forgotten momentarily.”

“Well, don’t ‘forget momentarily’ again. It’s important to keep these things, these connections, in mind. I’ll be right back.”

And with that, Helen disappeared, at least from Heron’s purview.

While she was “gone,” Heron Man fell into a reverie, as if Helen’s arrival had taken him to some other level of being. That’s why he didn’t know how much time had elapsed when she finally returned.

“Hello! Anybody home?”

“Oh, Helen! Good, you’re back. How long were you gone?”

“Who knows, my dear. We don’t keep track of ‘time’ like you do, when we’re on this side. I think I found out what you are wanting to know—at least in broad outlines.”

“Wonderful. What’s going on?”

Helen knew that there was no point in beating around the bush, so she just came out with it:

“Owl Man and Jasmine are trying to make a decision about the rest of their lives, whether to stay together or to separate. It’s a big decision, so their conversation is deep and full of care, of course. I don’t even think he *heard* your cell-phone call. And, don’t worry, there are no histrionics involved. They’re both being very, very calm and, as I said, careful, because, as you know, their love is deep and true. They both want to do ‘the right thing.’ *That’s* what they’re trying to figure out.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” said Heron Man.

“No need for fear, my dear. They’re actually laughing as much as they are crying. And, though I’m not sure, I *think* they’ve been making love all morning, which gives their discussion a different kind of foundation from what these kinds of conversations are usually based on—buried resentments, and all that.”

“Hmmm. That’s good, then,” said the Heron.

“Oh, yes. I had a very positive feeling about what they were doing, but I couldn’t tell, even with all my ‘muse antennae’ spread out and activated, what the outcome will be. I guess you’ll just have to be patient, to wait and see. Owl Man will call you when it’s time.”

With this advice, Helen began to fade, and once she had “disappeared,” Heron Man

was left with his buzzing imagination, trying not to let it run away with him. Instead, he placed his cell phone on the desk next to his computer, in which he opened up a new blank document. To the document he affixed the tentative sub-title: “Owl Man Returns Heron Man’s Call.”

The Roman Limousine . . .

The morning after Tully's anniversary party, Tully did not show up for work. Jasmine had to cover for him. If she was lucky, he would put in an appearance during the afternoon. Maybe. But it was a Scottish hangover Tully would be dealing with—drums rattling and bagpipes whining inside his head—so all bets were off.

Owl Man sat at his favorite table, and Jasmine saw to it that a good portion of her customer-care responsibility was directed toward him—getting him refills, walking past whenever she could and whispering to him, her hand on his shoulder. At one point she even sent Jimmy down the street to bring Owl some donuts.

After ringing up several *lattes* for a group of Seattle businessmen, and with Jimmy covering the bar, Jasmine finally had some free time to sit down with Owl Man.

“Tell me about your novel, Owl darling.”

“You mean this one?”

“No, silly, not this one. We’re *living* this one. I’m talking about the *other* novel, the other one you’re writing.”

Surprisingly, Owl Man had momentarily forgotten which book he was in. The line between fiction and reality had been growing thinner for some time. It’s not that he was “losing his grip on reality.” Far from it: He was just as well-adapted to reality as ever. This was different. It was as though “reality” was less adapted to itself, and was proving to be far more elastic than ever. Reality, in other words, was becoming far more, well . . . fictional.

Had you asked Owl Man about this, he would not have said that reality was unreal. It was real, all right, just as real as this beautiful Jasmine sitting right next to him, just as

real as the Poet's Jasmine perfume she was wearing, which he could smell every time she walked past with a tray of coffee. Poet's Jasmine—so poetic a name—he could almost smell that delicate fragrance in his dreams, so powerful was its effect.

Had you pressed Owl Man on this “reality” issue, really pinned him down, he might have said something about the *mundus imaginalis* and how it impinges in strange ways upon our consciousness. He might have pointed out ...

“Where are you, Owl Man?”

“Hmm? Oh, I was just thinking about your question.”

“About the novel?”

“Yes, yes, the novel. Well, it's difficult to explain. It's really about the power of dreams, a power so great that it shakes the Roman Catholic Church to its foundations. There's a lost text that's been suppressed for centuries. Lots of things going on in it, of course.”

“Sounds fascinating, Owl. I suppose there's some conflict?”

“Oh, yes, indeed. Lots of conflict, danger, intrigue, interesting characters.”

“I'd love to read the manuscript, Owl. Would you mind?”

“Of course not, Jasmine, my love. I'd be honored if you would read it.”

Owl Man reached over and was about to touch Jasmine's cheek affectionately, with the back of his index finger, when a long black limousine pulled up in front of the coffee shop.

“Look at that, Jasmine,” said the Owl. “You've got company. Big business, from the looks of it.”

Jasmine and Owl turned their attention to the sleek limo, whose front doors were

already opening. They watched as two dark-complexioned men jumped out and ran toward the coffee shop. Both wore dark suits, white shirts and ties, and both looked like they would wrestle grizzly bears if asked to. They were obviously bodyguards. Whoever was sitting behind the dark-tinted glass in back was someone of power and means.

The men burst into the coffee shop bristling with a sharp, dark energy.

Jasmine jumped up, bristling with her own energy—though much brighter—and ran to the register before the men reached the counter.

“Can I help you?”

“*Sì, signorina,*” said the shorter of the two. He was the driver, and wore a short-billed cap, although the straining seams on his coat sleeves belied any weak-willed servility. He was obviously someone accustomed to giving orders, even as he served someone higher.

“What would you like today?”

“*Un espresso doppio, due macchiati, i un cappuccino. Presto. Rapidamente, prego.*”

Then, as if just now remembering that he was not in Italy, the man said slowly, “Queekly, plees.”

The second, taller man added, “*Portare via.* You say, to go.”

“Yes, of course.”

Jasmine turned and gave the to-go order to Jimmy, who set about the task with his usual wiry competence. Meanwhile, Jasmine turned to the two men, smiling.

“Where are you from? Italy?”

Jasmine’s friendliness, not to mention her shapeliness, was having a transformative effect on the two Italian men, who became visibly more relaxed in her presence. They exchanged a few words, *sotto voce*, then both turned their attention back to Jasmine.

“*Sì, signorina. Siamo de Roma. We from Roma. You like Italy?*”

“Oh, yes, I love Italy. I mean, I would love Italy if I ever went there. I’ve never been to Rome, or Italy.”

Every word that passed between Jasmine’s lips seemed to have an intoxicating effect on these two stunned admirers. Their natural bodyguards’ reserve gave way to the onslaught of blood and hormones surging from their lower regions. Discretion soon fell victim to an urgent wave of instinct.

“*Scuzi, signorina, but you never been to Italy?*”

“No, never, I’m afraid.”

“Mebbe,” the short one began, “mebbe you like come to visit Roma? Mebbe we show you the Vatican? You like see the Vatican? You like Roma?”

“Oh, I’m sure I’d love Rome. Yes, of course, it would be wonderful to see the Vatican.”

The two men looked at each other.

“But, unfortunately, I don’t have a lot of money. I’m a writer, you see. It will be a long time before I can visit Rome.”

“Mebbe not so long thees time? We haf very powerful *padrone*, how you say, boss?”

“Do you mean your employer is a powerful man? The one in the limousine?”

“*Sì, sì, signorina. E molto poderoso. Molto.*”

“Oh, really?”

Jimmy was almost done with the coffees, but the two Italians no longer seemed to be in quite such a hurry, so eager had they become to impress Jasmine with their importance.

“What is he doing here in Seattle?” Jasmine asked sweetly.

The Italians were smitten.

“Eh, he come for make arrangement. Big negotiate. Big *consiglio ecclesiastico*.” He paused, then resumed. “*Scuzi, signora, ma non so parlare inglese*. No speak good English.”

“You’re saying he’s here to negotiate arrangements for a big ecclesiastical council?”

“*Sì, sì, signorina. Certo.*”

“What’s his name? Have I heard of him?”

The two men looked alarmed. Again they glanced at each other as if silently conferring. Again discretion fell under the onslaught of instinct.

Then the taller one leaned across the counter and whispered something to Jasmine.

Throughout this unusual conversation, Owl Man was trying to write in his laptop, but he kept being distracted by the reflected images on his screen—images of Jasmine and the two mysterious men.

Finally, they paid the bill, and both insisted on kissing Jasmine’s hand. One of them even bowed courteously.

Then they turned and nearly ran out the door with the tray of coffees. They disappeared into the limo, closed the doors, and the immense machine whooshed silently away.

The tinted windows of the limo prevented a clear view of the interior. But for a flash, Owl Man thought he caught a glimpse of a face staring out at him from the back seat. The features of that face, at least as much of them as he could see, were disturbingly familiar. Or was he imagining all this?

But it was impossible. There was no possible way Owl Man would know anyone being chauffeured around Seattle in a shiny black limousine.

Jasmine returned to the table. Owl Man smiled up at her, but saw she was visibly upset.

“What is it, Jasmine, my dear?”

“I don’t know, Owl. There was something creepy about those two men.”

“Where are they from?”

“They’re from Italy. From the sound of it, they might have something to do with the Vatican. They want me to come visit, can you believe that? Said something about negotiations for some big Ecclesiastical Council here in Seattle. What do you think is going on, Owl?”

Owl Man hesitated. He looked as if a mosquito had been molesting him, flying into his ear or something.

“Did they happen to say who their boss is?”

“Yes, they did, but the man was whispering, like it was some big secret. And Jimmy was steaming coffee so I had trouble hearing clearly.”

“Maybe you heard a fragment of the name?”

“Well, I don’t know, Owl darling. Maybe he said something like ‘Viscovo Bogle’ or ‘Scovobogo’ or ‘Viscobro.’ Apparently he’s a big mucky-muck. The man said ‘Beeshupe,’ so I assumed he meant Bishop. But I really couldn’t hear well at all.”

“Impossible,” said Owl Man.

“What do you mean ‘impossible’? That’s what he told me. What are you talking about now, Owl? Is this another one of your Agatha Christie moments? Or, like Fex says,

is your Ouija board heating up?”

Jasmine was trying to make a joke, but in truth she was getting nervous, and more than a bit annoyed. Once again, strange events seemed to be constellating around Owl Man, as if he were a lightning rod in an electrical storm.

“I can’t be sure of this, my dear Jasmine, but there’s a chance I might know who was in that limo. Not personally, of course. I mean, not officially. That is, not in reality.”

“Well, *tell me*, Owl Man! Now you’re talking gibberish. Ell-Tay e-May, Owl-ay –an-May.”

Jasmine had lapsed into Pig Latin, mocking Owl Man, but it just made her all the more jittery.

“I’m getting that spooked feeling again, Owl. Fex is right. You really *are* a witch doctor.”

“If I’m not mistaken,” Owl continued, “the employer of those two men might just be Bishop Darien Broga.”

“So? Who the hell is that? What’s the big mystery?”

Owl man said nothing.

“Owl?”

Jasmine’s voice rose in pitch.

“Owl? Are you there?”

“Can I get you something, Jasmine? Owl Man?” It was Jimmy the barista.

“No, Jimmy, but thanks. We’re fine. I appreciate it. I’ll be right there.”

“No, no, take your time, Jazz. It’s slow right now anyway. Say, who were those two dudes?”

“You mean the Italians? Oh, nobody. Just a couple of chauffeurs.”

“Two chauffeurs for one limo? You sure about that, Jasmine?”

“I’m sure, Jimmy. Just drop it. I think the tables need bussing. Just give me a minute, OK?”

“No problem, Jasmine, no problem.” And Jimmy went off to buss tables.

Owl Man seemed lost in thought.

Jasmine looked at him closely. His forehead was wrinkled in a way she had never seen before. And since she had just finished reading *Moby Dick*, metaphors from the book naturally sprang to mind.

At this moment, she couldn’t say whether the puzzled look on Owl Man’s face more resembled Melville’s descriptions of haunted Ahab, or whether it resembled the furrowed knots on the brow of the hated, hunted White Whale.