

Julie Bogart

— *contest winner* —

THE SPIRIT LOVED ONE

The First Spiritualist Church of Quincy, Massachusetts, sits nestled on a picturesque hill in the middle of town. Flanked by houses and trees, the church could represent New England in a travel guide: quaint, old, a little weather-beaten, modest yet striking, white with pale blue trimmings. Worn, steep wooden stairs lead up to the church's double doors, mahogany wood with narrow, rectangular stained-glass windows, one on each side. A small garden comprised of stones, plants, and miniature trees sprawls below the stairs and wraps around the side of the church, creating a stone path to the basement entrance, where coffee and potluck meals are served after each service. There is no parking lot; visitors must park on the street down the hill and walk up. On a Sunday morning, when services are held, Quincy is still asleep. The town barely stirs. A crow announces itself loudly. Trees move in the slight wind, while leaves rustle and blow.

Fall. A Sunday morning in New England. A church on a hill. A place where people speak to the dead.

I am one week into my first semester of graduate school. I walk into the classroom, settle into my seat, and pull my books out of my backpack. I am tired, but ready to discuss Borges and his many labyrinths. The girl who is also in my writing workshop strikes up conversation: "I'm looking forward to Doug's class," she tells me.

"Me, too," I agree, wishing I had more to offer her.

"So, are you still with that boy you wrote about?" she asks.

I think back to the in-class writing assignment: A turning point. I had written about Mark.

"No," I say and pause. I turn away from her and stare at an empty desk. He's dead, I don't say, but want to. After all, that's the interesting part of the story. The sad part. But I know that this will only shock her, shame her for asking, and turn her off to future conversation with me. She is simply making small talk, appeasing her curiosity. She does not want something real or intense. She wants a cute love story, pleasantries. And I want friends. So I say nothing more.

But in my head is this: He's dead he's dead he's dead he's dead he's dead he's dead he's dead he's dead he's dead he's dead. In some moments, moments like these, moments in which I think too much, dream too much, or am asked about a particular time in my past, it's all I hear.

He's dead.

Rita Berkowitz didn't want to be a medium.

"I was dragged into it," she said. "If they had told me when I was eighteen that I was going to be drawing dead people, I probably would have run for the hills."

Rita was a successful artist in her mid-thirties when she discovered her other gift. She had a studio in Boston where she showcased and sold her paintings, taught art at Bradford College as the proverbial adjunct, and worked with troubled kids in Dorchester.

"I thought I had done it," she said. "I thought I had reached my thing that I was going to be doing for the rest of my life."

We were seated in her office at the Healing and Wellness Center in Hanover, Massachusetts, staring at each other across the small wooden table she uses to perform her life readings and spirit communications.

Rita calls herself a spirit artist. Not only does she see and speak with the dead, but she can draw them, too. This was how she accidentally discovered her connection to the spirit world, though the gift had always been with her, dating back to an incident with a Ouija Board when she was thirteen.

"Someone gave me a Ouija Board for my birthday," she said. "I grew up in an Orthodox Jewish house in Brooklyn—not the kind of place you'd see Ouija Boards. Anyway, I started answering questions that my mother knew I shouldn't know the answers to, like people's names. So she took it from me and threw it away. I didn't question her."

In 1984, at the insistence of a friend who wanted company, Rita took a psychic development class, held at a professional psychic's home. Rita wasn't all that interested in the class; in fact, her friend had to buy one of Rita's paintings in order to get her to enroll in it. But she did enroll and soon learned that psychic readings came naturally to her. After she completed the class, another friend invited Rita to her church, the Swampscott Church of Spiritualism, to listen to a rabbi speak.

“Had you heard of this church before you went?” I asked, having never heard of Spiritualism myself.

“Absolutely not,” Rita said.

During the meditation portion of the service, standard at Spiritualist churches, Rita saw the spirit of her grandmother, who had died during the Holocaust. “Her vision just came to me,” she said. “And she told me that she was all right.”

“Had you known what she looked like?” I asked.

“No,” Rita said. “There were no pictures of her in my house. My mother was the only person in her family who escaped.”

Prompted by this vision, Rita signed up for a few more classes in healing and spiritual philosophy.

“When I went to the Spiritualist church for the second time and started taking classes there,” Rita said, “there was a wonderful medium who kept walking around, saying, ‘Rita, you’re going to be a spirit artist,’ and I used to laugh at her and say, ‘That’s not what I want to do with my life,’ and she would say, ‘No, no, no, you’re going to do it.’ And she kept insisting and insisting, and, literally, in order to get her to stop asking me, I finally said, ‘Okay.’ So, I went to her class, and I did three drawings. One was of a spirit guide, one was of a middle-aged man, and one was of an adolescent boy.

“After I did the drawing of the adolescent boy, a gentleman who was there took a photograph out of his wallet and said, ‘That’s my son.’ He laid the photo down next to the drawing. They matched. And I was scared to death. I realized at that point that this was an awesome responsibility that had been given to me, an incredible gift. You know, before when I’d taken the classes with my friends, it was just for fun. But once I saw that, and then looked over at the person whom I had given the drawing of the middle-aged man to, and she was sitting there with tears rolling down her face, and she said, ‘This is my father,’ I knew I couldn’t deny it anymore.”

For a time after Mark’s death I dreamt about him often. In those early dreams he was always alive. Sometimes we were still together. Sometimes he was with the woman he dated after me, the woman he was engaged to when he died. In one dream she and I were both there

with him, in a pool hall, drinking beer. Mark and I had never played pool together.

As the years passed, the dreams became fewer. Two years after his death, I dreamed that we had sex, something we also never did together when he was alive. We were in a cheap motel, and we made love on top of the comforter. He was bulkier, and his hair was thinner, from the chemo. In the dream I knew that he was dead.

"I had sex with Mark in a dream last night," I told my best friend Lizzi over the phone the next day.

"That's—interesting," she said.

"I knew he was dead," I said, my voice rising. "I had sex with my dead ex-boyfriend in a dream. I'm a subconscious necrophiliac."

Lizzi laughed. "You are not a necrophiliac."

"Okay, but how do you explain this?" I asked. "Why? I mean, what the hell? Having sex with an ex-boyfriend in a dream is bad enough. But a dead ex-boyfriend? That's just fucked up."

"It is a little strange," Lizzi conceded, amused. "What does your dream dictionary say?"

"My dream dictionary doesn't have a section on sex with dead ex-boyfriends," I said. "If it did, though, it might say something like, 'See a fucking shrink.'"

"Yeah," she agreed, "but you've already done that."

"Do you want to hear the worst part?" I asked.

"What?"

"The sex," I said. "It was really good."

The last time I dreamed about Mark, weeks after I moved to Boston for graduate school, there was no sex, thankfully. In the dream I was walking home and came across a blacktop where a group of young men were playing basketball. I stopped for a few minutes to watch them play. One of the men turned to look at me: Mark. He smiled at me, not at all surprised to see me, as though he had been expecting me. He bounced the basketball in my direction. I caught it, felt the slick perspiration on the side of the ball, and shook my head, feeling shy. I wasn't going to play basketball with a group of men. I threw it back to him, and he nodded, tossing the ball to one of the other players. Then he walked toward me.

"How are you?" he asked, though I sensed that he knew.

"Good," I answered.

We began to walk then, though grass and trees and woods. "And

your love life?" he asked.

I gave him a sardonic smile. "Not so good," I said, thinking about my latest heartbreak, the one that had hurt more than his and mine. Again, though, I had the distinct feeling that he already knew this.

He nodded, confirming my suspicions. "I know," he said. "But you'll find him. It will be easier. It really will." He looked at me with such kindness then, his blue eyes sympathetic. He seemed cavalier, happy, calm. Soon I, too, felt calm. I believed him.

The sun set and night fell. I realized that we were standing near train tracks.

"I have to go," he said.

"Wait," I said. There was so much I wanted to ask him, so much I wanted to know.

He smiled and shook his head. A train roared by, and he jumped on it, effortlessly situating himself on the side of a cargo car, just as I'd seen runaways do in movies.

When I woke my shirt was soaked through with sweat. I sat up and looked around the sun-filled room, wondering if Mark had been there.

I felt calm as I walked up the hill to the First Spiritualist Church of Quincy, where Rita has been pastor since 1997 (incidentally the year I met Mark). The previous night had been eventful and melodramatic, rivaling my college freshmen days, and in the wee hours of the morning I had managed to whip myself into an emotional frenzy over an undeserving member of the opposite sex. Church, I reasoned, even one in which dead people roam amongst the living, might actually be a comfort.

The weather was beautiful, a surprise after a day of slushy, wet snow, with sun and highs in the fifties, the fall leaves turning. Rita had outlined Spiritualism for me ("It's all there in the brochure," she said, handing me a folded piece of blue paper entitled, "Spiritualism: Two Worlds Working Together"), but I still had no idea what to expect. A bunch of mediums getting together to talk to dead people? I clutched my pen and stenographer's notebook to my chest and allowed the sudden calm I felt to assuage my skepticism.

Once inside, I took a seat in the back. There were no pews, only cushioned folding chairs. About fifteen to twenty people, a good mix of men and women, mostly white, filled the seats. Many were conversing

and greeting one another with hugs and handshakes. The interior of the church was as quaint and rustic as the exterior, with pale blue walls and white curtains on its many windows. On the stage, or altar, at the front of the church sat a piano and a podium, as well as a few wooden chairs. A large stained-glass window, located above the chairs, served as the center of the altar: two hands—the hands of two different people—touching, surrounded by clouds, sunlight, and blue sky.

Rita was moving about with purpose. She was more dressed up than she'd been when I met with her in her office—more make-up, fancier jewelry, her short dark hair more styled and spiky. She seemed surprised but pleased to see me there among the regulars.

"I'm glad you came," she said in her thick New York accent. "It's such a nice day out today. Our turn-out might not be as good."

At eleven o'clock, Rita positioned herself behind the podium. The congregants settled and shushed themselves. She called out a few names and asked those people if they'd like to "take a chair" later. Take a chair?

She made a few Halloween jokes—everyone should sample their children's candy, ha ha—and then asked that we join her in prayer. This is how Rita begins every service, asking her congregation to send healing thoughts to those in need.

"Our declaration of principles is always growing, evolving, and changing," Rita said. "Let's read it together."

The declaration of principles, or the nine tenets of the Spiritualist faith, are listed on the back of every program, from (1) We believe in Infinite Spirit and that God is Infinite Spirit, to (9) We affirm that the precepts of Prophecy and Healing are divine attributes proven through Mediumship.

"You're going to make a difference, one way or another," Rita said. Then, "Healers, take your chairs." Eight people walked forward and stood behind the chairs set up at the front of the church.

Rita pressed a button on the boom box resting on top of the piano. We sang number four in the prayer book, "Healed, Whole, and Healthy." I am healed, whole, and healthy. I am well. She instructed us to close our eyes and relax. From the stereo came the sounds of wind chimes, soothing instrumental music. "This is your time," Rita said. "Be one with God. Let go of what is no longer serving you; take it today, and turn it over to God. Feel it. The quiet peace. In that rest is renewal. The healer chairs are open."

I watched as some people stood, walked to the front, and sat in the

chairs, their eyes closed, the healers behind them. The church was silent save for the sounds of cracking bones, gurgling stomachs, and the creaking of chairs on wood floor. When one person finished, another would stand and sit in the empty chair. Feeling like an imposter, I made my way to the front of the church. The healer, a short, round woman with brown hair and rosy cheeks, rested her hands over my ears without touching them. I closed my eyes and gave into it, the church, the healing, the exhaustion and inner turmoil I felt. My mind cleared as I sat there for what felt like hours. The woman's hands moved to the top of my head, grazing my hair. The tension in my shoulders relaxed; my mind was still. When she finished, she rested her hands on my shoulders and whispered into my ear, "May you go in peace."

For fourteen years, Rita attempted to be both an artist and a medium, not letting go of her studio until 1998.

"Every time I said I wasn't going to do it anymore, that I was going to put all of my energies into painting, something came along and said, 'No, you have to go back to that.'"

"Something like what?" I asked.

"Well, [years ago] I had been sick for a while, and my husband came home one day and told me that his job would give me a fifty-percent scholarship to get a graduate degree, which I wanted. Everybody thought I was going to get it in painting. I thought I was going to get it in painting. I meditated on it and heard, 'Get it in counseling.' So, I got it in counseling."

"Who did you hear that from?"

"My guides. You hear it as an inner voice, but it's coming from them."

Rita explained that our spirit guides are the deceased people, or spirits, who watch over us, speak to us, and guide our lives. They're not necessarily relatives, though one of her guides is her grandfather ("Isn't he cute?" she asked, showing me his photo). Rita's other two guides are a rabbi and a woman named Esmerelda. She showed me drawings of both.

"A guide and a spirit loved one are not the same thing," Rita said, responding to what must have been a look of confusion on my part.

Though Rita had enjoyed counseling, she didn't enjoy the paper-

work. After completing her internship, she received some valuable advice from her astrology teacher.

“I went over to her house one day, and she said to me, ‘If you continue working in state institutions, you will be sick again.’ I quit my job the next day because I knew she was right. I told my husband that I would send out resumes [for counseling positions] and also call places where I used to do readings. I filled up for three months of readings within a two-week period of time. And I did not get a single job offer. So, it was a very strange thing to see, but I really felt like I got my answer.

“And then all of a sudden, things started to roll, like, somebody came into the church wanting to write about me, and from that article, the Complete Idiot’s Guide people came to me and asked me to write a book. One thing led to another until I had this very wonderful career.”

When she was fifteen, my best friend Lizzi lost her mother to breast cancer. Her mom was diagnosed when Lizzi was twelve. In pictures of Lizzi’s bat-mitzvah, her mom sits in a chair, hoisted into the air by a crowd of guests.

“She looks scared,” I said, pointing to her mom’s deer-in-headlights expression.

Lizzi smiled. “She was worried that her wig was going to fall off.”

I stared harder at the picture.

Lizzi’s mom died before I met Lizzi. During my freshman year of college, Lizzi had been enlisted to help “handle” me and my “situation.” A year ahead of me, she was a resident assistant in another building.

During a psychology class-related extra credit project—monitoring brainwaves—doctors at the University of Pittsburgh had found a tumor on the right frontal lobe of my boyfriend Mark’s brain. When he left college in November to have a biopsy at home in New Jersey, I fell apart. I wasn’t sleeping. I wasn’t eating. I often locked myself in the bathroom and cried, so I wouldn’t disturb my roommate. On one occasion, I woke to discover that I had wet my bed, something I hadn’t done since I was three. I was eighteen years old at the time and full of hurt and shame.

One night, in the midst of my grief, Lizzi knocked on my door. She walked into my room and sat backwards in my desk chair, facing

me. “My mom died of a brain tumor,” she told me. “Her breast cancer metastasized to her brain.”

My eyes had filled with tears. “I’m so scared,” I said, vocalizing this for the first time. “Scared that he’s going to—”

“I know,” Lizzi said. “I know.”

She was the only one in the world who did.

“Infinite spirit, God of love and light, I would ask that Julie’s most high guides be here. I would ask that all that comes is healing, helpful, evidential, loving, and recognizable, proving the continuity of life, helping Julie on her path. I would ask that the master teachers, the master guides be with me. I ask the arch angel Gabriel be with me.”

This is how Rita begins each reading. It’s a prayer that she says mostly to herself, one that she created.

Rita provides three different kinds of readings: one is straight spirit communication (during which she’ll describe and speak with, say, your grandfather); one is spirit communication with a drawing (during which she’ll draw your grandfather as she sees him); and the other is what Rita calls a life reading. A life reading is similar to a psychic reading—a look into your life, past, present, and future—but as opposed to a psychic reading, during which the psychic reads from a person’s vibes, a life reading involves “connecting up.”

“In order to tap into the spirits, do you have to do something mentally?” I asked Rita. “For example, I’m sitting here with you now—are you picking up on anything?”

“No,” Rita said, “because I’m not focusing on it. In order to do that, I would say my prayer, go into a quiet place mentally, and then,” she whistles and motions with her hands, “go up.” Mediums must learn to tune out the spirits they see on a daily basis, otherwise they’ll go crazy, Rita said.

I nodded.

“There is a man around you that I’m seeing, though,” she said. “He’s not real tall, but he’s taller. Beautiful head of hair on him. I do feel a lot of congestion in the chest with him, so I’m feeling like he probably was a smoker. Okay? I’m feeling that he had a quick sense of humor. So if I were with him, we’d probably be bantering back and forth. He’s playful. As your eyes are blue with a little tinge of green in them, his

eyes look a little bit bluer than yours do. And I do feel like I want to go on the paternal side of the family, and I feel like I'm going straight up, so if it's not your grandfather, it's your great-grandfather. Okay?"

Okay. My paternal grandfather was still living, but nonetheless I felt shaken.

"And so that's how you would do it."

According to Rita, mediumship is about a three-way connection between the person, the spirit, and the medium. The spirit, in other words, has to feel comfortable communicating with Rita.

"Once, I brought a man's grandmother through, and he was thrilled. He came running up to me and said, 'I've waited fifty years for a message from my grandmother. Why do you think she came to you first?' I laughed and said, 'Your grandmother was Jewish.' And he said yes. And I said, 'Didn't much speak to people who weren't, would she?' And he said, 'No, she wouldn't.' And I said, 'That's why she came to me. I'm the first Jewish medium that you've ever been around.'"

Mediums are like extension cords.

"I tell my students that the most important thing to do is keep your ego out of it," Rita said. "When your ego is in it, you worry—am I gonna be right or wrong? When your ego is out of it, you're just getting the information and letting it flow through you. I use the analogy of being an extension cord. The extension cord is not glorious. Nobody's like, 'Wow, man, you're a really great extension cord; I could reach all the way to the coffee pot with this.' As mediums, we are the cord between the two worlds. We're giving those in spirit a voice to talk to their loved ones here. And most of the time it's pretty joyous."

About a year after Mark died, Lizzi made an appointment with a medium. She was visiting a friend in Rochester, New York, and they decided to make the trip to Lily Dale, a town notorious for its psychics and mediums.

Lizzi hoped that her mom would come through for her. She didn't, but a host of other relatives did. The medium also hinted at the death of Lizzi's grandmother, who indeed passed away one week later.

Someone else came through for Lizzi.

"I'm getting a younger gentleman," the medium told her. "He died before his time. He has beautiful brown hair," she continued. "Medium

height and build. He considers himself an intellectual. I'm getting something about teaching. If he hadn't died, he would have continued with his education; he would have taught people. He thinks he's pretty smart."

Lizzi laughed through her tears. "That sounds like Mark," she said.

"He wants to know about your writing," the medium said.

"No." Lizzi shook her head. "That wouldn't be me. That would be my friend."

"Well, he wants to know why her writing isn't out there yet. She's written something about him. He's very adamant about it." Her voice dropped an octave, and she became insistent. "She needs to do something with it, he's saying. She needs to do something with her talent. She needs to get that out there."

Lizzi nodded, stunned. In an autobiography workshop in college, I had written a sixty-page piece about my relationship with Mark, his cancer, and our break-up. During the final weeks of our senior year, I had left it on his doorstep. He had e-mailed me the following day, wanting to meet for coffee. We caught up, touched upon old hurts, and formally forgave each other. As our conversation drew to a close, he told me that the tumor was back.

Lizzi called me after her reading. We talked for twenty minutes or so until she said, hesitant, "Mark came through for me." I sat in silence as she recounted his message. I glanced at the cardboard box collecting dust on my bookshelf, the box that housed my most valued college writing.

A year and a half later, as I applied to creative writing MFA programs across the country, I used selections from my piece about Mark in my portfolio. His was the piece that got me in.

"The most important thing for me is that I always do this with the intent of healing," Rita said. "And that really is a crucial piece. This is not about how clever I am. It's about what I can do to help you."

At the First Spiritualist Church in Quincy that Sunday morning, a guest medium spoke about facing one's fears. Then Rita delivered a closing prayer and said, "Now, it's time for the portion of our service that makes Spiritualist churches so different from all other churches."

The readings.

The guest medium performed what Rita described to me as a “rapid-fire” reading, a quick reading for each person in the room, moving person-by-person, row-by-row, through the entire congregation.

“I’m getting a motherly vibration: schooling, learning. I see two gentlemen with golfers’ hats; they want you to look at things differently at work. I’m getting two ladies, sisters with the same brown hair; they’re very chatty and are showing me a broom; they want you to sweep up the past, out with the old.” And so on. Then she reached me.

“I’m seeing a woman on your mother’s side,” she told me. “She’s very proper and wearing a nice suit. She’s kind and warm, a good listener, like you in that way. You’re very alike. She’s saying that you have a hard time trusting. Is this correct?”

I nodded, the word *yes* trapped in my throat.

“She’s telling you to trust others and, more importantly, trust in yourself. She says you’re starting to get better at this, that you’re on the right track, but that it’s very important for you to keep doing this. Trust. She’s also showing me books and studying,” she said. “You’re going to get more into that. Okay, blessings of spirit be with you.”

She moved on to the woman sitting next to me, and, though I wasn’t sure who my woman in the suit was, I felt as though I’d been dunked into a pool of cold water.

When the service was over and I had taken advantage of the coffee and snacks, I said goodbye to Rita and walked through the stone garden, back down the hill to my car. I felt peaceful and at rest, understanding for perhaps the first time why so many people seek out and attend church. Or plug in an extension cord. They do it for this: a temporary solace, a momentary calm, a chance to peacefully co-exist, if only for an hour, a day, a week, or a month, not with our spirit loved ones, but with grief.