



FIG. 36

The 'heart line' formed at the site of the metacarpophalangeal joints is accentuated by their movement and thereby swells the metacarpophalangeal pad. While in monkeys this line runs across the roots of all four fingers, in man it runs between the middle and forefinger.

# Traveling Hand

BY SARAH FERGUSON

*The unconscious is that chapter of my history which is marked by a blank or occupied by a falsehood: it is the censored chapter. But the Truth can be found again: it is most often already written down elsewhere.*

—Jacques Lacan, "The Language of the Self"

**THE FIRST** was Catherine. I found her in a dark apartment above the 25 Cent Peep Show/Triple X Video Store on Seventh Avenue and 41st Street. "You are here for a reading?" she asks and gently takes my hand, leading me past three older matrons, through a long maroon-colored room, sparsely decorated with mirrored panels and large stuffed animals still trapped in their plastic bags.

She seats me at a small table near the window before an array of mournful Jesuses and passionate Therasas, their plastic faces enlivened by the red neon glare below. Then she tells me the prices:

"Five dollars for a half life, \$10 for a whole. Two dollars for three questions answered—very general."

I opt for the whole life, and she spreads my palms on the table next to a page of "Favorite Bible Passages," and begins, in her singsong, Eastern European accent, to unveil the mystery of my hands: "You will have a long life, but it will take many turns. You are successful, but still you feel confused. You see many different choices, but still you haven't chosen the path. You will be married twice, with two kids—are you presently engaged?"

"No."

"I see confusion now with a man, and a woman. You will travel soon, in the next few months. And you will find a new lover..."

"When?"

"Soon, in the next month or so. The first three days of the next month will be lucky for you. May you go with God."

She folds my fingers over my palms

and it's over. "What about the lover, and the woman? I don't have any problems with a woman," but she responds only, "I am psychic, this is what I see."

I leave muddled, feeling half-told. I had gone on a lark after all, curious about the profusion of palm-reader shops cropping up midtown alongside the nail salons—like some new hand fetish to combat corporate ennui. I knew the palmists were gypsies and con artists. I never expected them to give me any real answers to the problems of my life; I did not expect to want answers.

But desire begets obsession, and soon I am searching out those signs with the third eye, hungry for a telling. There was Estrella, a dark Hispanic woman who read me in her apartment on 14th Street and Sixth, next to the Dream Donut Shop. "You have tasted the fruit of the vine and it is bitter," she told me in a candle-lit cupboard of a room plastered with hundreds of pictures of Jesus, hun-

dreds of eyes searching as Estrella searched with her own.

Then there was Zena in her New Age-styled storefront off Seventh Avenue South: "There is evil around you. Things you cannot sense with your five senses. Jealousy."

For a time it was like a form of reverse confession. I go, I bare my palm, and they tell me my flaws, my sins, and promise love and luck in the future if I have faith—and money. Ronnie at Sister Sylvia's on East 10th Street offered to "clear my aura" for \$25, so that I may find love and happiness. Zena offered to cleanse my spirit with purifying waters for \$150.

I could dismiss some of their ominous warnings, figuring they just wanted to get their hands on my hands and pump me for more. The attraction was in the stories, the epic clashes of good and evil, the heady melodrama of love and betrayal that they pulled out of the lines in my

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hands, like psychic trail maps to some long-forgotten soul. There was something comforting in the way they seemed to externalize my existence, inserting me in a universe ruled by fate rather than that guilt-ridden, imploded self that constitutes postindustrial identity. Soon I was swimming in stories of my self, or these hand selves—one that will get married and have kids, another with two women stabbing her in the back, and another beset on all sides by unknown forces of evil like Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens*.

I am not taking their prophecies seriously, but then again I am, sifting through their stories and piecing together the parts that most closely resemble the fiction that I am. Because you can't dismiss the power of intuition; they do hit at the "truth" occasionally, but it's a tease because you have to barter for it, and in the end you never know if they're just telling you what you want to hear. (I generally go with very little money in my wallet, and they usually let me slide for \$5, \$10 with the tarot cards.)

I'd just about given up on my quest when I met Marc Seltman. Seltman is a practitioner of what he calls "scientific hand analysis." Far from simple fortune-telling, he explains, studying the size, shape, and lines of the hand can reveal a person's basic character traits and propensities, allowing the palmist to point out potential career paths and relationship patterns or identify particular health and nutritional problems.

the four elements of air, earth, fire, and water—which also correspond to Jung's four basic psychic functions: thinking, sensation, feeling, and intuition. Each person is a balance of these elements, though the shape of the hands reveals overall strengths and propensities. Thus a person like me with long fingers and square palms has an "air hand," indicating an independent, versatile nature, but at times impractical. In contrast, someone with a "fire hand" (rectangular palm and short fingers) would generally be impulsive and outgoing.

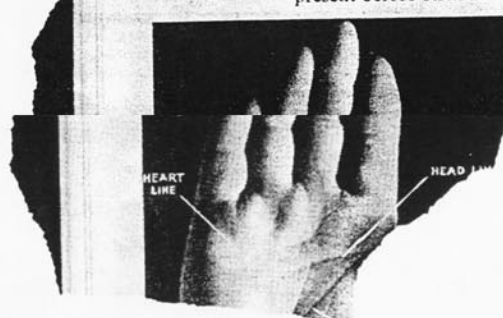
These basic types are modified by other aspects of our hands. Each finger and its base, or "mount," correspond to one of the planets. The thumb is ruled by Venus; the index finger, Jupiter; the middle finger, Saturn; while the ring finger is ruled by Apollo; and the pinky, Mercury. Named after the Roman gods, they are really metaphors for those personality traits that those mythological figures embodied. For example, the index finger is ruled by Jupiter, who represents drive and ambition. A person with a large or fat index finger would tend to be prideful and aggressive. But that could easily be offset by a supple thumb, which indicates a lack of willpower—so it's necessary to take a more gestalt view of the hand, says Seltman.

Our fate is hardly fixed in flesh, however. "I believe more in free will than destiny," says Seltman. "The hands show predispositions to certain behavior—especially self-destructive tendencies. If

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Sounds like another New Age hook on an old age con, but I head over to his East Village apartment anyway. First he makes a set of prints of my left and right hands on photosensitive paper—revealing a complex terrain of lines and mounds I never before noticed. Then he tells me, "You've had to struggle very hard not to be crazy."

I am a bit taken aback, but after an hour of analysis, he'd told me more about childhood traumas, parental fixations, artistic aspirations, career dilemmas, and love problems than I'd care to admit here. How could a person's hand reveal all that?

"Other than the tongue, the hands are the most connected part of the body to the brain. It's only natural that they should reveal a lot about our personalities." For Seltman, hands are like living topographies of our existence. Each line, lump, or knuckle has some meaning, and they're all there for a reason.

Unlike other scientific palmists, who might stick to the facts "at hand," Seltman's approach combines a reading of physical aspects with a heady mix of astrology, mythology, and Jungian psyche. "Jung believed you could determine a person's dominant archetypes through their dreams. I believe you can do that physically—through the hands."

The shape and proportion of the hands, Seltman explains, correspond to

you understand them, you can work to change them."

And these changes, he claims, can be read in the hands themselves. Lines can change in a matter of weeks, becoming more clear as a person's direction becomes surer, or more "frazzled" as her situation becomes more fragmented. Even the size of the mounts and fingers can change, becoming fuller and thicker as the person becomes stronger in a particular aspect.

For Seltman, the value of palmistry lies in its capacity to objectify those traits and internal struggles that a person might otherwise deny. And while hand analysis won't replace therapy, he believes it can serve as a useful accompaniment: "It's a fast-forward way to get to the nuts and bolts. It may take a therapist months to get at issues because a patient is very clever at hiding them."

Our hands, then, are really a cast of characters playing out internal dramas. I am thrown back into that epic universe of competing forces of good and evil, but this time the forces are inside me. I'm not sure I believe in them, but then I can't forget them either. Seltman grafted a complex symbology over my hands—one that I can't erase. I'd been given another language, one that could render the mental realm physical. Isn't that what we've all been wishing for—the word incarnate?

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