

The Beauty Seer

by Krin Van Tatenhove



The day would climax like no other, but Alma Fuentes didn't know that as she unlocked the entrance to her studio at 9:00 a.m., a ritual as regular as sunrise.

She stepped outside to make sure her hanging sign wasn't tilted, dusting it with a red bandana. Orange and black letters announced, "The Beauty Seer, by Appointment or Walk-ins Welcome," her phone number beneath.

She glanced along the sidewalk towards downtown San Antonio, early sunlight slanting through gaps in the buildings. It would be a typical summer day in south Texas, hot and humid, suffocating tourists along the River Walk. Grackles whistled from nearby trees, and the exhaust from a recent bus lingered in the air.

Down the street, Alma could see Carlos, a homeless man already on his panhandling circuit, holding court with the voices in his head. Sometimes, he would stand across the street and protest her practice, holding a sign that read "Repent from witchcraft! Only Jesus can save you!" She talked to him once, trying to explain that her craft had nothing to do with the dark arts, but he wouldn't listen. He fixated on the word seer, quoting an obscure verse from the Old Testament prophet, Micah: "The seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame; they shall all cover their lips." Impressed by his wit, she tried to show him that seers were used positively by other Biblical characters, including King David, but she made no headway. Now they had a truce. Carlos stayed on his side of the street and she stayed on hers.

She smiled as she thought about him. In a harsh way, he was simply giving voice to the skepticism people had always expressed about her profession. Did she really think

she was some kind of fortune teller, astrologer, or soothsayer? Wasn't she just a quack who trafficked in people's narcissism and naiveté?

Her only rebuttal was to engage them in conversation, gently probing the details of their lives. If they were willing to share at meaningful levels, she would find it. She would see the beauty in their lives, the reasons—more numerous than they imagined—to be grateful, to seize each passing moment and savor it with a full heart.

Even as a child growing up in Reynosa, Mexico, her parents and friends marveled at her temperament. “How can you always be so positive?” they asked. Or, on a cynical note, “There's Alma. The world could be burning down around her and she would see the splendor in the flames.”

As she became conscious of her uniqueness, she realized she had a gift. It was an unflinching optimism, an inner wellspring of hope, and its power filled her with joy and determination. By the time she was a teenager, people who had previously ridiculed her began to seek her counsel. They laid out their troubles with family members, love interests, or peer pressure, and she would calm and encourage them with words that focused the assets in their lives.

After her family moved to the U.S. and became citizens, she chose to cultivate her talent by attending classes on counseling and psychology at a local college. But clinical theories left her cold; she found them divorced from the flesh and blood individuals she encountered in daily life. Further, there were certain words those theories rarely mentioned, especially the word love.

Love. On this day, her sessions would provide ample opportunity to practice her art.

At 10:00 a.m., Vanessa arrived, her face lined with the stresses of her busy life, the pressures of parenting, marriage, and a law practice. She felt she was losing herself, her life slipping away, swallowed up by others who didn't appreciate her. She greeted Alma, then sat down on a couch across from her, checking her watch.

"Same as every day, she said. "I'm afraid I don't have a full hour. I'm slammed. I've got an important deposition this morning."

Alma let her catch her breath, then said, "It's hard to be someone who cares enough to give the fullness of their lives. Not everyone does that, Vanessa. Let's pick up where we ended last time. Tell me more about your parents. What were they like?"

"They were salt of the earth," said Vanessa. "Hardworking and responsible. I would even say they were selfless. But that's just the point. When I sat next to my father's bed during his final moments, I kept asking myself 'Is this all there is? Working yourself to the bone to provide for others, then dying in a hospital bed with tubes running out of your arms and impersonal nurses changing your bed pan?'"

"Were you with him when he died?" Alma asked.

"Yes," said Vanessa, tears welling at the corners of her eyes.

After some silence: "Was he conscious?"

"Almost to the end," said Vanessa. "And I'll never forget the last thing he said to me."

"What was it?" asked Alma.

Vanessa's tears flowed more heavily, and her chest seemed to spasm. She looked away, gathering herself.

"He said, '*Mija*, you are a deep soul. I am so proud to call you my daughter.'"

With those words, Vanessa let out the depths of her grief, tears flowing freely in the sanctuary of Alma's studio. Alma said nothing, just reached across the table and gently laid her hand on Vanessa's. After a few moments, Vanessa looked up and gazed into Alma's eyes, her face vulnerable. It was the moment Alma had been waiting for.

"Vanessa," she said, "You are an intelligent, capable, and powerful woman. You know that you can always choose to lighten your schedule and take more time for yourself. You can set boundaries to make sure that others pick up their fair share of the load. I encourage you to do so. Meanwhile, I see *such* beauty in you and the memory you shared of your father. What a treasure to know that this man who poured out his life for others felt a love for you that he could barely express. It's a blessing, an anointing, and please hear me when I say this. In a world where so many people are concerned primarily with their own selves and personal gain, you have discovered one of the deepest reasons we are created—to bring joy to the world. This makes you a wealthy woman in the realm of the Spirit."

Vanessa lowered her gaze and took a deep breath, and as she did, her hand grasped Alma's and squeezed it in a gesture of gratitude. Time stood still.

Then there was the session with Victor at 1:00 p.m.

He entered the room with an air of confidence, an outer façade that he usually chose to drop when he was in Alma's presence. A recovering alcoholic with four years of sobriety

under his belt, Victor managed a local Tex-Mex restaurant and art gallery, often displaying his own photographs, including some that had gained national notoriety. He was a tall, handsome man with dark hair and full lips. The crow's feet around his lustrous brown eyes added character to his face, speaking of hard paths and difficult lessons.

Victor had a sponsor in AA, a man who helped him remember to *never* take another drink; it would only resuscitate the nightmares of blackouts, hangovers, and suicide by degree. But the sponsor was rigid and harsh in applying the principles of The Twelve Steps. Alma knew that Victor came to her for a listening ear that was gentler and more affirming.

Once he settled in his chair and greeted her, Alma noticed that he looked more haggard than usual.

"You're struggling with something," she said.

"Yeah, I've been having trouble sleeping," he said, "Intellectually, I know that regret is a futile waste of time, a self-centered vestige of what we AAers call stinking thinking. But at night I wake up and I can't go back to sleep. I get obsessed over pieces of the wreckage in my past. The images of people and situations swarm over me like mosquitos. There has to be more to sobriety than this..."

"That's true," said Alma.

"It *is*," replied Victor. "And even though I don't have the urge to drink again—*honestly*—I know I have to find a way to quit these thoughts and return to serenity. I just can't seem to get there."

"You are very hard on yourself," said Alma.

Victor smiled with a tingle of sadness.

“True,” he said. “Self-criticism comes naturally to me, a dubious inheritance from my seriously fucked-up family of origin.”

Alma chuckled, then gently changed the subject.

“When those nighttime regrets come rushing at you, is there one memory in particular that is especially painful?”

She instantly hit a nerve.

“Yes,” he said. “My regrets over losing Mary Ann.”

“Who was she?”

“A romance I enjoyed for a couple years. We had this amazing connection, physically, intellectually, creatively. I sometimes feel that our time together, especially our love-making, spoiled me for anything in the future. It was that good...”

He drifted away for a second, wandering in a garden of memories.

“What stings the most when you remember her?” asked Alma, bringing him back to the present. He looked at her, almost reluctantly.

“I lost her because of my selfishness, this gnawing need for affirmation inside me, this pressure that fueled so much of my drinking. I directed it at her. I became more and more demanding of her attention until she felt suffocated. I don’t blame her, but when I think of losing her, a fissure of grief opens up inside me. It’s connected to all the other losses in my life. I don’t know...it’s hard to describe. It’s like a wave of melancholy.”

Alma let the wave roll over him for a moment.

“There are many aspects of The Twelve Steps that I love,” she said. “Especially their reminder that letting go of self-recrimination is a daily reprieve, something we work to achieve through spiritual discipline. With memories like that, I understand your restlessness and stress in the middle of the night,” she said. “But tell me, what are your days like *now*, especially compared to when you were drinking?”

He thought for a few silent seconds, his countenance gradually brightening.

““They are *so* much better,” he said. “I’m getting more accomplished and I seem to be doing so in a natural way. My business and art flow out of me rather than being forced. And I have finally begun to have a short time of meditation, early morning walks when I settle into a rhythm and listen to the sounds around me.”

He looked up at her with a smile that was more peaceful. It was the moment she had been waiting for.

“I read devotional literature from many traditions,” she said, “including the Hebrew Psalms. There is a verse in Psalm 84 that I love. ‘Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere.’ It tells me that when we begin to live in the center of each 24 hours, uplifted by the Presence that loves and affirms us, time expands dramatically. Psalm 84 uses the hyperbole of a 1,000:1 ratio just to drive home the point.

“I see such positive things happening in your life, Victor. The darkness of the past with its self-destructive behaviors is being replaced with the fullness of the present. Your Higher Power is redeeming your time, and any regrets you have will eventually dissolve in the beauty of this new life, one day at a time. I am sure of this.”

“I hope so,” he said. “Thank you so much, Alma.”

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In the middle of the afternoon, Alma was going over some notes when she heard the bell at her front door. She looked up to see a young man dressed in baggy jeans and a black tank top. His head was shaved, his arms sleeved with tattoos, including one that was all too familiar to her: the black and gold crown symbol of the Latin Kings. It sparked a memory that made her catch her breath.

From the moment he entered, his eyes were locked on hers.

“Walk-ins are welcome. Right?” he said.

“Yes, they are,” she said. “Have a seat.”

He sat down, his eyes still fixed on hers, the rest of his face impassive.

“Can I help you?” she asked, trying to conceal her growing anxiety.

“I’m sure you can’t,” he said. “I’m here because *you* are the one who needs help. You need to free your mind, *mujer*.”

She forced a smile and said, “I’m always open to new insights.”

He laughed, a guttural sound that rolled across the table.

“That sounds like something you would say.”

“I’m serious,” she said, not blinking.

“I’m sure you are, and that’s the problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ll get to that,” he said. “But first, a question.”

“Anything,” she said.

“You’re from the Fuentes family on Calaveras, aren’t you?”

Her mind began to work, putting his question together with the gang tattoo on his forearm. She did not like the way their conversation was turning.

“Yes,” she answered. “*Ellos son mi familia.*”

“Then you’ll be happy to know that Bennie sends you his greetings,” he said. “More than that. He asked me to give you a message.”

At the mention of her nephew’s name, something caught inside her chest. A memory came back as vivid as the present.

It was one of those endless days in late summer, heat and humidity lingering in the air. She had returned from a day’s work and was preparing dinner, looking out the kitchen window at her husband, Beto, trimming roses in the front yard. The skyscrapers of San Antonio loomed in the distance.

Suddenly, she saw her sister-in-law rushing down the sidewalk, stopping to talk to Beto, clearly distraught. After a moment, the two of them turned towards the house and fixed their gazes on Alma. The anguish in their eyes was unmistakable.

Bennie had been arrested for murder, and all the fragmented puzzle pieces of his dark descent fell into place. Despite family support, and even professional counseling, he had drifted into the gang life that permeated so much of the west side culture in San Antonio, recruited by the Latin Kings. His whole demeanor had changed, and no one, not even his closest family members, could convince him to alter his course.

Her sister-in-law gave the latest gory details. Bennie has been ordered to warn away a rival gang member. What started as verbal threats escalated into violence. Bennie shot the other young man with his 9MM Glock in broad daylight outside a drug

trafficking house. He would have escaped except for the bravery of a witness across the street, an old man who said he was “no longer going to surrender” to the intimidation gang members used to quiet bystanders.

The old man’s identification led to an arrest and conviction. On the day of judgment, with the court packed by the Fuentes clan, Bennie sat defiantly as he received a sentence of 30 years. Once behind bars, he made it clear that he did not want visitation from family.

“What’s wrong?” said the young man, jolting Alma from her memories. “Speechless?”

“No,” said Alma, collecting herself. “I just haven’t heard Bennie’s name for a while. How is he doing?”

“*El es un soldado fiel.* He is one of our most effective enforcers in prison. When we need the hand of vengeance, he is more than willing.”

The young man looked at Alma with a malignant smile, expecting a reaction.

“So, that’s it?” she snapped. “You came here to share the sadness and tragedy of my nephew’s life? Why would you want to do that?”

“Because Bennie said your outlook on the world needs some correction, and I agree. I, too, have a family member who lives in a fog, *mi tia* who comes to see you, wasting her social security money on your brand of insanity.”

Without knowing her visitor’s name, Alma suspected it was Elodia, one of her few clients from the old neighborhood, a widow battling depression, afraid to set foot outside her home because of increased violence in the neighborhood.

Partly from anger, partly because of her basic nature, Alma decided to commandeer the conversation, turning it in a new direction.

“*Bastante!*” she said. “You have delivered your message. Now, you can tell Bennie *this* the next time you see him. No matter how disturbed his life has become, no matter how far he has descended into darkness, there is hope. No one is outside the influence of love, even the most hardened criminal.”

The young man grew rigid as she spoke.

“Bennie knew you would say something like that. But you’re wrong, and here is the rest of his message. He told me to tell you that the world is NOT beautiful. It is full of violence, selfishness, and inequality. Look at this city. So many of our people live in rundown *barrios*, struggling to get by, their homes sagging, their schools shabby and poorly funded. Then drive 10 miles north, *mama*, and see the suburbs, where people live in big homes and seal themselves off from reality. They don’t give a shit. They just want to get their piece, their portion. I don’t blame them. In fact, I agree with them. Find a way to get what you deserve, by any means necessary.”

“But the means do not always...” Alma tried to intervene.

“Shut up!” he nearly shouted. “Bennie and I aren’t finished. We want you to remember the history of our people. Even you, with your idiotic optimism, cannot deny the racism that has existed here since this land was seized from Mexico. It is the same oppression that affects people of color all over the world. It is *not* beautiful! You hear me? It is evil in a pure form. For too many years it told our children that they are somehow inferior, when in reality they are kings and queens!”

“But this intolerance is not our basic nature,” said Alma, raising her voice. “Inside each of us...”

The young man slammed his fist on the table. “You are no better than the oppressors,” he hissed. “By filling people’s minds with this narcotic of false hope, you keep them from joining the struggle, from demanding what is rightfully theirs!”

He suddenly stood, staring down at her, visibly calming his breath until he was preternaturally still. Alma felt a chill run through her body, as if a curtain of ice had dropped in her studio.

“OK, Beauty Seer,” said the young man with a sneer. “That is all I have to say to you right now. But I am *sure* we will meet again. Soon. You obviously need additional correction.”

Without another word, he turned and left the studio.

Alma was shaken. It wasn’t so much the young man’s words, or even the memory of Bennie. It was that final stillness, his complete immersion in the glacial atmosphere of his dark world view. He was a true believer. Alma shook off another shiver.

The rest of the afternoon passed without incident or any new clients, and she was able to maintain her composure despite traces of the young man’s presence in her mind and heart. Her final appointment was late in the day, and by the time she locked the front door, dusk was settling over the city. She went to the rear of her studio to exit along the alley where she parked her car. She stepped out, turned to lock the bolt, then heard quick footsteps behind her. A rough hand grasped her around the neck and twisted her body

against the wall of the building. She could feel its bricks radiating heat from the summer day.

She turned her head, though she already knew who it was---the young man with the tattoos, a crazed look in his eyes, a smile like a grimace twisting his lips. He lifted a handgun and pointed at a space between her eyes, just inches from her skull.

“Stop struggling or I’ll shoot you right now,” he whispered harshly.

“You don’t have to...” she said.

“Shut up,” he commanded, his hand growing tighter around her throat.

She attempted to swivel her head, to see if there was anyone nearby who could help. A siren wailed from the heart of the city, but it receded. The last light of day bathed the alley in shadows.

Using all her strength, she twisted until she was fully facing him, galvanizing her fear, looking beyond the barrel of the handgun to focus on his eyes.

“If you would only...” she started to say.

“What? If I would only *what?* I don’t want to hear your bullshit. I don’t want to suffer through your fortune cookie trivialities. You and people like you have no idea what it is like to live in reality.”

“Reality depends entirely on how we...” she tried one more time.

“Enough,” he snarled. “Here’s another lesson from Bennie and me. Think of it as a test. Maybe your *final* test. Look deeply into the barrel of this gun. What beauty do you see in there?”

Alma focused on the black circle of the gun's barrel, and it appeared to her like the void that opens in the lives of so many people, threatening to engulf them. The heart of darkness, the cistern of death, evil, and hopelessness.

Simultaneously, there was the answering fountain of her soul, rising up with unquenchable power. Time stood still. It brought a smile to her lips as she said...

“I see....”