

## I, the Hanging Man.

Liv H. Scott

"Will you read my cards?" My best friend, Grace, asks tossing the deck at me.

She's bright and cheery, even if a minute ago she was cringing at the fact I sleep with the cards under my pillow, a solid "Ugh, that's weird" and more cringing when she realized all those naps she's taken in my bed over the years meant sleeping on my cards.

"I always saw them in your bed, I just didn't really think about it," she said when I pointed out that they had always been there, under one pillow or another.

I don't turn her down, because I never turn people down when they ask. This, has made for some awkward readings. Like the time the Passion Parties representative who had just got done selling dildos in my living room found out about my cards and asked me to do a short consciousness, unconsciousness reading for her and we opened up the can of worms that was her house loan.

I free my deck from the jute twine and gaudy silk scarf that protects it. The scarf is a relic of my great grandmother whose maiden name I now own as a middle name; and when my sisters being funny, as my Cajun fortune teller name. Mama Holcombe.

I tell Grace to think about her question and to hand me my tarot book. It's a guide to reading the cards for beginners. It was given to me along with my deck, a classical Rider-Waite. I haven't got everything memorized, partly because school occupies a good chunk of my time and there are 78 cards total. 21 Major Arcana, and 56 Minor Arcana or the suits.

I flip through to find her card representation. For the reading I do, the Celtic Cross, you must always start with a card that represents the seeker, that is, whoever is asking the question. The card representations are generally one of the suit or minor arcana cards. In Grace's case the queen of pentacles to represent a woman over 18 with black hair and eyes.

"Do you have your question?" I ask.

"Yeah, I want to know about Casey and I, you know the future," She doesn't need to tell me. It's not necessary I know the question really, I'm only here to interpret card meanings. Everyone always shares the question anyway. It helps me interpret better, at least.

"Ok," I shuffle my deck. Casey is Grace's boyfriend. They've been together almost 6 months.

I set the deck beside her and tell her to cut it into three piles going towards the left, however she wants. Grace plays around and cuts the cards unevenly and gleeful that she can do so. When she's done I stack them right to left and deal out the two cards over her representation card, the four points of the cross, and the four cards to the side.

"Whoa," Grace stares. She has never seen me do a reading yet. I assume she didn't expect quite so many cards to be dealt. Then again, I could have done a simple two card consciousness and unconsciousness reading like I did for my Passion Parties lady. I feel that Grace should be allowed more of my time, however, and a good full reading for her first.

At first glance the cards are bad. Ten of swords, bad. Of course Grace first notices death. She points and opens her mouth and I jump to cut her off.

"Death isn't bad. It doesn't mean death. It means change. It's actually a pretty good card." I fail to mention that the ten of swords is not. The ten of swords in my deck is a guy lying face down on the ground with ten swords coming out of his back. No one really needs to explain that that's a bad card. Ten swords to the back is very infrequently considered anything but bad.

I launch into Grace's reading and it's grim. Full of strife and miscommunication. It's not the kind of reading you want to give someone, especially your best friend, and certainly not for their first reading. Most of the cards have to do with miscommunication or poor communication, which I find odd as all I ever hear about is how Grace and Casey talk, all the time, about everything. They have the most openly communicated relationship I've ever seen so the cards just don't make sense. Grace is doing her best not to panic, and it's not until I get to a card that suggests she will look to black magic to solve her problems do I get it.

My deck is being a sarcastic little shit. My deck is giving her everything she wants to hear because she's afraid to hear it. My deck is upset that someone dared to ask it anything about the future.

The black magic card, which is ultimately the devil card, tips me off because only the day before did I pull my book of the history of black magic out from my bookshelf to try and read through for the second time. I recognize that the black magic the cards are referring to are themselves, something Grace has never given much thought to or been exposed to. The black magician is me. Not because I or the cards are bad, but because the cards are mocking her through her fears. It's only fitting I and they play the role of the villain.

It may seem anthropomorphic for cards to mock someone with a sarcastic reading, and believe what you will. However, the idea behind sleeping with your cards is to become closer to them. In my case to give them a little personality similar to mine. One that teases. At the same time, my cards have never been used to tell the future in a serious manner. When I first received them I would do readings for friends at sleepovers as a novelty and a joke. I never believed I could tell the future. I don't believe the future is something that can be told like a story.

My cards are used for their advice. The meanings of the cards, positive or negative, help me think about situations in my life through different means than I normally would. That is how I use the cards. As advice givers, as helpers in decisions making. Not as mystical fortune tellers.

I start laughing, and have to explain to Grace that my cards aren't being serious. That they're feeding her all her worse fears. I point out how I can tell and laugh some more. Grace doesn't take too kindly to being made the butt of a joke by some laminated pieces of paper. I am just gleefully pleased that I've been shown how closely knit my cards and I have become.

...

Halfway across the country in upstate New York, Lauren is getting ready to do readings for some of the eager followers of her blog. She feels relaxed and as if she can take her time, despite it being a school night. Lauren is still in high school.

To prepare for her readings Lauren lights a few white candles, a stick of sandalwood and a stick of dragons blood incense, and spreads her amethyst crystals out on the floor around her. Amethyst is supposed to help create clarity in psychic readings, and peace in spirituality and meditation. It's kind of like caffeine for tarot cards. She doesn't do all this preparation on a normal basis, but something about the night and her mood tells her to do it now.

She shuffles her deck a few times before spreading the cards in a half circle in front of her. She focuses on the anonymous seeker, and the question they sent her through her blog as she does so. Lauren doesn't use formal spreads like the Celtic Cross, or two card draw. Instead she merely spreads her cards face down and uses her intuition to pick the right card.

Lauren describes it as choosing the card that's energy speaks out to her the most. Something she feels as a magnetic pull to the cards. Specific ones, for specific people and questions, pull harder

than others. It's not always easy to pick the right card, it takes practice and a clear mind to listen and feel for the different energies and to judge what's strongest.

Unlike me, she allows her seekers to ask any variety of questions. Future included. Tonight she's drawing on the subject of love for her first seeker. Looking both into the future and for advice over whether or not her anonymous seeker should ask out their crush or not.

She pulls the moon card, one of the 21 major arcana. It is a fairly neutral card, except when it comes to matters of love. Then it means deception, and trouble for loved ones. Lauren sets the card back along the others, face up and pulls her computer into her lap. She types out a reply to her anonymous seeker telling them what card she has pulled, what the meaning is, and giving them the advice to use their intuition (one of the more neutral meanings of the moon card) to determine whether or not it may be a good time to try and start a relationship.

After she posts the message on her blog, Lauren puts her computer away and picks up the deck. She turns the moon card to face the same direction as the others and shuffles again, this time considering the question of her next seeker when she spreads the cards.

Lauren will do all or as many readings as she can before she grows tired. Despite the media continued idea of going into a seedy, new age designed and incense suffocating small shop to get your cards read, many people who read tarot cards will do readings for strangers over the internet through personal blogs and email. Most of them preface their readings with background knowledge about themselves, whether they have degrees in finance, psychology, business, or not. Many are upfront about their qualifications to be giving advice that may seriously affect a person's, and act more as unaccredited therapists or your best friend giving you advice.

Lauren makes it wildly known she's only 18 on her blog, and handles mostly questions coming from people who are around the same age as her, and in areas that don't involve high risk situations like money, jobs, or investments.

I myself mostly give readings to friends, and use my cards to illuminate situations in their life rather than tell them what to do. I read the card meanings and help guide my seeker through understanding the card and how it can appear in their life—rather than telling them what it means. In this way I differ from some of the tarot readers I have met.

...

About a week after I read Grace's cards and my deck ridiculed her, we go to Village Inn for free pie Wednesdays. Casey is with us.

We chat, place our orders, and it's only when we're in the midst of enjoying our pie and coffees that the topic of tarot cards comes up. The fact that I'm wanting to write a piece about the cards comes up too.

"You could go to one of the psychics in town, there are few, I mean for material." Casey suggests. It's the first time we've hung out for more than 3 minutes and we've both been sober. I knew I liked him before, but the easy going, nonjudgmental attitude he's had all night has won me over. I'm glad my cards were giving Grace a hard time instead of speaking the truth.

"I wanted to!" I say, possibly through a mouthful of pumpkin pie. I've been shoving my face ever since they sat it down in front of me. Can you blame me? "I wanted to maybe shadow someone, see how they do it, but of the two places I've found one never called me back and the other lady--"

"Was a bitch." Grace cuts in emphatically.

"I mean," I sigh. Casey looks between us wide eyed.

"I called, and she picked up. But she said what she does is really private, and personal like a therapist so she wouldn't be able to let me watch anyway." I say, before adding "She was really short with me though," in a murmur into my coffee.

"Well, what if you just went for a reading? As a customer?" Casey suggests.

I glance between his raised eyebrows and Grace's look of *hm, why not?*

"Problem." I say. "I don't have the money." I don't know the actual prices of the in-town psychic's services, but I can guarantee you that if it costs any more than a three dollar pot of coffee and a free slice of pie, I can't afford it right now.

Casey just nods and goes back to eating his own pie. We're all quite for a moment before he perks up again.

"Have you ever been to Renaissance?"

...

Lauren and I met online through both of our blogs. Mine more a time-kill than hers which had a keen focus on her tarot journey and readings. I had made a post about my cards and about the runes I was trying to start learning, Lauren was one of two strangers who saw the post and commented. The other, I am friends with as well, but we have more in common when it comes to runes than tarot.

Lauren and I have never read for each other, and some days I wonder if maybe it's something we should try? Like many others I know, Lauren does not readily turn to the cards for her own needs and questions. I on the other hand am a shameless whore at using the cards for my own purposes. I have never had anyone else do a reading for me, and in this way I believe I am strange within the community of people who read tarot cards. Honestly, I'd never even known anyone else who read the cards until I got rid of my fear of being a strange "other" and spoke up about my activities. Since then, I have found more people willing to talk about the cards with me, or open to the idea of learning about them, than those who are purely critical.

I attribute some of my fear and anxiety about people's reactions to my family. But most to my longest relationship.

I dated a boy named Amaad for 3 years in high school. Top of our class, rational to a fault, and gorgeous. We stuck to each other like glue because of our rejection of all religions, but mostly Christianity. A raging monster of a religion in our area, and something that acted as a pressuring force to get me into the cards more and more. To many I knew who were loudly Christian, the cards were Satanic, demonic, or blasphemy at the least. I myself was called many similar things by random strangers in Starbucks lobbies. Amaad simply grew up torn between his radical Muslim father and his blaze catholic mother. To him religion was more an amusing bit of fighting ground between to happily married parties, rather than the end all be all word of the world.

Despite our similarities in religious leanings, and rejection of faith for a preference for science, we did not share an appetite for the cards. Or anything taboo. Amaad would walk a straight line, and I wandered around picking up every rock I could find, and poking at the lesser-beings with sticks. To him my cards held no psychological reasoning. My interest in astrology was an entertaining joke and nothing more. And should I utter half a superstition he was already rolling his eyes.

The card that represented our relationship, found out by the addition of all the numbers of our birth years (Day + Month + Year) into one double digit number, was justice. Is justice. It will never change. It also will never be my favorite card. Something about it is off putting, ugly to my eyes. I dislike

the card and hated to see it as the one to represent our relationship. In my high school enamored state I wished desperately for the lovers, or my personal favorite the hanging man.

Justice, was, and still is an accurate card. One of a balance between mental and physical, faith and fact, emotion and logic. Two spheres equal held, or if the card is reversed and things go wrong, a card of dominance, superiority, illogic, and tyranny. At the end of the relationship, things had gone very wrong. To this day things remain wrong between us. A history of emotional abuse, sexual pressure, and nasty arguments unravels behind us. The same arguments, the same stubbornness and disregard for another's emotional and mental needs spreads before us. Justice was undone when our relationship became anything less than balanced, and the distaste for that man is something I feel almost as strongly as what I feel for the justice card itself.

...

My Aunt gave me my Rider-Waite deck as a belated birthday present the Thanksgiving of the year I turned 17. She herself had a deck, and I'd pestered her for a few years with different questions about the cards for a piece I was writing. (A piece I never did finish). She either had enough of my pestering, or recognized something genuine in my interest, and made the decision to give me my own deck. And a guide book to get me started.

So my Aunt gives me this deck on Thanksgiving, after we've all ate, and I sit in the hall of my eclectic grandparent's house with the cards spread out on the mismatched carpets and try to learn something about how this whole future telling, mystical card mumbo jumbo works.

My cousins are scattered around me, most of them younger, and they each fill in as guinea pigs while I try to understand the Celtic Cross spread, and the rather cryptic descriptions of the cards. I read for them one at a time and we all cringe over the really creepy cards; the devil, the nine and ten of swords, death; and giggle nervously over the shameless nudity of some of the drawings. Them because they're all 8 or 9 and nudity is funny because they never see it. Me because I'm 17 and I'm not sure if I should be exposing my cousins to a little drawn penis or nipples.

One of my other Aunts, one more catholic than the first, hangs over my shoulder. She shakes her head at me when I look up and tells me not to mess with these things.

"It's just for fun, you can't really read the future." I tell her. An hour ago she was dangling my sisters cross necklace over her palm and using the movement of the chain and pendants swinging to

determine the gender of my sisters not-yet-to-be-conceived first child. My sister still has yet to beget the little baby girl my aunt predicted. Though she has married, so who knows what could happen in a year?

I recall my first night with the cards fondly. Even though I had to stay far away from the kitchen and living room with them, and even though I wasn't very keen on being the type of person who believed in the cards. Having them, was one thing. Being the crazy kid at school who took tarot cards seriously? I kept a tight lid on the fact I had them, especially when my long-standing boyfriend of 2 years ridiculed me for believing in such 'cold-reading'.

In that way I admire Lauren's honesty about her cards, and in all her spiritual matters. She's only a year older than I was when I received my cards, and she isn't afraid of being ridiculed. It took me five years to get there. It only took her two.

Lauren came across the cards when she discovered her mother's deck. Her mother had never really gotten involved much with them, and like my aunt, had drifted away from the cards as she got older. This discovery, however, harbored an interest in Lauren. She bought her own deck, because its taboo to read from someone else's, and started learning with the guide that came with them. As she got more in tune with her cards, and pagan beliefs, Lauren bought more decks, her crystals, and gained a better insight into the aromatherapy of incense.

While both Lauren and I came across our cards through family members, this tale is not necessarily a universal one for deck owners. Many I know have been gifted the cards from friends, or close coworkers. A few even stumbled across them on their own, making the split decision to buy a set either out of curiosity or admiration of the artwork on the deck.

Even less universal is the ethnicity of those who read the tarot cards. Though the idea of tarot cards in modern days seems to be stuck to Roma people, derogatorily called gypsies, the actual cards themselves are Italian, not Roma. The original name being Tarrochi. The original purpose being simply to play card games. That is until the French got a hold of them and renamed the cards to Tarot and began divining the future with them. As with many French words, the ending consonant is not pronounced. Thus I spent many of my life calling the cards Tarot with a harsh ending T, before my Aunt corrected me with a not-entirely-hidden bought of laughter.

None of those I know who read the card's have Italian blood, and only one other finds any connection to the cards through their ethnicity besides me. She is a woman in her thirties, who reads

her cards in the Celtic and English tradition as she is primarily Irish. Lauren, when asked, was amused that I might consider her Mexican descent having anything to do with her relationship to the cards. Most of those I know found it funny I even asked. A reaction that made me consider that maybe my own Southern mixed bayou blood and the connection I felt to the cards because of it was weird, not the other way around.

...

Renaissance, or Renaissance Books and Gifts, is a new age shop that sells anything pagan, witchy, and Wiccan. It's the kind of store that exists in every city, wildly popular or on the fringes. Here, where I live, it's on the fringes. Stuck between two small stores in the back of a strip mall complex. Grace and I had to drive around a few times, maps pulled up on our iPhones, before we found it. Casey had meant to go with us, but were all young twenties and the call of work cannot be ignored. Without him, it becomes a treasure hunt.

The store has more windows than I expect, carpeted floors, and an 80's department store décor that I did not expect. I expected the wood floors, cloying incense, and exposed brick of the hipster shops in St. Louis my home town. Despite this, the incense was still powerful enough to make anyone who did not burn it on a regular basis choke and get a headache.

We perused for a while, Grace quicker than me. I got caught up in the aisle full of candles. Different colors to strengthen different readings, and natural scents to bring about luck and courage. I'm not in the habit of burning candles during my readings, but the idea of scented candles not merely colored ones wasn't something I could pass up. I picked a few out and scurried to find Grace who was ringing all the wind chimes.

At the checkout and a small basket of brass bells caught my attention. So small and so cute. It was an impulse buy, but it was also one of those things that catches your eye and you can't pass up. A bell. The size of a nickel, and molded in brass. I added it to my purchase and made a point to look up bells later. There had to be a reason for the attraction I felt to this small trinket.

Bells, I found, are thought to cleanse the air before and after a reading. They're also thought to bring protection, and ward of evil spirits with their ringing. I found myself wanting to carry my bell around in my pocket, and stopping myself out of fear I might lose it. Instead I put it in the cubby on my dash, so it'd be with me whenever I drove.

There was no mystical feeling when I entered the store, no sudden vibes my presence gave off to the store clerk so that she might feel the need to tell me something about my life. Even with my own experience in tarot and knowledge of it demystified, I still expected something monumental to happen when I entered the store. And maybe a bell is monumental, and I'm just overlooking it. Maybe it means I'm simply on my path, undisturbed, un-needing of a push in the right direction.

...

A week after I turned 21 my sister got married, and a week after that I walked into Kaleidoscope, a well-known tattoo and piercing parlor in town, with an appointment to get my first tattoo. It was a birthday present to myself, belated because I'd held off not wanting my Mother to cause a scene on my sister's big day. My sister herself could have cared less whether or not I had fresh ink, so long as I wore the mint green she had picked out for me.

I was getting a small triangle, point down, with a plus sign over it behind my left ear. It was a simple design. I'd talked it over with the artist, and if we had enough room, we'd color the downwards top of the triangle red. The symbol itself seemed to surprise most people when they found I was getting, or had got a tattoo. It wasn't a heart, or Christ fish, nor a cross, or a star. Normal things people get small tattoos of.

Instead it's the base symbol for the Hanging Man card from the rider-waite deck. The man on the card hangs by one ankle, arms cast in a triangle below his head, and legs crossed at the calf and thigh to create a cross. It symbolizes incompleteness and a journey still being taken. It's the reverse of a symbol that signifies spiritual completeness and arrival at a destination; generally that of spiritual enlightenment or the 'aha!' moment to the great question 'why are we here?'

"I'm going to have to shave your head, ok?" the artist asked. I had a foot of long brown hair, even though I couldn't give a shit about it.

"Go for it." I said. The prickle of the razor against my skin, and the warmth of water and shaving gel was pleasant. It helped calm the churning ocean in my stomach of doubt, and apprehension. The ridge of the mastoid is close to the skin right behind your ear, and I'd always heard that inking on bone was the worst.

The artist drew the guidelines out against my clean-shaven skin, before waving me towards the mirror.

“Check it out,” he said.

I wiggled my eyebrows at Grace, who had come with me in case I passed out, but mostly to document this occasion with my phone’s camera.

I crossed the room towards the large mirror. I could just barely see behind my ear when I pulled it back, so I ended up using a hand mirror to catch the temporary ink and bounce the reflection into the large mirror for me to see. I immediately gave a noise of distress and turned towards the worried artist.

“Do we need to move?” He asked.

“We need to flip it,” I said coming back to the chair. “It means something different this way. It means I’ve got my shit together, and I am not that vain,” I laughed, the artist laughed, and I dropped back into the chair to have the ink washed away and reset.

When he actually started on the tattoo I barely noticed, except for the buzzing sound in my ear. I closed my eyes and relaxed into it. It’d been nearly a year since I decided I wanted to get this on my body permanently. It’d been my whole lifetime I’d wanted a tattoo, or a few.

The irony of having a symbol of impermanence laid in ink under my skin permanently, well that wasn’t lost on me.

It doesn't change how we associate with the cards, perhaps the ways in which we do and how we came to find the cards, but the underlying concept of believing in some non-god-like power and using tools to help us exist and make decisions stays the same.

I came across a diagram once that showed a set of 3 concentric circles. The largest labeled paganism, the medium witch craft, and the smallest Wiccan. Paganism and witch craft overlapped briefly, while Wiccan rested in paganism and overlapped the same portion of witch craft. It made sense. Not all who practice witch craft are pagans, not all pagans practice witch craft. Not all wiccans practice witch craft either, but all wiccans are pagan. I could see this diagram and easily fit myself and Lauren into it, as well as my other friends who did or did not handle the cards. We had separate beliefs on whether there were gods or goddesses, spirit forces, or simply vast nothingness in the world. We could agree that nature was important, and despite the idea that witches ignore science in favor of mysticism, we all seemed to have fairly grounded beliefs in modern science and it's explanations of the world. Scientifically, you might not be able to predict future events, but humanly you can assess a situation and determine the possibilities.