



VENUS RISING

Olivia Stren goes in search of ANSWERS (including what to order for dinner) with one of the world's most POPULAR astrologers.

On the patio of the Atlantic Grill on Manhattan's Upper East Side, astrologer Susan Miller is ordering dinner. "We'll have a dozen of your briniest oysters," she announces. It's a woozily warm late-summer evening, and soigné patrons dressed in piqué polos and Pucci foulards are chasing chopped salads with French rosé. Miller—who is liberally brined herself in Thierry Mugler's Alien perfume—is getting ready to read my birth chart. This feels like I'm about to share a fortune cookie with Confucius himself.

Miller—one of the world's most popular astrologers—is vivid, warm and inexhaustibly energetic. ("I wake up in the morning like bread out of a toaster!") Much of this energy she dispels in writing. Her site, AstrologyZone.com, provides detailed horoscopes (each sign's write-up can orbit around 4,000 words) for six million loyal visitors a month; she has written nine books; she is the resident astrologer for nine international magazines (including ELLE

GETTY IMAGES (MODEL); ILLUSTRATION BY EMILIE SIMPSON

U.S.); and she claims over 170,000 devoted followers on Twitter, many of whom wouldn't risk buying new earbuds without Miller's planetary counsel. (Mercury in retrograde can be deadly for electronics purchases.)

Miller is similarly expansive in conversation, hopscoching from topic to topic, changing direction with every breath, as if she were constantly receiving urgent correspondence from the cosmos. Before our mains arrive, she has covered God's omnipotence, Edward Snowden (a Cancer), how airports and passports are also Geminis, a recent Charlie Rose interview with Stephen King, a consultation with Richard Nixon's cardiovascular surgeon and how a genetic eye disorder requires that she get injections, using hair-thin hypodermic needles, in her eyeballs every month to prevent her from going blind—each conversational flash as astonishing and fast-vanishing as a comet tail. Miller also tends to casually conclude most conversational tangents with sentences like "And then I cried for days! Days!" or "And that's when I died on the table" or "That's when I almost bled to death."

Miller's life *in extremis*, and her CBS prime-time communication style, resonates with a passionate, labile fan base. When her mother passed away last year and she was late in updating her site, outraged fans—adrift without their cosmic forecast—assaulted her with tweets demanding their fix. Miller understands their need for the stars—she was born with a still-nameless disorder that she defines as "malformed veins and arteries that wrap themselves around nerves and run through muscles and vanish under pressure—literally disintegrating into rivers of blood." She has had 40 blood transfusions in her lifetime and spent much of her childhood confined to her bed, often in a state of "white knockout pain." She survived with prayer ("Of course, I prayed; I'm Catholic"), but astrology brought her comfort. "I just wanted to know: 'Is this all going to have a happy ending?'" she says. "I was looking for answers."

How did I find myself slurping down molluscs on Third Avenue with someone of Miller's calibre? I can only thank the stars. And my mother. When I was about 10 years old and my friends

were reading the *Sweet Valley High* series and *Flowers in the Attic*, I was cuddling up with Linda Goodman's *Sun Signs* and her encyclopedia-fat *Love Signs*—its hot-pink cover featuring a lion snuggling up with a dainty pink-eared lamb (presumably a lady Aries). I had plucked the tomes from my mom's bookshelf, where they had been nuzzling amid her collection of Proust, Camus and other classics (like *Smart Women*, *Foolish Choices* and *Men Are Just Desserts*). Goodman taught me that I was a Gemini, my favourite colour was probably yellow (it was!) and I got along with fellow air signs. (I did! My best friend was a Libra.)

According to developmental psychology, it was no accident that I became interested in astrology at that age. "At 10, kids are starting to explore the world and what it means," says Toronto-based psychologist Shelagh Emmott. "They are starting to think for themselves for the first time, and they are looking outside of themselves." If the world was starting to feel bewildering, Goodman sketched an alternative, entertaining and categorical universe where people and their behaviours make plain sense. "People are always trying to minimize uncertainty, and astrology—providing a non-scientific world view—may well offer comfort," continues Emmott. "A rational world view can actually increase uncertainty and insecurity. Astrology may offer an air of predictability in an unpredictable world." With Goodman, the world assumed a tidy and magical order. If, say, I liked stories and had a tendency to lose my Beaver Canoe pencil case six times a year, it wasn't my fault; it was the galaxy's! My family was never remotely religious, although I knew I was (technically, at least) Jewish. But if I never felt part of the Jewish community, I now felt that I was a part of the Gemini community!

I had a friend (born on a cusp, poor thing) who went the first 30 years of her life thinking she was an Aquarius only to learn she was actually a Pisces—like finding out she was adopted. I can hardly imagine the ensuing psychic mayhem this discovery must have provoked. In second-year university, a question-raising ▷

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time in the lives of most, my own world view was also rocked. My roommate came home from campus hoisting a mood-ring-blue book above her head: "This changes everything!" she announced. The book—*Sun Sign, Moon Sign*—explained, for instance, that I was not only a Gemini but my Moon was in Taurus—just like Michael J. Fox, Che Guevara and Yugoslavian dictator Tito. (Well, forget about the Tito part.) The profiles were, we concluded, uncannily accurate. We dubbed the book "The Bible." My roommate (a Capricorn—I'm just saying) determined that The Bible was never to leave our apartment—not even on friendly loan. We recommended it to all our friends and to my boyfriend at the time, who read his write-up and laughed in irritatingly smug incredulity. "Of course, he did!" my roommate offered, also through a knowing chuckle. "His Moon is in Virgo." My mother bought a copy for herself, and my dad bought one to take to his office at the university.

Astrology doesn't supply answers so much as "signposts," says Miller.

The Bible was a thrilling tool for dating. Over cheap wine and candlelight, I couldn't help but whisper sweet nothings to prospective suitors, like: "So, you mentioned your birthday was in September? Like, early in the month... or more like after the 21st?" The answer often left me feeling crestfallen, tragically doomed to fall for my astrological kryptonite. Indeed, in my rebellious, romantic 20s, I dismissed Goodman's better judgment: I spent the bulk of that decade with a Pisces. After Pisces and I broke up, I discussed my romantic history with a colleague and astrologer *manqué*. He looked at me gravely and asked, with a mélange of alarm and pity: "You were with a Pisces for that long? I'm sorry, I don't understand. Who was feeding your Mars?"

"Nobody, I guess," I said meekly. "My Mars must have been starving."

The evening of my dinner with Miller is on a new moon. "Is that a good time to be meeting?" I ask, in retrospect, idiotically. "There are no accidents," says Miller definitively. After our meal, she dons her reading glasses and studies my chart. "Wow! Your Ninth House is packed! Look at it—it looks like Times Square," she

says. "But..." she pauses theatrically, "what's happening with your house?"

"My Ninth House?"

"No, no, your real house! Father Neptune wants to move in." My mother-in-law has been considering a visit, but I hadn't heard anything about Father Neptune. To protect myself from him, she advises that I purchase some flood insurance. (I live on the seventh floor of a condo.) After offering up some other (startlingly accurate) musings about my health and career, she freestyles: She suggests that I keep a lot of fruit in the fridge (I enjoy fruit!), that I might consider moving to Denver (not so much) and that Jupiter wants me to join Twitter.

As a child, in those simple and golden Goodman years, I was consoled by astrology for its answers, for its rendering of a world safe from accident and mapped by cozy categories. Twenty-five years later, my life itself in chronic retrograde, I am hoping that Miller can provide me with affirmation—a planetary pep talk. Am I making the right decisions professionally? Romantically? For dinner? "Should I have the branzino or the Scottish salmon?" I ask Miller as I consider the menu as if I were beholding the mysteries of the Milky Way. "The branzino," Miller answers firmly. Astrology doesn't supply answers so much as "signposts," she advises. "If somebody gives you the podium, you have to be ready." But I'm never ready on time! I'm a Gemini.

Post-reading, I feel not as I had hoped (see: different, better) but freighted with a fresh constellation of questions. I've long been prone to worrying and doubt (my Virgo rising?), but if before I was vulnerable to the approval of my parents, for example, now I feel the need for planetary approval. I don't only have to worry about the expectations of my family and friends; I have to consider Jupiter's stance on social media, Mars' appetite and Neptune's travel schedule. After dinner, Miller and I part ways and she tucks me into a cab. The driver asks me which route I'd like to take to get back to my hotel. I reply, my mind as vacant as my Fourth House (or was it my Third?), "I don't know." I need to ask Susan Miller.

About a month after my meeting with Miller, my husband and I sold the condo and bought a house (the kind with bricks). We also bought flood insurance.

(DEC. 22 – JAN. 19) Your ambition is roused in 2014, and you intend to make your mark. No doubt you will because you are unusually diplomatic and charming now. (No small wonder, then, that all your relationships will blossom.) Be bold with your ambitions and expectations because you can benefit from the wealth of others. Late in the year is an excellent time to begin partnerships or marry. **FOCUS FOR 2014: Sometimes you do things alone; sometimes you do things with others. This year you benefit from forming working units with others.**

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Rev up your LIFE with a new FOCUS for 2014! BY GEORGIA NICOLS

(FEB. 19 – MARCH 20) Your sex drive is amped in 2014. (It's time to go shopping: Buy stilettos.) Now is the time to prepare for your career peak in 2016 and 2017. This means getting further training or education or expanding your world through travel. Disputes about shared property, taxes, debt and inheritances are likely. Fortunately, romance, love affairs, vacations, the arts and playful times overshadow all disagreements. What can you do to get ready for that opportunity? **FOCUS FOR 2014: This year offers chances to socialize, explore romance and enjoy the arts. Don't forget that in two years, your cherished dreams can be fulfilled.**

(MARCH 21 – APRIL 19) Although you have less support from others, you are building your self-confidence for your time of harvest in 2018. Look for real-estate opportunities and ways to improve your home. Family life will be happier and more enriched in 2014. Late in the year, vacation opportunities abound. The arts, romance, love affairs, the entertainment world and sports will bring joy and rewards. **FOCUS FOR 2014: People in power admire you this year. This will take care of itself. Enjoy and improve your home and family, which are your richest assets. Plan fun vacations.** ▷

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