

Famus Peepul

by Debbie Ann Ice

Famus Peepul

Ellen and her boy, Larson, were on the second floor of The Monsters restaurant, searching for the fortuneteller. Larson had decided her signature was a necessary addition to his autograph book. He hadn't asked for her autograph while she was at their table because he always had to think about such things, ponder the person's qualifications, satisfy himself with the likelihood of the candidate's future fame. He didn't want a book scribbled up with just any old names, only people who would go on to become something significant. Years from now he would open his book with a friend, point to a name and say he knew this person back before all the glamour and glitz, back when they were simply a special education teacher, a speech therapist, a school aide, a psychologist, and now, a fortuneteller. So far, all twenty-four potentially famous people in his book were female, all tender-hearted, all attentive. All pretty.

The fortuneteller had done her act at their table downstairs right after the vampire had come and gone. The vampire had been OK, although a bit melodramatic and too chatty. The fortuneteller had breasts that puffed out of her black corset, the swells evident under her white eyelet peasant blouse. She wore oversized black rectangular glasses that tried unsuccessfully to hide her sharp features—oval green eyes, high cheeks that became pink balls when she smiled-- and when she leaned into Larson, she said in a lilting, heavily accented voice, "You a big boy. Do you play on Yankees team?" He said he was a Hurricane. The Hurricanes had a cerebral

palsy pitcher who tossed a plastic ball from a wheelchair. If the baseball game went smoothly, Larson played somewhere near first base, behind Mike, who had Down syndrome and ran off the field to the far swing set every so often. If the baseball game did not go smoothly, Larson played in the outfield, where he lay prostrate, or on the street, where he ran hysterically, or by the far fence, which he beat repeatedly. The fortuneteller seemed to think the name of his team suggested strength, passion. She laid several cards upon the table and asked him to choose a card, which he did, turning it over to reveal a gold chariot pulled by a white horse. "You will be famous one day. It says so right here. The chariot, you see, is fame and the horse is speed. This means you will be famous soon." Before ruffling his hair and excusing herself, she said she would be back. But she never came back.

Ellen tapped a man passing by. He had a nail in his neck and red marks that looked like cherry syrup on his face and neck.

"Do you know where the fortuneteller is?" Larson said before Ellen could open her mouth.

"Oh, fortunetellers? Hmm. That's tough. Many of our vampires love the taste of their blood, you see. He may have her."

Larson's mouth formed a large an 'O', and he put his book up to his face, the way he always did to hide his panic. From a distance, he looked look like an animated boy playing around with one of the characters. The agitated expression and slight moan were barely noticeable to other diners. Ellen knew if she handled it right, the world around them would carry on, undisturbed. But the inevitable meltdown was apparent in Charlie's tight grip, his white knuckles, squeezed eyes, slight beginning of a loud "no." The man with the nail said he was just kidding and looked at Ellen, as if to say, I didn't know this boy with his brown hair, freckles, and oversized baseball jersey, was anything other than a regular boy.

Ellen always made a mistake during these public moments. This time, her mistake was grabbing Charlie's wrist. And there was her self-conscious apology, delivered with no explanation. Charlie jerked

his arm away and started his “no's,” one following the other, shotgun style, so loud the table behind them stopped eating.

Ellen put her arm around him and walked to the side of the room, behind an empty table. Larson screamed as they walked. “They did something to her. The vampires did something to the fortuneteller.” The adults looked up briefly then continued to eat. Most of the children at nearby tables stared, fascinated by bad behavior.

The man with the nail in his neck stayed still a moment, taking it all in, perhaps pondering what role he was expected to play. Bystanders never quite understood the proper thing to do when a child like this erupted. Most either walked away quickly, like a victim escaping a crime. Occasionally, one or two would lope behind Ellen as she struggled with her boy. Ellen preferred them to walk away.

The man with the nail followed.

“It's OK. He'll be OK,” Ellen said to the man, but he didn't leave. “Larson.” She decided to ignore the man with the nail. “Remember when you asked where your spelling book was, and I said I had it for breakfast? It was a joke, but you thought I ate it. But it was funny to say I ate a book. Remember? That's what he's doing. Same thing. A joke. No one would ever hurt that nice woman.”

“Oh, don't mind me. I have a very bad personality. Which is why I have a nail in my neck.”

Larson stared at the nail. “Did they try to kill you?”

This is why Ellen preferred they not follow her.

“Yes, they did, in fact. But I am inviolable. They even once severed my cerebellum.” He put his hands upon his head. “Which would have made my life difficult.”

Larson widened his eyes and opened his mouth. This time Ellen didn't touch him.

“But I reattached the organ to my spinal chord, using this nail I found to secure it into place, prevent it from toppling off my shoulders like some ball on a fulcrum. So here I am.”

Larson reached for the nail. Ellen lightly brought his hand back down.

“The nail causes me to engage in rather mindless palaver. Whatever. So, the fortuneteller? You are in need of one to portend your final outcome? I think fortune-tellers end up on the library most days, among the books. That would be the fourth floor. But I can tell fortunes, too.”

Larson smiled, his hysteria now history. He pulled Ellen's arm in the direction of the elevator.

“Would you like me to tell your fortune?”

“No, thank you,” Ellen said before following Larson to the elevator where an old man with dark bushy eyebrows, dressed in a tuxedo that was soiled but bloodless, unfolded the iron accordion doors. She tried to hold off a sigh when she stepped inside with Larson.

Ellen's neighbor told her she was crazy to bring Larson here to a dark restaurant where monsters served you. But a classmate in school had told everyone about the “haunted mansion” in New York, and Larson insisted upon it when they got tickets to see *The Lion King*. He loved scary movies, but only at home, with Ellen right by him, her arm around his shoulders. This was a bit harder to take. The restaurant was indeed dark, a bit musty, its walls festooned with scary paraphernalia—moose heads that talked, pictures with shifting eyes, bloody monster heads, ambient horror pictures flashing on elevated TV screens tucked in each corner. An exposed elevator shaft cut through all levels, bringing to each floor a talking coffin or closet, augmented by loud creaks and horror movie music. The closet or coffin would usually tell jokes, off color, some even a bit bathroomish, then up it would go into a dark hole in the roof. The entire place was crowded with aspiring New York actors and actresses prancing about, trying out their acting skills upon attentive children. Ellen and Larson had to sit on the first floor, because, after the foyer show -- where a mini-skirted Morticia-like woman crowded new customers into a small room and lowered the ceiling, pretending to smash them like bugs--Larson had shrieked so loudly they had to cut the show short. The woman had been so sweet and gentle-- leading him to the first available table then returning

with a basket of French fries--that Larson had considered asking her for an autograph. But she wasn't quite right.

The library was the smallest of all the rooms. The restaurant was built in the shape of a tower, rooms shrinking in size as one moved up, so that the top floor was claustrophobically narrow. It took only a few seconds to scan the room and see that there was no fortuneteller. Ellen was getting a bit anxious. It was late; the train left in thirty minutes, and Larson was getting that look that suggested a spark of desperation, which had the potential of morphing into a conflagration of anger at any moment. He never missed an autograph. Never. Once someone was deemed potentially famous, the signature was obtained. Period.

The autographs had started last year at his tenth birthday celebrated at Disney World. Snow White had greeted them at breakfast with her white teeth and perfect makeup and solicitous voice. Her hair was stiff, like shellac, and Ellen thought she smelled like lavender. Larson turned to a clean page when she leaned over with her pen. An entire page, just for her. Later, he cast out all the other signatures, sleeping with her page tucked under his chin, setting it by his breakfast plate the next morning, staring at it intermittently the rest of the week. He had asked Ellen several times if Snow White was indeed famous, and Ellen had said yes she was. After he asked for the twentieth time, Ellen had become worried about his growing obsession with fame. She said, without thinking, "But, Larson, you never know who'll be famous. It's likely anyone-- teacher, friend, even a waitress somewhere-- may go on to be famous." Larson had found this fascinating-- that years from now someone who was just an ordinary person would suddenly be famous. "How does one tell?" he asked. Ellen was eating a Popsicle with him at a café in Magic Kingdom. She had shrugged and said she wasn't quite sure. But when he kept pressing, she finally said, "Well, I suppose you can tell by the way they act." Soon afterwards, Larson obtained a small black notebook, and on a strip of duct tape at its top he wrote "fuchoor famus peepul."

Ellen stood with him at the front of the library, praying to the great monster in charge of the world, to let the fortuneteller appear. The next train wouldn't be for another hour and a half, which would put her back in Connecticut past nine, way past the time their dog should be let out for his last sniff at the bushes before sleep. More importantly, if they missed the train, she and Larson would be left in the city with nothing to do.

"Perhaps she is taking a bathroom break," Ellen said.

"We can go down to another floor."

"The third is closed today. Remember?"

"Maybe there are workers there who need their fortune."

A magician wearing a black cape and tuxedo tie finished up with a family and walked to the back, where a hall disappeared into darkness, perhaps dead-ending into a room, a kitchen, or employee hangout of sorts. Ellen imagined them all back there, feet up, a cup of coffee in hand, gossiping, exchanging anecdotes. The fortuneteller was probably there, picking at French fries, not one thought about some strange kid who had responded well to her.

A gypsy with a wide, deeply wrinkled face walked out of the hall, her hands pinching her waist in as if she were going to do a polish polka dance any minute. She looked around the room briefly and loped towards a booth where she started in on a group of girls, bending towards them to chat. She laughed in a burst of crackling, phlegmatic noise that sounded like a pack a day for twenty years.

"I wouldn't want her signature," Larson said.

"Are you looking for someone, or have you gotten lost in the library?" The magician had reappeared out of nowhere, as if he had been tossed over to them from the back of the room. He held a deck of cards and addressed only Larson, not moving his eyes to Ellen even for a moment.

"I want the fortuneteller," Larson said.

"I tell fortunes," the magician said. "Let's see." He spread the cards in his hand like a fan.

"No," said Larson. "The fortuneteller."

The magician assumed an expression of offense, as if the child had told him he was no good at his job.

"We need to talk to the fortuneteller," Ellen said. "Before we leave. Do you know where she is?"

"Well, I suppose, if you have a relationship with the fortuneteller, then you have a relationship with the fortuneteller. There is nothing I can do. I think the woman you are in need of is in the back. Fortunetellers sometimes get tired. Magicians? We go on and on, you see. Fortune is transient; magic has a degree of permanence."

"Back there?" Larson pointed, but didn't wait for an answer. He passed by the booths and gypsy now performing a trick with her scarf. Ellen was right behind him. She reached out for his arm, but he jerked it away and started to trot. His face was flush, his breath quick. There was nothing to do but go along.

Ellen's ex-husband had thought there was something to do. Structure his day with rules, discipline. Chemically constrain him with drugs. Therapy, therapy and more therapy. One therapist had told Ellen it was important to take Larson out of his fantasy world, comfort him with reality. But where was this comfort, Ellen had thought. When Larson was two and spun around in circles, Ellen had held out her hands and spun with him. When he lined up his cars in straight lines, organized by color, she got on the floor and helped him. When he was convinced the world did in fact have a Peter Pan, she bought two green capes and they jumped around the furniture. She had searched the woods for hidden jewels, lugged pieces of granite around everywhere and waited while he shared his precious jewels with anyone who would listen. Last year her husband left, and she carefully explained to Larson that Daddy and Mommy simply didn't live with each other anymore. It was something between them, nothing to do with him. But it had everything to do with him. Everything. She played his fantasy games, spun around, chased down women for autographs, and lied.

The gypsy stepped in front of the hallway, hands on hips again. "And where do you think you're going?" Not only her face, but her entire being was round, thick, and tight, like a cabbage. She would

have looked tough if not for her small bird-like blue eyes which danced around, cutting the edge off her mien.

"I have to see the fortuneteller."

"Only the building tenants can hang back there. Are you a building tenant sir, or one of our visitors? You look like a baseball player. A Steinbrenner baseball player, I see. They're the worst. They come and take over our private quarters. If you were a Mets baseball player, I would perhaps let you into our cozy abode. But we don't know about the Yankees."

"Hey," Ellen said, placing her arm gently around Larson, but he jerked it off violently. "Seriously, we do need to chat with the fortuneteller. We finished dinner and he can't leave without seeing her."

"You want a fortune? I can tell your fortune."

"No!" Larson pushed the tough gypsy aside, and ran back into the hall. The gypsy raised her hand to someone near the elevator, as if signaling bodyguards.

"You cannot go into that room. I'm serious, buster. I am also mean," the gypsy yelled as she followed Ellen and Larson. The cavernous hall was surrounded by black walls and black ceiling, with a strip of small red bulbs down its center. At the end was a door on the left, opposite another elevator, which was probably used to transport food. Larson jiggled the door before Ellen grabbed his wrist, which resulted in his potato sack routine-- a loose arrangement of flesh, hair, Yankee jersey upon the floor. This would last ten minutes at least. The train would be missed. Forget the train.

"Baseball players always get upset over the future," the gypsy said.

Ellen and Larson stood to the side of the door, waiting for the gypsy to return. She had disappeared inside, leaving Ellen with her now weeping child and slightly crumpled autograph book. In ten minutes, the train would leave, and Ellen still had a semblance of

hope. She went through the steps that could conceivably put them in the station—a quick signature, a dash for a cab, promise of a big tip as compensation for roller coaster, near-death experience.

When the door opened, a man dressed in a black sweatshirt slipped out, looking interrupted and put upon.

“I’m afraid the fortuneteller will not be available.”

Larson put the book to his face again.

“Can I talk to you?” Ellen said.

“I would be glad to talk to you, but really, she is not available right now.”

“Just one second, OK?” Ellen squatted and held Larson by both shoulders. “Look, Larson, I’m going to talk to this man, but you have to stay right here. ‘K? Right here.” She looked up. “Is there like a waitress or someone who could watch him for one minute?”

He raised his hand to the hostess who had been huddled in the back with a few waitresses studying the scene.

The room was not dark and dank, and there were no ambient horror movies or moose heads hanging on walls. It was brightly lit and held only a few card tables scattered around, topped with messy plates and plastic coffee cups. There was a refrigerator, a sink, a linoleum counter tucked in the corner, like a New York apartment kitchen. Two vampires were at the sink, laughing out loud.

Ellen saw her, or someone who looked like her, drinking a beer, chatting with a man in jeans and light t-shirt. Her glasses were off, her dark wig gone, her corset and low cut peasant shirt replaced by a blue sweater. She was now your basic blond in tight jeans.

“She was standing in for another girl. A favor. They knew each other in college or something. You watch soap operas?”

Ellen shook her head.

“Well, she’s in that popular one filmed here in New York-- Hours of Our Lives? Or something like that. She’s been in some bit parts too, a few. Filmed a scene today down at So Ho. A tired woman, and as you can see, no longer a fortuneteller.”

“I see. I don’t watch soap operas, so.” Ellen talked fast, eager to move the conversation, everything, forward. “Look, this is hard to

understand. I know. But Larson gets this thing in his head and it's hard to live with him if he doesn't get the bug out of his brain. He just thinks she's nice. A nice fortuneteller who will be famous."

"Yes?"

"Yeah, he's a little obsessed, like your monsters out there. You know how they're all obsessed with telling fortunes?"

"Of course, but maybe not this time."

The kick at the door started up, a low tap. The hostess' voice was indecipherable, but the tone was harsh. The kicking stopped and the top of the door started pounding. Larson was shouting "Mom."

"Maybe you should leave?" the man said.

The actress poured the rest of her beer into a cup. The man put his arms around her, leaned in and whispered something into her ear. The kicking resumed. The hostess said something through the door in a pleading voice. Ellen went through it in her head. She would talk to this woman who would acquiesce, reluctantly, and put down her beer. Larson would run up to her for the signature. Maybe she could simply put back on the glasses and do the accented voice again, just for a moment. Ellen was considering all of this when the actress laughed, turned and caught her eye.

"Is this a customer? I said I'm through for the day?" Her voice was ironic and sultry.

Ellen was in front of her before the man or vampires could grab her.

"My boy? Remember, the Yankees jersey?"

The doorknob jiggled.

The girl shrugged like there was a distant oblique memory somewhere but she didn't want to retrieve it. She looked over at the door, which was jiggling slightly with kicks.

"He has a notebook full of people he predicts will be famous," the man said, now by Ellen's side. "She said he now thinks you will be famous."

"Funny. Tell him no. I act in soap operas. I will never be famous," the girl said.

“He doesn't know anything but that you're a fortuneteller who was nice to him. He thinks nice, pretty women will all be famous.”

Everyone in the room laughed.

“Well, that's not so far off,” the boyfriend said.

“Except for the nice,” the actress said.

“Just sign his book. He only knows you as a fortuneteller. You can, like, put on those big glasses again, or something.”

“Well, that's cute and all. But look, I'm tired and not a fortuneteller anymore. No autographs. Tell him I left. Maybe it's time you taught him that life isn't always getting your way.”

Ellen stood on Sixth Avenue with Larson. She had spent five minutes holding his hands, his back against the wall, as he screamed while New Yorkers passed by, sliding their eyes at her, as if debating whether or not she was an abusive parent or just another mother from New Jersey. She had talked in a hush, held him until his yells became whimpers. And now he was calm enough to walk.

“I think,” Larson finally said, his voice and breathing still lachrymal, “the fortuneteller went home.”

“Yes, Larson. She's home now.”

“Where do you think she lives?”

“I don't know.” Ellen spoke as if each word had a period after it. They had an hour to kill, and walking around speculating where a fortuneteller would live was not how she wanted to kill it.

“Larson,” Ellen started, now slowly, the way she spoke when pondering how to bring the world closer in to him. “About this fortune teller...”

Larson said “no” and put his hands over his ears.

Ellen looked straight ahead and waited for his hands to leave his ears and come down to his side so she could grab one and hold it while she spoke. It was time to change. Her husband and the therapist were right. This would grow, like everything grew, like his fantasies of Peter Pan, his obsession with jewels, his interest in fame, his need for signatures. This night would begin their

fortuneteller search, and on they would go, hunting down this woman on every sidewalk, shop, mall, and school. Ellen was exhausted by his mind, and it was time to push her boy into this world, one without fortunetellers or nice people who became famous, one where he existed as a different, disabled kid with a mom who destroyed a marriage. This world could be nice, but it moved on, and there was little chance of anyone in his book ever being famous. There were no fortunetellers. She looked at him. There were no fortunetellers her eyes said, but she remained quiet.

“How about we walk towards the Park? Or what do you say, a carriage ride? Or a bike ride! Yes, a pedicab!

“Seriously, Larson--” She squeezed his hand, and they started to walk. “You’ll love it.”

“Do they know where everyone lives?”

“They’re taxis, so I guess they do.”

She picked up speed, almost pulling him behind her.

“He may know where fortunetellers live. They probably all live in the same place in New York.”

“Larson, look.” Ellen stopped, grabbed both hands so he could not put them over his ears again. He closed his eyes, as if knowing what was coming was unbearable. “We will not see the fortune teller again. She left for the night and that is that.”

“We can go back and get the magician.” He opened his eyes. “The magician knows magic. He can find her!”

“Larson!” She squeezed his hands tight.

He closed his eyes again, but she didn’t talk, only stared at his lids. The evening lay before her: She would listen to his perseverations all the way to the Park then again inside the pedicab. He would ask the driver where fortunetellers lived, and she would have to try to explain the question without making Larson mad. There would be another explosion while the pedicab driver hovered over it, and of course another potato sac routine in front of passersby’s. She became so lost in her thoughts, trying to think of ways around each potential incident, that the world around her was

a collective murmur, a hum, and at first she didn't hear a part of it break loose.

"That's him! I know it!" The girl's voice was small, out of breath. "I know it's him. It's him!"

"Is she talking to me?" Larson said.

She looked six and so tiny a gust of wind could have swept her away. She had a southern accent and carried a large crumpled Macy's bag. The mother wore too much color and looked tired.

"You were in Angels in the Outfield!"

"Our first visit here. It's been a long day," the mother said to Ellen.

"And she has a new outfit from Macy's I see? A New York outfit," Ellen said.

"Are you the boy in Angels in the Outfield? "

"Sweetie, it's just a nice boy."

The girl walked closer to Larson, studying his face.

The mother leaned into Ellen, lowering her voice. "She thinks famous people are all over New York."

"Do you want me to sign something?" Larson said.

"Sign what? Why?"

"I'll sign something. If you want."

"Larson," Ellen said, slowly. "It was a mistake. She thought you were someone else."

But the girl was already tearing off a piece of her Macy's bag and handing it to him.

"Sign it right there. Right there." The girl stabbed at the brown paper, while her mother shrugged at Ellen, as if to say why not let them do this.

Larson stared at the precise place on the page she had stabbed. He ran his finger over it, took his pen from his pocket, then sat on the sidewalk, his back against the wall. He spent a few moments on the "L" before continuing.

"How old is he?" the mother said.

"Ten."

The mother smiled in a way to indicate she understood, even though she didn't and never would.

"She loves baseball, something my husband appreciates. I'm the only mother in my group in Charlotte with a daughter on a baseball team."

Larson pulled out his book, splayed it open for the girl. The girl stared a moment then took his pen, scratched out her name somewhere, while he watched intently.

"We're going to look for a fortuneteller tonight," Larson said, after she signed. "But she may be in Connecticut. We don't have to look now. We could find her tomorrow, right, Mom?"

"Is this a story he's read?" the mother said.

"Not really. She was with us earlier." Ellen started to explain who the fortuneteller was, what Larson was doing with the autograph book, why they needed her signature, but it all took too much energy, so she stopped. "It's a long story."

"She's probably asleep now," Larson said to no one in particular. "She for sure will be famous. She was right about me. Right, Mom? She's good."

There was the silence that always came after these comments, waiting for Ellen to take a turn, say something, explain her boy, perhaps change the subject. But Ellen didn't say anything. She considered what Larson had said as she regarded the southern skyline, the lacuna of vacuous space in the right-hand corner that used to be towers still noticeable after three years.

The moment became New York energy-- honks, moving bodies, shouts, the engine-like hum of life underfoot. It came upon them in undulating waves, one sound, smell, vibration leaving, another slipping in to fill the void.

