

# RETRACTED

are expected to double by the end of the century. The industry took off in 1984 when the Federal Communications Commission deregulated the amount of time broadcast stations could dedicate to advertisements. What seemed at the time to be a minor rule change launched the infomercial industry and its subset: the psychic hot lines. The psychic-hot-line industry is extremely secretive, comprised of privately held companies that never open their books and often require psychics to sign nondisclosure contracts. Virtually no details of the industry's culture have been published.

JULY 25, 1996

I've spent nearly every night of the last few months watching psychic infomercials. Like a lot of the characters in the ads, I'm concerned with my financial future, but unlike them I decide it would be more lucrative to become a psychic than consult with one. I track down the phone numbers of eight networks' corporate offices from ads on TV and the back pages of *The Cable Guide*.

The man who answers the phone at LaToya Jackson's Psychic Network greets me with, "Yeah, and what the fuck do you want?" Before I can finish, he hangs up. At the Kenny Kingston Psychic Hotline a gum-chomping secretary spits, "No, we're not hiring. You should have known that since you're, like, the psychic." Three networks take my name: Psychic Friends Network (PFN), Psychic Encounters, and Psychic Believers Network (PBN).

Becoming a psychic is like applying to college all over again. Dionne Warwick's PFN is my safety. Like a big state school bursting with professors, they have psychics for everything: love, career, money, and the lottery. One PFN psychic I interviewed says she specializes in giving readings on "hair days." "You give me any date in the next twenty-seven weeks and I will tell you if you'll have a good-hair day," Sharonna explains. "Nothing can fool me—I'll know if you get the frizzies from humidity or because you had a boy over late the night before rustling your bones up." PFN's nightly ads signal a

growing business in need of more psychics. I figure with a Midwestern accent and an Ivy League education, I'd be a shoo-in. On the other hand, Psychic Encounters is a little more challenging. No one alleges their fortune-tellers use scripts, which means I might actually have to try and predict the future. PBN is my reach—the Harvard of psychic networks. Sharonna and her husband "dream" that their newborn will someday work for PBN. They pay their employees more. Their advertisements brag of having only real psychics. They never use scripts.

JULY 30

This morning I get a call from Ruth, PBN's administrator, whose voice resembles a soprano Darth Vader. It might be due to illness, but as if she never learned to breathe and talk at the same time, Ruth holds her breath while she speaks, then, after each half-sentence, she pushes air out through her mouth and laboriously sucks more back in. "You looking for . . . woosh . . . whoooooop . . . a job as a psychic . . . woosh . . . whoooooop . . . with PBN?" That's right, I say very quickly, realizing that when I speak, she's holding her breath. She asks me if I have psychic powers. "Many," I say. She explains that PBN only hires "real psychics" and asks if I "fit that description." I say yes. She asks me again if I have psychic powers. "Very many," I say this time. She still doesn't seem to believe me. "Well Susan will . . . woosh . . . whoooooop . . . have to check you out," Ruth mutters. "If you're not a psychic . . . woosh . . . whoooooop . . . give up now. 'Cause we'll . . . woosh . . . whoooooop . . . find out."

Around 8:00 P.M., my home phone rings. It's Susan. In a Kentucky accent that runs like thick syrup, she tells me she manages the psychics for PBN. At the end of every sentence, she calls me an affectionate term. The interview lasts for nearly two hours. We talk about Michael Jordan. She calls me "sweetie pie." We talk about people who've died of AIDS. She calls me "honey." We talk about the rising cost of produce. She calls me "rosy cheeks." We

even talk extensively about *The New Republic*, my "day job." She says she used to read the magazine but hasn't touched it in a few years. I ask her if it's because the current editor, Andrew Sullivan, is more conservative than Michael Kinsley, as some readers have complained.

She picks right up on my cues. "Nope. You see, Michael Kinsley was someone special, sugar plum. I could channel with him. I've tried to connect with Mr. Sullivan, but, honey bun, all I get is bad vibes, static, interference. Oh boy."

During a conversation about how Kellogg's attaches sugar to the flakes in Frosted Flakes, she interrupts me: "Candy apple, I think you're gonna work out just great." Was it my empathetic voice? No. Was it my engaged listening? Wrong again. Susan was impressed that I speak English correctly. "So many people call me talking with so many ain't's that I can't put them on the phone," she said. "Who cares if they're psychic, cotton candy. No one will think they're psychic." Susan tells me to fax her a résumé and cover letter about my life as a psychic. If I seem qualified, I will have to give her a reading.

JULY 31

After six drafts I ultimately decide that the key to my letter is modesty. Susan probably receives a barrage of testimonials from people claiming to have predicted Hurricane Hugo and saved dozens of lives. Hopefully, a more sincere letter will stand out. I write that simple bouts of childhood déjà vu lead me to think I am a psychic: "I merely saw my mother feeding my brother and me lunch. The peculiar aspect of the vision was how she handed us the plates—using her left hand instead of her right. . . . [Then, the next day] I saw my mom use her left hand to serve me a peanut butter sandwich." Years later, I write, Oxford tutors honed my psychic skills. Since Susan had warned me she would check my references, I had already told her that my mentors—Laertes, Julius, and Juliet—had met with tragic ends. I fax Susan the letter.

Anxious to begin preparing for my test reading, I leave work fifteen

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