

Signs and Wonders



Darnell Arnoult



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I was raised on TV westerns like some folks are raised on religion. Rawhide. Wanted: Dead or Alive. Sugarfoot. Lawman. Bronco. There's something about a cowboy-independent, vulnerable, hero to the underdog, survivor against the odds, able to sit a horse for the long haul. At 25 years old, I was a divorced mother of two small children, and I made a subconscious decision to wait for my cowboy. I talked about wanting a cowboy but, looking back, I was more comfortable with the waiting.

The spring I was 42, an Arizona psychic gave me an accurate and plausible account of my life. He used tarot cards, spread on a table, as visual portals into my life. When I stood to leave the reading, I jarred his table, sending an unturned card to the floor. He retrieved it as I reached the door.

“You didn't want to know about your love life,” he said. “Why?”

“I've been a single mother for over 17 years,” I said. “I don't have that kind of love life.”

“You will, soon.” He eyed the card in his hand. “All I can say is, he’s on a horse and riding toward you.”

I took his prediction with a grain of salt, assuming he had read into my fantasy life. Soon I’d forgotten about it. But while antiquing that October, I found a 1940s triptych. On the left was a cowboy, his six-gun holstered on his hip. On the right was a cowgirl dressed in buckskin. In the center, the two huddled by a campfire beneath a starry sky. My grandmother had taught me about planting by the signs, about the wonders that await us if we keep a watchful eye. I recognized the triptych for the sign it was and bought it for \$65. On the first of November, I wrote a poem to the “cowboy,” asking him to come on if he was coming. I wasn’t getting any younger. The last night of November, I stayed late at my Durham office to research a short story about a woman who answers personal ads on the Internet. After reading ads from a few other cities, I clicked on those from Nashville, Tenn. They were mostly vulgar, sometimes sad and often poorly written. After 30 or so, I thought, “One more and I’m out of here.” The next ad read, “Do you like horses, fishing, sitting on the porch watching it rain? Do you like fine dining, concerts, the theater? I wear both kinds of clothes. Let’s talk.” It was signed “Cowboy.” I was so tempted to answer that I packed my things and headed home so I wouldn’t do anything foolish. Cowboy could’ve been an ax murderer or a teenage girl with a mean streak.

At the front door of my office building, I thought about the triptych, the poem and the psychic’s prediction.

I went back and wrote to Cowboy that I'd had a mean pony as a child and my father sold it, then saddled the back of our Naugahyde sleeper sofa, which I rode until my legs were too long and the couch broke. I signed it "TV Cowgirl."

Cowboy and I exchanged e-mails daily for two months. I found out later that I answered the ad, as did 34 other women, on the day he posted it. After reading the responses, he replied to six. He never read any of the hundreds of responses that came after that first day. A month later, he was writing only to me.

In December, on my 44th birthday, he told me his real name. He called on Christmas Day, and I heard "home" in his voice, that beautiful way of talking, rich with the sound of the past, like the speech of my native Virginia foothills.

What began as a computer-age blind date turned into an old-fashioned courtship of beautiful letters with an occasional touch that required a four-hour drive or a plane ticket. On April Fools' Day in 2000, it became a marriage grounded in the best kind of romance and the deepest friendship.

As our sixth anniversary approaches, folks still consult an almanac before planting their seeds, just like my grandmother did, and our romance continues to blossom. As a 50-year-old woman who waited a long time, I can say that I believe in a large design. I believe in its signs and wonders. And I believe in the power of love, in spite of all else, to reach out to the loneliest of hearts-when the time and signs are right.

Post Script: As of 2023, this essay was written 17 years ago. My wonderful husband and I were together for just over 20 years before his passing. I miss him everyday.

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*Cowboy tarot card by Molly Renda.