

CELLULAR COMMUNICATION

(Tarot Card: The Star)

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I dragged my headachy groggy body out of bed. On the way to the bathroom, I glanced out the window. The frost left only a small circle through which I could see the icy street. I shivered, even though the air was moist and warm from the vaporizer. I longed for the heat of summer.

The bathroom mirror reflected the tell-tale puffiness of still yet another sinus infection that no amount of make-up, decongestants or painkillers could hide. My furled brow would give me away. This would be my third in a year of chronic yuck. Antibiotics had stopped working. I'd even learned to cry less to avoid stirring up the infection that made permanent residence in my sinus cavities. I was so tired of being sick, I wanted to die. Not really, but I felt like I was sleeping my life away. Blowing a rainbow of colors into a tissue, I moved beyond despair, beyond rage, into a sneezing fit and presto -- it all came back to me.

It's not like I planned on forgetting. Weird stuff hardly ever happens to me. But then again, maybe everyone in denial says that. A year ago today, a conscious neuropeptide in my body found a way to talk to me on my cellular phone. No, I'm not kidding. I remember I tried to listen to what it had to say, but when I finally got healthy, it was easier to attribute the weirdness to a raging feverish flu. Those three conversations refused to take root in my conscious mind, making it easy to deny the existence of this talking cell -- or whatever it called itself -- during its silence. And who wouldn't deny such weirdness?

As I tried to relieve the pressure in my nasal cavities by breathing the same steam that fogged the mirror, I wondered how long had it been since I paid any attention to my sneezes. I did remember the neuropeptide told me it would use sneezes to communicate after I replaced the dead battery in my cell phone and our conversations ceased. It said something about how it had to match the right time with the right frequency.

The shock of memory gave me pause, but no relief. Sinus infections are relentless. I'd already tried every supposed remedy possible, both conventional and not-so-conventional -- nasal sprays, herbs, acupuncture, naturopathy, home remedies, prayer even though I'm something of a fickle agnostic. But still I got sick. Not that I was so sick I couldn't function. No, that would be too easy. I could still work and do reasonably well. I was just sick enough to feel lousy and antisocial. Not that I found being antisocial such a bad thing. If I reached past another layer of denial, I would have to admit the sinus infections were a convenient way to hide away in my apartment.

Through the dewy surface of the mirror, I saw my eyes widen and fill with tears. I let them flow since the infection was already stirred up and on the verge of causing pain and discomfort. What did I do to deserve such a chronic condition for which there was no relief? The only thing worse than feeling myself suffer was watching myself suffer in the mirror. I made a deep growling sound in my throat and let it turn into a scream, thankful my neighbors went to work in the wee hours. Self-pity sucks.

I did my morning routine, grabbed my mug of hot coffee, inhaled more steam, locked the front door of my apartment and got into my car. I opened my daybook and set it on the seat next to my cell phone. In my morning daze, I could have sworn the

cell phone looked at me accusingly for forgetting its importance in my life. To shake off these absurd thoughts, I started the car.

Unlike me, the motor purred happily. I bought a new car every other year because I practically lived on the road. It made for an excellent tax write off. This year I drove a canary yellow Saturn. It was my favorite car so far. I tried not to think about the sublime selling techniques used to sell these cars. Selling should be an opportunity to pit one's wits against a client, take them farther than they ever planned to go. Making a sale should feel like a victory, a conquest, the proof that one's will prevailed. The sales people at Saturn required no skill to make this sale. Any idiot could have done it.

As I pulled out of the parking lot of the humongous complex I called home, I pasted a smile on my face. I was now ready to sell my little heart out. I reached into the back seat for the materials I needed for my first appointment. My back seat was a cross between a file cabinet and an office supply room. Each catalogue and order form was clearly labeled. My customers gloried in my speed at ordering and delivering souvenirs, chachkas, thingees and other provocative junk for their gift boutiques, gas station shoppees or other such retail outlets.

My continually foggy brain challenged my ability to juggle the many customers I needed to cram into a day to assure that my profit margin supported my lifestyle. Today would be no better. The rear view mirror revealed the dark circles under the puffiness and a green-tinted pallor that would not add to my charm. The headache brought my eyebrows together into a permanent frown no matter how many teeth I displayed. I was beginning to look as bad as I felt. This was not good. My grim thoughts were interrupted by the ringing of my cell phone.

"Amy's Gift Distribution, this is Amy," I said into the phone. I was more relieved than I cared to admit that the call was from a client, not the cell in my body. Better yet, my 11 o'clock canceled. Lucky me.

As I waved goodbye to my 10 o'clock, happily carrying off a bigger order than usual that justified my joy at having three hours of freedom, I flung my phone. I wanted to believe it was an accident, but observation of my own reflexes told me otherwise. Maybe I was mad at the phone. I pushed the thoughts away that could easily follow, picked up the phone and checked its status. Fortunately, it landed on the grass and didn't seem the worse for it.

I drove to a heavily wooded park and hid my car amidst the old growth trees. The misty rain had melted the morning ice, but I still had the chills. When I first started taking midday naps, I insisted on being at home. But the Christmas season made demands of distance and I learned to sleep in parks and rest stops. When the car's heater finally warmed me down to the bone, it made me drowsy.

The ringing of my phone jolted me out of a dreamless sleep. "Hello?" I said into the phone. I'd been in such a deep slumber, I forgot where and when I was.

"Sorry to wake you."

"You didn't wake me." Never 'fess up to naps in the middle of the day. Customers don't like to think you ever sleep.

"You were sleeping very deeply, this I know to be true. But the minute you remembered me, I knew I finally got the right frequency." The voice was familiar, but I couldn't place it. "Yes, you do remember me." My heart leapt into my throat as denial turned into recognition. "Sorry to scare you."

"Of course not," I said.

"You can't lie to me. I have a contract with neurons in your brain and others in your cardiovascular system who tell me everything. We neuropeptides make many friends. Nor can you pretend I don't exist, much as you have tried."

"Then why did you ask?," I snapped. "I was hoping I was so sick last year, I made you up. You must hate me."

"Hate you? Do you hate God?"

"Sometimes." I knew what the neuropeptide really meant, but I was in the mood to be difficult.

"Bad example. I hoped a metaphor might encourage you to remember me in a better light, but maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it's hopeless."

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's just that--"

"You don't feel good. You think I don't know that? Why do you think I called you out of a dead sleep?"

"Does that mean you can heal me?," I said. My headache had reemerged and my stomach was growling.

"Just because I'm conscious doesn't mean I'm some kind of master of your body. You're no better than the other ninety-nine percent of the other cells who want to follow me as though I were some kind of guru. I may not be prescient, but I can tell you that if you don't eat soon, you'll feel even worse than you do now. That's why you're getting that headache. Eat." I grabbed my lunch and ate my sandwich.

"What can I call you? Maybe if I had a name or something --"

"You wouldn't pretend I never talked to you? Fine. Call me, ah, Mike."

"Mike? No that won't work."

"Why not?"

"Mike is the name of my ex-boyfriend."

"You remembered him."

"Why are you being so mean?"

"I'm not. I'm angry. I have a thing about being ignored."

"I have the same thing."

"I know."

"Why don't I call you Peppy?"

"Sounds like the name of a small neurotic dog."

"You know about dogs?"

"I told you -- I have a contract with some of the neurons in your brain. They know all sorts of things. They're not as good as I am about seeing the big picture, but they are some of the few who tolerate me and my opinions."

"Peppy, can I ask you a stupid question?"

"Please do. I love stupidity."

"What exactly is a neuropeptide?"

"I was born from a neuron, secreted into being that time you saved some dog after it got hit by a car, carrying it home and tending its foot. You laid your hands on its foot and said a bunch of words. It got to its feet and ran off. The other neurons told me the dog had been stunned rather than hurt, but in your mind, you healed it. Your faith and belief resulted in me. I have 36 amino acids and reside in your central nervous system."

"Wow. I remember that. But you didn't die when I figured out the truth of the situation?" I always harbored that memory with great fondness.

"You may have come to a different conclusion intellectually, but emotionally, you still believe you were responsible for the dog's healing."

"You have a contract with these other neurons? What does that mean?" I asked with my mouth full.

"I'd be crazy without them even if I do scare them a bit. The contract we have is something like your marriage contracts. They're part of my -- best word I can come up with is tribe. Yeah, that's it. They're part of my tribe."

"And you hold tribal councils at your local organ?" I laughed at my own joke, spitting food into the phone and onto the dashboard.

"As a matter of fact we do."

"So there's the circulatory tribe, the digestive tribe, and you're the neurological tribe. What's so funny?"

"You're way off. Our tribes are collections of neurons from many different systems within your body. We send amino acids to the organs for meetings. Our leaders -- what you would identify as proteins -- do the scheduling and coordinating."

"This is too weird." Food was helping me think clearly and under the circumstances and I wasn't so sure that was a good thing.

"I'm glad we finally connected so I can warn you."

"That I'm going insane? Too late for that."

"You're not insane nor are you going there, although you might get a wee bit crazy for a while."

"Peppy, tell me what you mean." There was something ominous in its tone.

"You should be scared. Another tribe has declared war. That makes four warring factions. We've been struggling through negotiations for a long time, as you know. That's why your sinuses are so wretched. The battles seem to be fought there more than anywhere else."

"The last time, didn't you help me get rid of my stomach aches?"

"Last time, the two other tribes we were battling were so impressed by my ability to talk to you they backed off. I thought we were in good shape. Then we were invaded by an especially strong strain of bacteria. Bacteria are nothing but trouble. What's worse, their evolution seems to be speeding up so that we're having a harder time fighting them off. These particular bacteria really piss me off. They're so slick -- they can con just about anyone into believing they mean no harm and only want a place to call home. Meanwhile, they pit one tribe against another. Plus, they've been harboring some fungi who have come to like living in your sinuses. Talk about scum. At least the bacteria have intelligence. Fungi are stubborn idiots who'll latch onto anything and not let go unless you kill them."

"Peppy, are you telling me I'm going to die?"

"No, silly. We're being invaded by bacteria and fungus, not cancer. And even then, we'd have some options. This is a war, not an environmental holocaust. Still, you'll continue to be uncomfortable for a little while. You could help us, you know."

"How?" Hope ignited and I felt a surge of energy.

"Whatever that was you just did disarmed all the factions for the time being. It's a short-lived victory, but it is a victory."

"What did I do?"

"It's out of my comprehension to tell you. All I know is you jolted all the tribes into reality. Those bacteria will shortly con them back into the need for war, I'm afraid."

"I thought you could see the big picture."

"So I exaggerated a little. Sheesh. In truth, there's a gap between what you do and what I understand you're doing. I'm conscious, but it's not like I'm omniscient or transcendental. I'm afraid we'll have to talk about this later. Rallying to get you to throw the phone just right was hard enough. Maintaining this line of communication is incredibly exhausting and I've still got a war to attend. I'll call you in a few days."

"What should I do?" The phone went dead.

I finished my rounds for the day, went home, took a scalding hot bath and melted into my overstuffed chair in front of the television. The three ibuprofen I'd taken didn't relieve my sinus headache, but they contributed to my hazy state of indifference. Peppy may have understood the dynamics of the warring factions in my body, but I only understood feeling rotten. The ringing of the phone brought me back into focus.

"Hello?" I said.

"Hey, girl, what's up?"

"Not much, Tanya." I tried to hide my disappointment that my body remained silent. Tanya was one of my good buddies. I wanted to tell her all about Peppy, but found I couldn't.

"Amy, you sound like shit."

"Thanks," I said.

"I was calling to check in on you and to invite you ice skating with Fran and Dolly and me."

"Ice skating?"

"Why the hell not? Just because we're single, childless and middle-aged doesn't mean we have to give up having fun. Join us. It'll be a kick."

"When?"

"Tomorrow night. Don't give me your I-don't-feel-good excuse. You've used that one too many times."

"But it's true." I hated it when I whined.

"So what? You make it to work every day."

"Barely. Besides, I gotta make a living."

"What's the point if you aren't also going to live? We miss you, Amy. Dolly said to tell you she's started taking your absences personally. Plus, Fran has a new beau. You gotta come, Amy. I want to give you your present."

"Fine, I'll be there." Tanya used a certain voice when she really wanted something. She rarely resorted to this tactic, but when she did, I complied. Otherwise she'd ignore me for a month or so. Her silences freaked me out. She was my best buddy. I needed her. I needed all my friends, but my life had gotten so congested, I hardly ever saw them. And, I wanted to give them the presents I'd found the energy to buy for them.

I made it through the next day by staying at home on the phone. Because it was so close to Christmas, many of my customers left frantic phone messages. Both my

regular phone and my cell phone rang off the hook. It was a nightmare, but a manageable nightmare.

I guzzled down two cups of coffee just before leaving for the ice skating rink. Going out at night had become such a novelty, I felt like I had to make sure I'd stay awake long enough to enjoy it. The coffee warmed me up so much I only thought to bring a light jacket. The rink was outside and the air was freezing. Moving helped, but we were committed to skate as a pack and Dolly kept falling down on her butt, pulling the rest of us down with her. The cold was almost easy to ignore because we were so busy laughing.

I didn't realize how much I missed doing silly time with the girls. I had shut them out when I was seeing Mike. After he dumped me, I continued the same routines of making dinner and watching television. Mike was a stay-at-home kind of guy like me. Over giggles and a hot cup of cocoa, I felt something inside of me unlock. The door didn't open completely, but at least it was ajar. We talked and laughed about our favorite subject -- men. Fran and her new honey were in that we-can't-talk-to-anyone-else-about-our-budding-love stage. We managed to squeeze a few juicy details out of her but she was pretty close-mouthed. I tried a few more times to talk about the strange conversations I was having with my body, but the words wouldn't spew forth. It felt uncomfortable not being able to confide in my friends something that effected me so much. No one noticed my discomfort except for me -- and Peppy, I'm sure.

By the time I got home, my body was bone weary, my sinuses burning, but my spirits were high. I looked forward to sleeping late. I figured I could easily weather

another quiet Christmas. Being Jewish has its benefits, one of which is being able to bypass the mandatory joy of Christmas.

The ringing of my cell phone woke me up at 7:30 a.m.

"What?" I growled into the phone.

"Put down the phone and go drink three glasses of water. And not that stuff out of the faucet."

"Damn it, Peppy, you woke me up out of a sound slumber for water?"

"Do it. You can go back to sleep later. In fact, sleep as long as you can. It makes for fewer casualties of war. I'll hold on while you drink."

I reluctantly got out of my warm bed, grabbed a glass and pulled the bottled water out of the refrigerator. Just the sight of water sent me to the bathroom. Back in my bed, I poured and drank three glasses of water.

"Better?" I asked into the phone.

"Yes. At least ten major battles have been disrupted. But we've got a way to go. Your little stunt in the freezing cold last night gave the other side temporary immunity from our attacks."

"You attacked my immune system?" I asked drowsily, amazed at my own cleverness.

"Your immune system is strengthened by peace, threatened by war. But somehow the cold froze our attacks."

"But that's a good thing. Who's side are you on, anyway?" I asked irritably.

"I'm a negotiator for peace, but I fight back if my survival is threatened."

"Fine, so I screwed myself by going ice-skating with my buddies."

"Not completely. The time you spent laughing with your friends gave us ammunition to fight off some of the flourishing bacteria that decided to use the war to their advantage."

"That sounds bad."

"Bad? How about the worst? The tribes at war with us believe in what the bacteria are preaching. They refuse to see them for the self-destructive fascist extremists that they really are."

"I never could get a handle on politics. Peppy, did you make sure I couldn't talk about you and these conversations to my friends?"

"I worked that out long before contacting you. I wasn't sure I could trust you. Nor does that really surprise you." I grunted. "Go back to sleep."

"I'm too annoyed to sleep. Tell me what's going on, Peppy?"

"Fine. Maybe ongoing updates will help, maybe not. A cult of violent bacteria and their recruits have created a home in one of your sinus cavities. They've blocked the only entrance. Meanwhile, two tribes have decided to fight over something insignificant but of vital importance to them because they're idiots and don't comprehend the real threat of the bacteria and have dragged in two other tribes in their fight, one of which I am a member. Some of the members of each tribe are acting on the bacteria's behalf. Smarmy spies. So there I am, trying desperately to negotiate peace so we can join forces against the bacteria instead of each other. Meanwhile the bacteria are recruiting so many they're threatening to take over other sinus cavities. The more recruits they get, the more it will poison negotiations for peace."

"Can't you reason with these bacteria?"

"I already told you -- they are not rational, they're self-destructive, the scum. And I haven't mentioned the viruses, the psychopaths of our world. Viruses grow in power and shrewd intelligence even though they can never attain consciousness. They're kind of like your politicians. What's worse, they've taught the bacteria everything they know."

"Should I take antibiotics?"

"And give the yeast the upper hand? Don't do it. Yeast only want to proliferate and they're a whole lot sneakier than the bacteria or viruses. They wear disguises and spy on all the tribes. Antibiotics will help the yeast infiltrate more tribes, ignore the viruses and only pacify the bacteria temporarily. You finish the dosage and not only are the bacteria back, but they hide behind the yeast. We can eventually sort it all out, but it takes time and it takes far too many casualties to maintain your immune system. We'd be sitting ducks, as you so like to say."

"How can I help?" I was glad Peppy could read my desperation.

"You're doing all the right things, but you may have to change the order."

"What?"

"Timing is everything but how to determine the best timing falls into the gap I told you about. Think of it like anything you do well. You practice and practice for a long while, until you finally develop technique."

"Healing is a technique?"

"No duh. Look, I've got to go and you've got to sleep. We'll talk more another time."

I slept all day Christmas but was no better for it. So much for my "healing technique." But I went ahead and did many of the routines I'd done previously -- herbal

tea, nasal irrigation, vitamins, hot bathes -- changing when and where I did them. I waited three days for my cell phone to ring before I noticed the battery was dead again. I replaced the battery, but had to assume that either the new frequency was beyond Peppy, or the poor thing was a casualty of war. That thought alone made me feel bad. Fortunately, the week after Christmas was slow and I paced myself accordingly.

Despite my grief over Peppy's departure that turned into lethargy, I forced myself -- with Tanya's help -- to go out with the girls on New Years Eve. When she picked me up, I remembered how our last adventure had been so satisfying.

"Feeling bad again?" Tanya asked.

"Yeah, but by the end of the evening I'll feel better." Tanya raised her eyebrows and smiled.

"And here I thought you were allergic to being social."

We went to a benefit for some arts organization. The place looked pretty bizarre, but I liked it. We danced, laughed and drank too much champagne. At one point, I found myself alone watching my friends gyrate on the dance floor. Just as the pulsing of my sinuses reminded me I didn't feel good, I got up and immersed myself into the dancing mass. Usually I hate crowds, but this one was as nourishing as it was active. Maybe it was something in the music or maybe it was the alignment of the stars, I would never know. But for a long moment, I looked around and I felt part of something larger than myself. We were all shapes, sizes, colors and ages, but we shared the desire to dance and celebrate. The door that had only been ajar opened wide. The veil of pretension dropped and I could see reflected in those around me our mutual need to

feel connected to one another. Our needs binded us into -- not so much a marriage -- but a tribe. I laughed out loud at the source of this paradigm.

Tanya and I debriefed our adventures on the way home. I drank three glasses of water and happily fell into a deep sleep.

I woke up the next morning with only a mild hangover and knew my sinus infection was on its way out. The puffiness was gone, my sparkle was back and despite my hazy demeanor, I felt renewed. I sneezed, took a deep breath and for the first time in weeks, felt oxygen breeze through my sinuses. So it was a communication problem rather than a sudden death that prevented Peppy from calling. He must have successfully negotiated peace and helped the other cells see the bacteria's spies for the self-destructive slime that they were. At least for the time being. What a relief. The war was over and the culture of my body would re-invent itself -- whatever that meant.

I knew it was just a matter of time before I would be catapulted into sinus hell, but I also trusted that Peppy might get the right frequency of my cell phone with its new battery to help me move through it. Maybe Peppy could even help me figure out how to break the cycle for good. The idea of having enough energy to do something inspiring and fun after working all day, was most appealing. Maybe there was hope after all.