

Zena

ZENA HAD A tiny bit of a storefront on the boardwalk, between Missouri and Columbia avenues. A sign mounted on her easel read:

ZENA
OCCULT READER
Know Your Future
Readings, \$1.00

Zena usually kept the door open, but a thick black curtain hung at one side of the entrance. She drew it closed when she had a customer, and she hung a sign that said *Please wait. Reading in progress*. Inside, her little space was furnished as a parlor. She had a small sofa, a colorful Oriental rug, and a round table where a smoky glass ball rested on a carved dark wooden base. The walls were waves of dark blue, maroon, and deep purple and covered with mystical symbols and heavenly objects. On one wall, a pale sun shone through a gray mist. On another wall was a full moon, half hidden behind dark clouds, a beam of its moonlight drawing a silver bead across a black ocean. Some of the better-known constellations covered a midnight blue ceiling. Strange circles and geometric shapes were everywhere. A painted eye decorated the center of the back wall. A flush door was cut into the back wall,

painted as part of the wall, so that when the door closed, it almost disappeared, becoming part of the wall.

Behind the door were Zena's living quarters, consisting of her bedroom, a bathroom, and an efficiency kitchen. At the back of the parlor was a large, ornate silver and brass samovar, standing on a corner table, surrounded by a fine china tea service. When the samovar was in use, it gave off a pleasing aroma of fresh tea to the accompaniment of a deep baritone *bloop, bloop, bloop* every few seconds. There were three embroidered chairs around the round table. Zena did her readings at the table, but while waiting for a customer she reclined on the sofa, smoking a cigarette in a long cigarette holder, and reading a newspaper.

Zena was a handsome fifty-year-old woman. She wore a colorful silk robe with huge sleeves, and a silk shawl and several silk scarves. Her robe had a heavy silk, rope-like belt with enormous golden tassels. She wore a multicolored turban with a large eye-shaped red stone set in the center. Full white silk trousers and full white silk sleeves peeked out from under the robe.

Her hair was black, long, and straight, gathered into a braided ponytail. Her face was swarthy. Only her pale green eyes betrayed that her deep coloring washed off every night and was reapplied every day.

Benny James took me to Zena one day. He wanted her to give me a reading. "Hi, Zena," Benny said. "This is Jack. He's a good kid. Give him a reading."

Zena studied me for a few moments while she shuffled a deck of tarot cards, slowly. Looking into her eerie pale green eyes, I believed she really *knew* things.

"I will do it, Benny, because I see much in this boy," she spoke in a low whisper. There was a hint of Slavic heaviness in her voice.

“Keep your money, Benny. This boy interests me.” I shivered with the mystery of it. Benny left. Zena closed the curtain. We sat at the round table. The glass ball lit up. She took my hand.

When the reading was over, I was convinced that Zena *knew*. She read my thoughts. She embarrassed me by telling me my secret yearnings. She ended with predictions of a good life. When she drew open the curtain to dismiss me, she cupped the side of my chin in her right hand and smiled at me, “God bless you, Jack. Good fortune will follow you.”

Boy, oh boy! Was I a lucky guy. Zena *knew*. I knew she knew.

Benny returned for me. Before we left, Zena spoke to him, very seriously. “Benny,” she said, “a strange man came in here the other day. I think he’s a kook. He wanted to talk about cocoa beans. He thinks I know something that he wants to know. He made me nervous. I don’t know what to do if he comes back.”

“Forget it, Zena. He’s probably a tourist from Oshkosh. You’ll never see him again.”

He was the cocoa man.