

GHOSTS

Spring beckons.

Maybe it's the change of seasons; maybe we've all been stuck in the house too long, but nearly everybody I know is sick: bad backs, mysterious aches and chills. It's made me consider, once again, the perilous transience of all our separate mortalities—and it makes me remember a strange story from about two decades ago.

My sister Terry had recently passed away; I was in a sort of unmoored state of mind. I saw her ghost every time I looked in the mirror; I heard her voice whispering in my ear at every choice I made. (“Why would you order the fish in a deli?”) I was convinced I was dying myself.

In the middle of that uncertain time (I seemed to be acting in someone else's play), a friend in publishing set me up to meet a film agent from International Creative Management who wanted to option a screenplay I'd written. I truthfully didn't think much would come of it, but I dutifully took the train to Manhattan and met her in the bar of a fancy hotel off Central Park.

It was an affable meeting. She was a stylish woman in her thirties; she wore gray cashmere and pearls. We sat near the bar for about a half-hour talking about current Broadway musicals and recent films; I agreed to her option offer, and it was flattering to hear her praise my work. What I remember now, more than anything we said, was *another* woman: older, blonde, wearing a white pant-suit, sitting alone at the bar staring at me. I mean, *really* staring. The film agent and I had been talking loudly about all sorts of show-biz gossip, and at first I thought the woman at the bar was just eavesdropping, intrigued by what she heard. But still she kept staring. It was unsettling. I'm an ordinary-looking guy; women don't stare at me. In truth, I don't *want* to be stared at.

My meeting ended. The next writer arrived for *his* meeting: a thin, energetic elderly man in a cranberry sweater. I was introduced to Walter Bernstein.

I said: “Walter Bernstein who wrote *The Front*?”

“Yes,” he said.

I shook his hand and, still standing, told him for a full five minutes how much I loved that film. (Woody Allen played a cashier who helps his black-listed writer friends by putting his name on their scripts.) I told him it was a perfectly constructed script—and in detail explained why. I told him that I'd actually purchased a copy of the screenplay to study it. He couldn't have been more delighted.

As I left, I thought: Well, if nothing comes from this day but meeting Walter Bernstein, it was a memorable day.

I exited through the lobby of the hotel—and *click, click, click*, I heard heels on the marble floor behind me—and I heard a female voice: “Oh, sir. Excuse me. Sir?”

Before I turned around, I knew exactly who it was going to be. The woman in the white pants-suit had followed me out of the bar. “Excuse me,” she said. She had earnest blue eyes. “I don't mean to bother you, and I don't mean to scare you, but I was watching you there in the bar, and, I can't believe this, but you are an exact ringer for my dead brother. I just can't believe it. You speak like him. You hold your head like him. You hold your hands like him. I, I don't know what to say.”

The months since my sister's death had put me in a surreal state of mind—that's the only way I can explain what happened next. But without one second's pre-meditation, I looked directly into her eyes, took her hand in mine, and said with complete seriousness: "I *am* your dead brother. And I've come back from the other side to tell you that everything is all right."

She stared at me a moment. Her eyes welled up with tears. I remember thinking: *What on earth have I done?* The words had come to my mouth completely unbidden, and I thought: Maybe I really *am* her dead brother. Or maybe she's a visitation from my dead sister. This scene was exactly the sort of thing that would have delighted Terry—it's absurd juxtaposition of drama and farce....

We exchanged a few more words. We laughed nervously. She didn't seem to want to leave. I finally told her I had a train to catch. She gave me her business card and said she'd love to hear from me if I ever was in the City.

I threw her business card into a trash can at Penn Station. It was simply too unnerving. And on the train ride home I replayed, ceaselessly, our encounter. I couldn't decide if I'd done something horrible or compassionate. They say that fraudulent spiritualists are trained in the art of cold reading. They meet a client, and in seconds, from a thousand subtle clues, piece together a portrait of the soul sitting across the crystal ball from them—then tell that client what he needs hear. And, in some similar way, some voice inside me—maybe my sister's—had instantly informed me what this woman needed to hear most in the world at that exact second—that her brother was all right; that he was at peace—and, somehow, I just spoke those words....

I never saw her again.

My sister's ghost would eventually leave me. I actually saw her sitting in my bedroom chair, next to my treadmill, explaining to me: "This is the last time I'm allowed to visit. You're OK, Bobby. I love you. You're not dying."

I think, perhaps, she was doing a cold reading on me.