

SEASON OF THE GHOST

I love that there's a psychic who practices on Main Street. Standing amid the high-tech banks and the high-end coffee bars is a store with a crystal ball in the window. A sign on the door says *Psychic. We Are Open. Please Knock. Doorbell Doesn't Work.* I walk past this sign every morning to buy a newspaper — and I never fail to smile at the irony that a psychic has the power to speak to the dead, to foretell the future, but doesn't quite have enough power to fix the doorbell. Spirits move in mysterious ways.

I've been feeling the nearness of ghosts recently. I was sitting in the dining room of my old house on Woodbridge Avenue for the last time — adrift in the morning's moody four-hour window that Elizabethtown Gas had given me for their technician to arrive, shut off the gas, and take a final meter reading. There was barely a stick of furniture remaining in the place. It was 88 degrees. I'd set up a beach chair in the dining room. I'd brought a radio, a fan, a can of Progresso pasta e fagioli soup and a small pot in which to warm it. The electricity would be shut off tomorrow. I sipped my water. I listened to Jeff Spurgeon's out-the-door dedication on WQXR. It was 7:55 in the morning. My poor old house! Nothing on the walls but ancient picture frame hangers: too rusted and stubborn to let go of their grip. Maple framed the entrance to the sun parlor. That's where my piano had stood — where a younger version of my band The Punsters (Michael, Tim, Marc, and I) had written and performed "Batman's Going to a Bat Mitzvah" in one gloriously chaotic take. I saw a younger Lynn in my kitchen cutting a smiling face into the crust of the blueberry pie she just baked.

After the technician had left, I met, at the side door — for my first and only time — the builder who was purchasing lots 8, 9, and 10 (my old house!) He was a white-haired gentleman who stepped out from an expensive-looking black car. He asked me if the house was empty. I told him it was 90% empty. "Then I don't need to go inside," he said.

"Then," I said, "as my father used to say: Use it in good health." I shook his hand. We both didn't know what else to say.

I will never again open that locked door.

Back at my new house, a sleuth from the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society has informed me that during the 1930s this house was occupied by

Dr. John D. Witmer whose office was one block away, next to the library, where an orthodontist currently practices. And suddenly I'm in the palpable presence of Dr. Witmer — walking home from his office, in his jacket and tie, to eat lunch in his own kitchen. In the unfinished part of the basement, screwed into the wall, hangs a large chalkboard, framed in green painted wood, an eraser still in its gutter. I've been wondering who put it there — what purpose it served — and I observe, now, that scratched into the slate near the top is engraved (upside down) JONATHANDW — and I feel the old doctor's hand on my right shoulder. I can actually feel its weight. I cannot sleep. I arise at three in the morning, and I stand in the darkness of the old bathroom on the second floor whose window looks out the front of the house — and with absolute certainty I know that Dr. Witmer stood in this same spot on a winter night, in his pajamas and robe, watching the snow fall, trying to judge how bad the storm was going to be. Would he have to cancel his morning appointments? I know this scene happened — and I know we all surrounded by spirits, no matter where we live. Hopefully benevolent spirits. And my message to all the ghosts who surround us is a simple one: Please knock. Doorbell doesn't work.