

## Life Line

The blame belonged, mostly, to the lady in the done-up paisley headscarf wearing gigantic plastic rings on her fingers and clanging bangles on both wrists. But also, the Catholic Church. Really, they were both to blame for Nora's childhood malady. The Church should have known better. It was in the Bible, Leviticus (19:31), *Do not turn to mediums or necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God.* But now, Nora was paying them back, or rather, they were paying her back. It was a lucrative business.

The thing that started it all, back when Nora was eight years old, occurred at a carnival-themed fundraiser in the parking lot at St. Mary of the Assumption Catholic Church. Her parents had set her free with a handful of quarters under the watchful eye of the Virgin in the tower. They retreated, hand in hand, to the school gym, grateful for some adult time. After an hour of fishing through cardboard cutouts and tossing ping-pong balls into plastic cups, Nora had a paper bag full of prizes including bubbles, a spider ring, some Pokémon trading cards, a mini bag of sour patch kids, and other sundry items with no educational or aesthetic value. With candy stuck in her back teeth, Nora went into the gym, crowded with adults holding adult drinks. She knew the smell of alcohol. And even the nasty taste of single malt scotch, her parents' favorite after-dinner drink. After one furtive sip while doing dishes, (her nightly chore), Nora had sworn to God the Father never to let that poison touch her lips again.

Set up in the gym were three mismatched camping tents, and for one dollar, exactly the amount in quarters nested in Nora's pocket, she could have her palm read by 'Madam Sophie – Seer of the Future' (according to the sign on the easel next to her tent). Nora recognized this seer (there were others in the gym—seer of the past, and seer of the present—clearly a Dickens rip-

off). This mystic was the woman who wore hats to church, although they had long gone out of ecclesiastical fashion. A few of the older ladies pinned lace doilies on their heads, but this lady, Madam Sophie, wore bonafide hats. At Sunday services, the madam sat in the front pew. At her father's insistence, Nora's family sat near the back for quick exits, explaining "*Otherwise, we will get stuck on the Sunday morning gossip train.*" Each Sunday morning, Nora watched a hat march by on the woman's circuitous return from communion, her head held high instead of tucked into folded hands like the other parading parishioners. The lady knew how to carry a hat.

In the gym, Madam Sophie wore a mostly green, pink-swirled, paisley scarf wound around her head so many times it mushroomed. A long, twisted green end hung over her shoulder like a pet snake.

"Come on in, dearie," the madam beckoned Nora while holding a stemmed drink, its gold liquid spinning as she stirred with her finger. Nora stepped forward and pulled out three of her four quarters from her pocket. Before she could dig out the stray, Madam Sophie spoke in a voice low and slow, "That will do. Come in my child" and she nudged the girl into the tent with her pointed fingernails pressed lightly into Nora's shoulder. The Madam closed and zipped the tent flap. Patchouli and mold mingled. On the floor, in the corners, flashlights balanced precariously on their small ends casting overlapping moons on the roof of the tent. Two kindergarten chairs waited beside a milk crate table. And, on that table, an upside-down fishbowl caged a flameless, flickering candle—as substitute for a crystal ball.

The madam groaned as she sat. Her bohemian green and dusty orange caftan dress spilled over her tiny chair, making it look as if she were levitating. After taking a loud sip, reminding Nora of a deflating balloon, the Madam balanced her drink on the rippled tent floor. "Sit kid," she said, having left her mystic's voice outside the tent.

As Nora took her seat, she kicked the Madam's drink, and the plastic stem separated from its martini top tossing the amber liquid. "Damn! Those drinks aren't free girly-girl," said the Madam and she picked up the pieces and set them behind her chair. "Let me see your hand," she commanded.

Nora held out both.

"Which is your dominant hand?"

Nora didn't answer.

"The one you write with, for Christ's sake."

Nora held up her right hand and the Madam pushed it away and latched onto her left." For some moments Madam glowered at her hand, still perturbed about her five-dollar drink. The madam's brow furrowed, "Hmmm," she hummed.

Nora waited with unease as the Madam bobbed her head back and forth between her hand and the palm chart glowing on her phone.

"Well kid, you better live it up while you can, especially if you keep knocking over people's drinks. Your life line is short as my dead husband's.... God rest his soul."

"Sorry I spilled your drink," uttered Nora, barely audible.

"Lookie here." Madam turned her phone to light up Nora's hand, "See this line? This is supposed to run down to the bottom of your hand, Like this." The madam dragged her pointy orange nail down Nora's palm to her wrist. "The longer the line, the longer the life."

Nora sniffled, "I'm going to die soon?"

"Who knows, I doubt it. Don't pay this any mind girl, it's all for funds." She smiled at Nora, then shook her head. "Get it? I mean it's all for fun." Nora sat in deference. "Don't you ever smile? Look, you will probably grow this line out later, like kids who get their teeth late. I

knew an adult who never lost his baby teeth in the back. Didn't slow down his eating none. So, lighten up, kid." The Madam shook her head and her headdress loosened and tilted like an off-kilter painting. "You get to ask me three questions for a dollar, so I'll give you two since you shorted me a quarter."

Nora couldn't think of any questions.

The madam straightened her headdress and waited. Her cellphone jingled, diverting her attention and she commenced tapping on keys for some minutes before remembering Nora. "Time's up. Still no questions?"

Nora shook her head. She could think only about dying. Her parents would be so sad. She was their only child. What would happen to her room? Nora wanted to know how long she would live but was afraid to ask. What if she died tomorrow? She wanted to know if she would go to heaven or hell. She was trying not to cry by clenching her teeth.

"Well girly, here's what most people want to know—Will I find true love? Will I get rich?" Madam took Nora's hand again and circled two fingers around its palm. "Darndest thing," she muttered. Then, reaching around the table, Madam Sophie, seer of the future, produced a magic 8 ball and gave it a shake. "Okay, answer to question one is—without a doubt. Answer to question two—outlook not so good. Sorry kid, you're gonna have to work for a living, like the rest of us. But at least you will have someone to share your misery."

"What about my other hand? Is that life line short too?" Nora asked.

The madam motioned for Nora's other hand and examined it.

"Nope. That one is plenty long, but it doesn't count. The nondominant hand is for life lines. Too bad your right hand isn't your left hand. Now skedaddle! I need a refill on that drink you demon-olished. Ha! Get it?" Silence. The madam shook her head. "Course not," she said,

then reached behind her chair to pick up the plastic cup pieces before rising with a groan. “Go on now, shorty.”

Nora stood so quickly she upset the milk crate. The crystal ball with its flameless candle rolled and righted itself, reverting to its fishbowl identity. The Madam sighed.

This was a definitive moment in Nora’s life. Not that she truly recognized it as such at the time. Not that any of us do, except in our down times of retrospection, where we give in to our desire to assign meaning to obscure events. But the carnival incident would never wane into a distant memory. Nora didn’t talk about the incident, fearing that giving it voice might set the dying curse in motion. And Nora’s obsessive examination of her left palm caused her father considerable consternation, “Is something wrong with your hand?” which was mollified by her mother, “She’s fine, just leave it be, Hank. The more you make of it, the more she will keep it up.”

When Nora wasn’t contemplating if her life line had grown by millimeters, her hand was held closed in a fist, and because it was closed, no one could see the red-penned long life line she drew and redrew and redrew. When Nora needed to use her left hand for dressing, bathing, carrying objects, doing dishes or keyboarding for school, her hand tingled with unease. A dreaded awakening of her doomed destiny.

At ten years of age, Nora came to know that the Madam, whose real name was Jane Myers, was not in the least psychic. When the hats no longer promenaded, her mother revealed the woman had died.

“Did you go to her funeral?” Nora had asked.

“Nope, never really cared for that woman or her crazy hats. God forgive me for saying so.”

“Wasn’t she a psychic?”

“More like a crazy. God forgive me for saying so.”

Despite knowing the Madam was just Jane, her hand remained closed because Nora knew for certain one verifiable fact—her life line was only 1.6 centimeters long, and it was not growing. She had googled and googled and googled about life lines, in particular short life lines. There was some encouraging news that scientific studies had demonstrated no correlation between the length of the life line and longevity. But science also didn’t believe in God the father, Jesus the son, or the Holy Spirit (Nora didn’t understand the trinity mystery, but nonetheless believed). Science couldn’t explain so many things. It couldn’t explain miracles, as when Jesus’s face appeared on a wall, or on a piece of toast. Or why people who pilgrimed to holy places were sometimes healed, could see or walk again. And science couldn’t explain why statues of the Virgin Mary cried bloody tears.

Over time, Nora grew into the kind of girl who is likable because she was thoughtful and expressed genuine concern for the plight of others and was especially prone to sending get-well cards. And she grew into the kind of girl who is enviable because her genetically thin body was adorned with long, genetically thick, straight, black hair which moved like a curtain in the wind. This gave Nora the appearance of dancing through life. She grew to be the kind of girl who is admirable because, while not exceptionally intelligent, she was exceedingly determined and goal oriented. If Nora was going to die young (her life line simply wasn’t growing), she wanted to go to heaven. She also wanted a multitude of family, friends, and admirers crying at her funeral (a frequent daydream). Thus, she worked hard and excelled in all matters of her young life.

In the sixth grade, seeking to disconfirm the relevance and reliability of the life line as a predictor, Nora facetimed a reiki master psychic-astrologer (RMPA) who, among other skills,

conducted virtual palm readings. The first five minutes were advertised as free, so Nora entered the numbers from her mother's Visa card, planning to keep the psychic connection within the free five. So, it really wasn't like stealing from her mother. It was borrowing her numbers. There was no commandment against borrowing. Nora always tried to follow the commandments.

As the clock ticked, the psychic read a disclaimer stating the information she would divulge was not guaranteed or necessarily accurate to this realm of reality. Finally, she asked Nora, in a semi-bored baritone, "Why have you come? Do you have questions for me?" Two minutes had passed, still plenty of time since Nora had only one question.

"I wanted you to read my life line." Nora held her hand to the camera.

The psychic moved her face close to the screen and Nora could see her thick eyeliner and smoky mascara. As she studied Nora's shaky palm, the clock ticked on. "Very interesting. The life line is quite short, as you probably know. I don't see many of those."

The timer on the screen indicated three minutes, twenty-four seconds had passed. Nora needed to end in the next minute or her mother's card would be charged at the exorbitant pay-by-the-minute rate. "Will I have a short life?" Nora blurted.

"That is a very interesting question," said the psychic. "But, like most important questions, the answer is not simple. I need to look at several converging astrological pivot points before I can answer your question. We need to run your astrological chart. But first, your life energy..."

The little clock on the screen was at four minutes, fifty-eight seconds when Nora hung up the phone. A scam! All she wanted was a yes or no to her one question. Would she die soon? Nora's phone dinged with a receipt for zero dollars and an automated invitation to rejoin the conversation in order to avoid disaster, invest assets wisely, or find true love.

When Nora was in eighth grade, the Art club girls (she was in seven clubs) were cutting. Not seriously or deeply (except maybe for the girl who never rolled up her sleeves). One by one, with all the excitement of their previous kindergarten selves on show-and-tell day, the girls unveiled their lightly-sliced skin in the school bathroom. They divulged their mutilation stories with an abundance of colorful adjectives (groady, extreme, gnarly) and concluded with words of wisdom for the next in line. *The sharper the blade, the less you feel it. Sit down to cut in case you faint. Do it up high on your thigh so your mom won't see it.* Nora was next up (they were going reverse-alphabetical order because they went in alphabetical order when they tried shoplifting—which Nora refused, citing the eight commandment).

Nora borrowed—because she returned it the next day—an Exacto knife from the art room. She thought a thin scar could mimic a life line if it healed as an innie instead of an outtie. At her home, anticipating blood sputtering from her hand onto the carpet, and walls and furniture, Nora locked herself in the bathroom. Leaning over the sink, she poured alcohol over her palm. She placed the tip of the knife at the end of her measly life line. Slowly, she slid the blade down until it came close to her wrist. She let the blade fall, clanging against the porcelain. Nora waited for the gushing to begin. It didn't. She pressed her fingers along the edges of the barely visible cut line. The blood oozed up slowly, in tiny bubbles. Just a scratch, really. Nora washed her hands and pressed a paper towel into her barely-bleeding palm before closing her fist. "I'm so lame," she said to Hermione, her cat watching at the door.

Only one of the Art girls, Misty, tried skin branding (the girls had ruled out moxibustion because mugwort sounded grody). Nora planned on using a hot wire bent into a life line shape when it was her turn. Misty had heated her pre-pre-engagement ring in a non-stick frying pan and then used an oven mitt to put the ring on the underside of her wrist to stand for eternal love.



The ring burned a red circle on her skin which only slightly blistered because Misty had immediately flicked the hot ring from her arm, and it had rolled away to somewhere she couldn't find. Probably under the oven or refrigerator. Seth, her pre-pre fiancé, was going to be mad when he noticed the ring missing; it had cost a *lotta dough*. Misty kept her hand in her pocket for the remainder of that next school day.

Like the cuts, this burn wouldn't scar, and in another twenty years those girls would tell the burn story as a funny antidote from their high school years with friends whose names they had trouble remembering.

Just before the end of the school year, the Art girls bravely ventured into the ancient practice of self-inflicted tattoos, so aptly named Stick and Poke. After their YouTube research, Sandy, a silent and susceptible rebel, had ordered the necessary paraphernalia from Amazon. The needles, ink cups, alcohol, cotton balls, gloves and tattoo ointment arrived in two days—her parents had Amazon Prime and believed the science experiment lie she fed them. Sandy facetimed her friends as she dipped the needle into the ink, then poked into her skin. After an hour of watching, the friends grew bored of the grimacing and *holy shit that hurts* and signed off because of homework or dinner or needing to walk, no feed, the cat.

Sandy revealed the final product the next day in a crammed bathroom stall. She raised her shirt sleeve and peeled away the edges of the taped gauze pad, "It's a good thing," she said, "that Bob is only three letters long. I wanted to go with Bobby, but it takes forever, and it hurts so bad." The girls examined Sandy's blue Bob. "You have to like stick the needle in your skin, like hundreds of times. If my boyfriend's name was Butler, I'd have 'But' on my arm for the rest of my life." The girls thought that was hysterical, but voyeuristically satisfied, none of the girls would follow suit.

“What if you change boyfriends?” Nora had asked as they exited the bathroom.

“I won’t,” said Sandy, feeling sorry for Nora who didn’t understand true love, “Bobby is my soul mate.” She and Bobby broke up a month later. And years later, Bob would be transformed (by a tattoo artist) into dying roses on a thorny bush which sprouted into demons and angels and birds and naked body parts.

By her last year of grade school, Nora was popular, artistic, a fan of her school’s sports teams, an excellent student, and a friend to all. But, still and always, she held a closed fist. Some classmates speculated it was for self-defense and that there had been a trauma in her young life causing PTSD and therefore she walked around ready to punch someone’s lights out.

‘Hypervigilant’ was the word for it, according to Mr. Fritz-the-ditz, their Iraq-veteran History teacher who preferred to focus on wartime behavior and its long-term impacts (he told gory war stories).

The day after her 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, wearing a somewhat lumpy stuffed bra (her mother’s) and lipstick purchased with her birthday money, Nora timidly walked into the *Live For Today* tattoo shop. The bells clanged against the glass door. From behind a counter, a very large man looked up from his phone, then down again. Nora walked closer to the counter and waited, staring at her orange and pink, high-topped gym shoes and thinking she should have worn something less juvenile.

“Driver’s license?” he asked while still engaged with his phone.

Nora reached into her wallet and produced the borrowed license from Samantha from the speech club (who borrowed it from her sister and needed it back by the next day—before her sister noticed it missing). Nora and Samantha’s sister both had thick, straight hair and brown eyes.

“Got an appointment?” asked the biker dude, shaking his head and handing the license back. The wall behind him was covered with tattoo photographs and thumb-tacked sketches, a yellow price tag clinging on each. Hanging crooked was a sign which read: *You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD*. Next to it was a smiley face, and a price sticker. It was Leviticus again (19:28), but Nora didn’t know this.

“I didn’t know I needed an appointment.” Nora sounded so disappointed, as if she had prepared her entire life for this moment. Like a gymnast who misses the balance beam on her first leap upward, breaks her leg, never to walk on a narrow board in the air again.

“Well, depends on what you want done.”

“Just a life line. Here, on my palm.” Nora opened her hand and drew her finger down her palm the same way Madam Sophie (or Jane Myers) had when she was eight. Nora pulled a folded page out of her pocket with a palm illustration and labeled lines.

She pointed with a chewed fingernail as she read, “Heart Line. Money Line. Marriage Line. Fate Line. Life line. My life line is too short.”

“Takes all kinds,” The tattooed man said, and he took the paper from her even though there was a labeled palm print with a sticker price on the wall behind him. “It’s fine, I get all kinds of request for all kinds of tattoos in all kinds of places.” And he smiled genuinely, and Nora trusted him. “You know this is gonna hurt, right?”

Nora thought she was ready, steeled against the pain, but when the buzzing commenced and the first painful jabs and stabs began, Nora cried. It felt like her skin was being chewed away, a millimeter at a time, by tiny voracious, carnivorous centipedes. When the tattoo guy asked if she wanted him to stop, she shook her head and continued crying. When he was

finished, she sobbed because her hand was so red and the color he used (an amber and umber combo) blended so well into her inflamed hand, Nora couldn't see the etched life line.

"Don't worry," he consoled, as he bandaged her palm, "when the redness goes down, you'll see it."

Nora stopped crying.

"Feel free to come in for touch-ups," he said as he took her forty dollars.

Nora turned away.

"Wait," he said, "Your instructions for care and your change." He handed her the papers and a single quarter, which she dropped into her pocket.

At dinner that evening, after saying grace, her father, looking at Nora's wrapped hand, asked, "What happened to your hand, sweetie?"

"Oh, it's nothing, just a scratch."

"Can I see it?" he asked reaching over the table, "Isn't that the hand you always keep closed?"

Nora shook her head, "I don't always keep it closed, dad. How do you think I type my homework and pick up stuff and do the dishes every night?"

"Mostly one-handed from what I see." He pursued a bit more, "Just let me look," and more, "What are you hiding?" But because Nora was a teenage girl, and he, frankly, had always been terrified of teenage girls, and because Nora's mother kicked him under the table, he let it drop.

Nora knew, from the instructions sheet, some bleeding was to be expected. And some bleeding occurred. When she wiped it away, she could see her new life line was very convincing, the color so perfect that she would fool everyone. She would learn to open her hand and to use it

all the time. That unused hand was considerably smaller than her right. She would lift weights to build strength. She would join a two-handed sport, like volleyball.

Nora waited for the bleeding to stop. But the bleeding didn't stop.

She went back to the tattoo man, and he informed her "I didn't do nothing wrong. You must have some sort of bleeding disorder." It wasn't a lot of blood, so Nora kept her hand closed around a crumpled quarter-sheet of a paper towel, day and night. Night and day.

After Nora graduated from eighth grade, she attended St. Agnus Highschool, like most of her friends. Then, one day in her Religion class, the word that emancipated Nora came from Father Frank during a lecture about St. Francis of Assisi – *Stigmata*.

"Father Frank," Nora said, after class. "Can you look at my hand?"

And he did. He had been waiting all his life to witness a miracle.

And that is how Nora gained notoriety in the Catholic Church. How she came to travel on the Church's dime to Rome (with her parents who finally believed they knew why Nora kept her hand closed all those years and wanted to know if Nora was going to be canonized at some point). But mostly, it is how she came to be Facetimed by curious Catholics at an exorbitant-by-the-minute pay rate.

It was a very lucrative business.

(Albeit, short-lived.)