

Rhonda Reverse

Part 1

Rhonda Reverse had been right after all.

As much as Geraldine had talked about her being some “bogus fortune-teller,” and however much I had wanted to believe that, Rhonda had been right.

I kept telling myself that it’s just a coincidence. I didn’t know if that made me feel better or worse, but believing in *something* at least gave me something to do. Some sort of anchor to the world.

Nothing seemed to calm my nerves. I kept having this terrible feeling in my gut, that I jinxed it, that my decision to get our fortune read was directly linked to a terrible fate.

I lay still in my bed, thinking about where my friend was lying, miles and miles away. I looked at my phone, wishing I could just pick it up and text her like before. Like it hadn’t happened. But it *did* happen. She’d never pick up my call or answer my text again. The unthinkable occurred. And now I’d never get my friend back.

Part 2

I rolled over in my bed. I tried but I still couldn’t sleep after what happened. I remembered the last words Geraldine ever said to me: “You’re not the girl I used to know.” Those words had haunted me for what felt like eternity. I just stood there, blinking back my tears, a fire burning in my heart, ready to snap and let loose at any moment, but I made myself hold it in. So the only thing I let out was a tiny little choked sound.

I’d had a lot of time to think about it, and if I could go back now, I would have said something. I wouldn’t have wallowed in my fury and let her storm off like that. That was the worst decision of my life. At that exact moment, I could have prevented that from being the end

of our decades-long friendship. We'd been friends for twenty years, since we were in the same kindergarten class.

It was more than the end of a friendship, I thought to myself. Not saying anything, being so angry and desperate to prove myself "right," I had ended something more: a life.

Part 3

I got up and tried to read a book, figuring that if I couldn't sleep, at least maybe I could chip away at that book I'd been telling myself I would read for over a month now. But the second I got up, I felt tired again, and so I laid back down. My eyes drifted closed and suddenly all I could see was Rhonda Reverse. I still remembered what Rhonda Reverse looked like. She seemed dressed for Halloween, wearing black robes with stars and moons on it, and gothic makeup. She was old, older than Millie, older than my great-grandfather who, believe it or not, was still kicking at age one hundred and two!

She was seated at a little stand, with a cartoon witch tablecloth draped over it, making her very hard to take seriously. I had to stifle a laugh when I saw her, and she looked up at me and Geraldine, her lips curving a little, settling into a small, satisfied smile. I bet she was thinking about tourists, and how easy they were to fool. But as we passed by, ready to dismiss her with a wave of a hand, she called out: "Something bad will happen."

I froze midstep, wondering who she was talking to. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw no one at her stand. There were other people milling about, but I had this feeling, this instinct that she was talking to us.

I turned to face her, and that was my mistake.

She grinned when she saw my face and how taken-aback I was. She laughed and reached out a hand, with sharp black fingernails and voodoo-like charm bracelets clanging together like the ringing of a bell. “My name’s Rhonda Reverse. You could say I’m the local psychic ‘round here.” She put her head back, letting out a high-pitched laugh that somewhat resembled a hyena’s mating call.

I didn’t shake her hand, just stared at her with wide eyes, like a deer caught in headlights.

Geraldine tugged at my arm. “Let’s go. I want to check out the bookstore before it closes.”

Rhonda looked up at Geraldine, her eyes curious, scrutinizing Geraldine’s face. She had a playful, almost sinister twinkle in her eyes, and she nodded at my friend. “You,” she rasped. “Don’t dismiss me so quickly, now. You might want to listen up, as this involves you. But if you don’t care, I guess you don’t have to know.” She shrugged and turned to me again, her unnaturally bright green eyes unsettling me (how *did* she get them that shade? Contacts? Or was she actually born like that?) “You, dearie, will lose a friend.”

Geraldine scoffed, not buying the old woman’s cryptic messages. “Come on.” She kept tugging at my arm.

I didn’t move, me being the worrywart I am. I turned to the woman. “What do you mean?” I demanded, feeling that pounding in my chest, blood rushing to my ears and making the only thing I could hear my heart, the rest of the world fading around me.

The woman smiled, revealing her missing teeth. She pointed to a jar of dollar bills. It was nearly empty, only two twenties inside.

“Twenty dollars to tell yer fortunes, sweetie pies.”

Geraldine started walking away, but I pulled her back and frantically dug in my wallet for some money. I pulled out a crisp bill and threw it in the jar.

Geraldine narrowed her eyes at me, mouthing, *“Fine. I’m not the one who’s lost twenty dollars.”*

Rhonda shook her head. “No, no, dearie. Twenty dollars just fer you.” She pointed a sharp fingernail at Geraldine. “But the dark cloud I see in yer future involves her.”

Geraldine put her hands up, shrugging. “I’m not paying a cent to this phony.”

“Come on, Geraldine.” I sighed, and tossed another twenty in the jar. “I’m paying for you.”

Rhonda seemed amused. After an intense staring contest, Geraldine had sighed and slid down into the stool beside me facing Rhonda.

Part 4

My thoughts now wandered to the town we’d found Rhonda Reverse in. I forgot the actual name of it, but I remember Geraldine and I had to drive forty minutes upstate to get there. It had an uncanny resemblance to Stars Hollow from *Gilmore Girls*. It was the perfect town to visit in autumn, with many oak trees all set ablaze, red and orange confetti falling from the sky and crunching beneath our feet. There was a gazebo decorated with for Halloween with spiderwebs and skeletons, a diner named Lucy’s, and many peculiar characters roaming the streets, so strange that Rhonda Reverse didn’t stand out among the crowd: Millie, an old lady with seven cats and a penchant for gossiping, Basil, the uptight author of the local weekly food blog, and Birdie, Basil’s ex-wife, who used to be an acrobat for a traveling circus in Nevada but retired to her hometown after an accident involving fire hoops.

We immediately loved the town.

And it was then, right then, after we spoke with Basil, that I first laid my eyes on Rhonda Reverse, and everything changed.

Back to my bedroom. My eyes were not on Rhonda Reverse, but on the painting beside my bed of a little white cat and a teacup, steam coming out of the cup and a tea bag hanging from the side.

Part 5

Just looking at tea bags reminded me of Rhonda. Well, everything reminded me of Rhonda, so maybe it wasn't the fault of the tea bags.

I remembered that it took a while for Rhonda to tell us *it*, and the first thing she brought out were old, dried tea leaves. Then, she lit some candles. Then she did a tarot reading and said some obscure words. All that was fine. It went well, actually.

It was when she was reading our palms that she dropped the bomb.

She was counting and studying the money I gave her, like it might be counterfeit, then fixed her eyes on us. "Give me your left hand."

I obliged immediately, and after some reluctance and groaning and rolling of the eyes, Geraldine followed.

Rhonda flipped our hands so our palms were facing upward, and she studied the lines there.

A bemused expression flickered on her face as she looked at Geraldine's palm. Geraldine immediately withdrew her hand. "What?" she teased. "I'm gonna die tomorrow or something?"

Rhonda ignored her, engrossed in her vision. “Something will happen. Two weeks from now.”

“She’s gonna die?” I shrieked, standing up before she could read my palm. I didn’t even care about all the money I’d paid. I *hoped* she was a phony. “Is that what you meant when you said I was gonna lose a friend?”

Rhonda sighed. “Sit back down, darling. I must give you your money’s worth. And I said *nothing* of the sort. Don’t jump to conclusions.”

“Well, you *implied* it!” I yelled back.

“Calm down!” Geraldine hissed. “I’m not gonna die,” she snorted. “You’re so gullible, you know that right?”

“She says you’re gonna die! Two weeks from now! We have to take that seriously, Geraldine!”

Rhonda just sat there, tapping her fingernails on that stupid cartoon witch tablecloth, and I had to say, she resembled that cartoon witch a lot, with her evil laughter and her toothless smile and her enjoyment of my terror.

Geraldine was rolling her eyes. “Seriously? Don’t tell me you actually *believe* this crap!” She shook her head. “We’re supposed to enjoy our Saturday girls trip, and you’re freaking out and making a whole scene!”

“It’s true,” Rhonda said, nodding at me. “Lots of people are looking at you.”

I rolled my eyes, although my cheeks did turn a little red. “I don’t care about that if my childhood best friend of twenty years is going to *die!*”

Rhonda reached out and grabbed my hand, studying my palm. “You. I sense yer a bit of a worrier. Don’t let that take over yer life, alright? I never said anything ‘bout death. That was all

in yer head. Calm yerself down.” She released my hand and smiled up at me, her eyes gleaming. “But yer gonna lose her, all right.”

Before I could reply, Geraldine dragged me out of there and into my car, and we drove the thirty minutes back to the city in silence.

I blinked, feeling a lump in my throat after coming back from the memory. My stomach felt unsettled. I put down the cup and tried to go to sleep, but I could not get Rhonda Reverse out of my head.

Part 6

It took me a while to realize where I was. I was in my bed, sunlight streaming in through the windows. I lay there for a few minutes, confused. My cheeks were wet with tears. I’d been crying in my sleep. I must have had a nightmare. The last thing I remembered before I jolted awake was being in the bathroom, getting a phone call, boating with Geraldine... The order was a bit off, but that was the gist. Boating with Geraldine... Geraldine... Tragedy.

I sat up, pressing my hand to my temple, trying to separate the real world from my dream world. No, I had not fallen asleep by the toilet last night. I was in my bed. No, it wasn’t a Saturday out with Geraldine: it was Friday, five in the morning. My shift didn’t start until eleven, so I had plenty of time to get more rest. Friday. *Tomorrow* I would go out with Geraldine. And no, Geraldine wasn’t dead like she’d been in the dream. *Yet*. I ignored that last part that my brain unconsciously added.

I opened my blinds and chugged some water, I mostly forgot it. It was all a blur. All I could remember was that it was terrible, and I hoped I would never have that nightmare again.

It was as if that dream was a premonition, a warning to myself that something bad was going to happen.

Well, of course something bad was going to happen. Rhonda Reverse's words kept echoing in my mind, echoing and echoing and echoing and echoing.

I realized Rhonda never said, explicitly, that Geraldine was going to die. For a second, I felt hopeful.

I wouldn't feel that kind of hope again for months.

I got to my feet and paced my bedroom, back and forth, picking at my nails anxiously. The world spun around me and I felt a faint buzzing in the back of my head, and it got louder and louder until it became a bulldozer.

I was spiraling. I was panicking. I made myself take a few deep breaths and make myself some tea. I sat back down on my bed and sipped it.

Tomorrow, I repeated to myself. Tomorrow was Saturday. The dream was just a dream.

The dream was just a dream...

Part 7

I had felt like I was in a nightmare. Like I had been bound to wake up at any second.

But I had not woken up in time.

I was in my house. Saturday night after a long day of boating with Geraldine. I'd just said bye to her after she dropped me off at my apartment and headed off to hers. We weren't exactly on the best terms - she was mad at me for freaking out over Rhonda's words. I was sitting in my bed, scrolling on my phone, when I got a phone call from an unknown number. Usually, I never picked up unknown numbers, but this time, I did.

I spent the rest of that night on the bathroom floor, alternating between fits of screaming and choking on my own tears.

The words of Geraldine's mom kept bouncing around my head as I sobbed and hit the wall, over and over and over again.

"I'm so sorry," and, "I know she was your best friend," and "It was a hit-and-run. The doctors confirmed it. She's dead."

I wished I could have said something to cheer up Geraldine's mother, but I was too consumed in my own grief to say anything beyond a simple "I'm sorry for your loss." I should've done something. I shouldn't have just let Geraldine go like that, with both of us so broken. I lost a friend, in both possible ways.

I squeezed my eyes shut and continued to sob, as the world around me faded away. When I opened my eyes again, it was morning.

Part 8

I didn't remember everything Rhonda Reverse said all that well. The only thing that mattered to me was what she had said about Geraldine's misfortune and how I would lose a friend. But something she said, right when we were leaving, stood out to me.

As Geraldine dragged me away toward my car, Rhonda had gotten to her feet and lunged toward me. She spoke in a hurried whisper, her unnecessarily strong perfume making my nose twitch: "Don't be so worried, my dear. Yer gonna find that looking at things from a different angle, or maybe, a different order, changes everything." She winked as she pulled away, and shouted out: "Remember my name!"

It was such a bizarre comment, and it had been ingrained in my head ever since. What in the world did she mean by *that*? I now knew exactly what she meant when she said I'd lose a friend, but that last comment still puzzled me.

First of all: what did she mean by looking at things from a different angle or a different order? Nothing changed the fact that I lost a friend, and it happened exactly two weeks after my meeting with her.

And second of all, and perhaps strangest of all: what was so important about her name? "Rhonda Reverse," I repeated to myself, over and over and over again. Rhonda Reverse. Rhonda Reverse. Rhonda Reverse. Rhonda Reverse *in reverse*: Reverse Rhonda? Rhonda in reverse was Adonhr, which I didn't think meant anything in particular.

Rhonda Reverse.

I'd remember that name until I took my last breath.

Maybe you'll figure out the meaning of her name, and if you do, don't leave me here so sad. Hurry up and tell me what she meant. I'll be waiting.

Please.

*Now read the story in **reverse** order, from Part 8 to Part 1, and you might finally understand what Rhonda Reverse meant when she said that "looking at things from a different angle, or maybe, a different **order**, changes everything."*