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PRIVATE
INVESTIGATIONS





PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS

—
MYSTERY WRITERS ON THE SECRETS,
RIDDLES, AND WONDERS OF THEIR LIVES

EDITED BY
VICTORIA ZACKHEIM


SEAL
NEW YORK

Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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CONTENTS

VICTORIA ZACKHEIM	INTRODUCTION: SOLVING THE MYSTERY	000
HALLIE EPHRON	GHOSTED	000
JEFFERY DEAVER	PLOT TWISTS: THIS WRITER'S LIFE	000
SULARI GENTILL	AN EXTRA CHILD	000
CARA BLACK	FIELD NOTES À LA MAIGRET FROM PARIS	000
CONNIE MAY FOWLER	LYDIA AND JACK	000
MARTIN LIMÓN	THE LAND OF THE MORNING CALM (AND OTHER MILITARY MYSTERIES)	000
WILLIAM KENT KRUEGER	THE CLAY THAT WE SHAPE	000
AUSMA ZEHAANAT KHAN	ORIGINS AND DESTINATIONS	000

Contents

KRISTEN LEPIONKA	A TRICK OF THE LIGHT	000
LYNN CAHOON	THE MYSTERY OF DECEPTION	000
RHYS BOWEN	THE LONG SHADOW OF WAR	000
RACHEL HOWZELL HALL	I DON'T KNOW THIS WORD	000
STEPH CHA	THE BEAMS KEEP FALLING	000
JACQUELINE WINSPEAR	WRITING ABOUT WAR	000
TASHA ALEXANDER	CAN WE LIVE WITHOUT MYSTERY?	000
CAROLE NELSON DOUGLAS	GODFATHERS, NANCY DREW, AND CATS	000
CAROLINE LEAVITT	THE MYSTERY OF MY LOST VOICE	000
CHARLES TODD	REMEMBERING THE PAST	000
ROBERT DUGONI	NUNS, MAGIC, AND STEVEN KING	000
ANNE PERRY	I WANT TO BE A MAGICIAN	000

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for your unceasing encouragement*



INTRODUCTION: SOLVING THE MYSTERY

– *Victoria Zackheim* –

WHEN IT WAS SUGGESTED THAT I CONSIDER A COLLECTION of essays written by mystery writers revealing the mysteries of their lives, I couldn't help but think of my own. Were the life-changing mysteries that had shaped my life shared by the twenty gifted writers in this collection? I quickly discovered that all of us view *mystery* in very different and personal ways.

The mysteries we discover in the course of everyday living are real, imagined, dreamed, even hoped for, feared, and anticipated. A mystery can present itself as an enigma, a solution, a challenge, a surprise. A thing of despair—or something magical. Falling in love—or out of love. Gaining stature and reputation or losing respect. Being innocent—and then not. Marriage and

INTRODUCTION: SOLVING THE MYSTERY

divorce, illness and death, the rise and fall of friendships. The expected and the serendipitous. Situations that hurt us and thrill us.

In these stories, you are invited into the private lives of gifted writers, most of them New York Times and international best sellers. You may be a fan, or you may be reading their work for the first time. Their stories, all true, cover the breadth of life experiences, from introspective to mystical, from laugh-out-loud funny to *noir*. Mysteries, when presented from our very personal perspectives—and all of these certainly are—come in all forms.

So what are the secrets, riddles, and wonders of our lives? Do we focus on our joy or grief, highs or lows, something meticulously defined or so amorphous as to seem impossible to fathom? Whatever form these mysteries take, all of us have had our lives shaped by them. They affect who we are and how we live, love, think . . . behave. We can celebrate those riddles, wonders, and secrets, or we can fear them. Perhaps it's because everything we touch, everything that touches us, has the potential to be a mystery. I felt this when I held my children for the first time. And when I accompanied my daughter to a medical examination and heard the twin heartbeats of my first grandchildren, causing my knees to buckle so that I had to grip the bed rail to stop myself from falling. And when I look into the faces of my son's children and imagine their futures, their dreams.

There are so many mysteries around us. I remember with unusual clarity that moment in 1977 when I saw my father only minutes after his death. He was ten years younger than I am today. Gone too soon, yet his body seemed so peaceful, finally

Victoria Zackheim

pain-free. I muttered, “This is not my father,” which caused a bit of alarm for my mother and the nurse. I tried to explain that I was looking at the shell that had housed his beautiful spirit but that his curiosity about the world around him and his quick sense of humor felt very much alive. This was my first close experience with death, and it left me confused, mystified. If a mystery is an enigma that we must unravel, then I was confronting a mystery.

That same sense returned while I was sitting at my mother’s bedside. When she took her last breath, I knew that she was finally at peace. Nearly ninety, she had become increasingly angry that her last years were so difficult. An artist who could no longer paint, a political activist whose voice had been stilled, she felt locked within the walls of her home. Again, I struggled with the *Why?* of it. My complicated, brilliant mother. Who she was will always remain a mystery in my life.

Mysteries are found in the stories of our lives, some of them challenging believability. Hallie Ephron visits a spiritualist in the hope of understanding her friend’s claims to have spoken with her murdered brother, while Sulari Gentill discovers an uncle whose existence was kept a secret . . . until she stumbles upon a family photograph.

We are confronted with mysteries when health is in question. I don’t exercise nearly enough, and one of my mysteries is how and why I remain upright and relatively healthy! Rachel Howzell Hall was living her life balancing writing, family, and career until a new word joined her lexicon: cancer. Caroline Leavitt lost her voice, found no answers from medical specialists, and set out to solve this mystery on her own.

INTRODUCTION: SOLVING THE MYSTERY

Many authors pull from their very personal experiences when mapping out the plots of their novels. Connie May Fowler recalls her abuse at the hands of her mother, the social pressures she felt as a childless woman, and a recent illness that was frightening yet reminded her of the kindness of strangers. William Kent Krueger shares how his childhood was defined by the mysteries of his mother's mental illness—the same woman who became the protagonist of one of his novels.

Life teaches us such varied lessons, some of which are cloaked in mystery, such as our quest for truth and how we respond to love and loss. As different as the stories in this collection are, you will discover similarities of the human spirit. For example, similar themes draw us into the varied and always difficult elements of war: survival, challenge, hardship, discovery. How are we affected by war? Do we honor those who fought to defend our rights? Our liberties? Martin Limón reveals the challenges of a young American soldier dropped into the foreign and sometimes mysterious culture of Korea.

There are mysteries that we discover as we write or as we adjust to a new place in the world. Ausma Zehanat Khan, an international human rights attorney, explores the mystery of her own origins, while Cara Black's Paris is so much a part of her being that Inspector Maigret seems to be evident everywhere she goes.

As you read these stories—I resist calling them essays, although that is what they are, because that label suggests something impersonal, perhaps even cold, whereas these narratives are rich with warmth and intimacy, sharing and trust—you will hear each author's voice, share each story, and in many



Victoria Zackheim

ways feel as if that author is seated beside you and speaking directly to you.

What are *your* personal mysteries? What have you seen, survived, and experienced that has made you who you are today? When you read these stories, you might find yourself nodding, smiling, perhaps discovering tears in your eyes, certainly identifying with so much that the twenty authors share with you. It is my hope that you find elements of yourself and your life in some of these stories and that what you find, what you discover, leads you to a greater understanding of who you are and how important you are—an essential thread in this mysterious tapestry we call life.



GHOSTED

- *Hallie Ephron* -

IT WAS DUSK TWENTY YEARS AGO, AND I WAS DRIVING THE I-93 North through Boston and beyond, looking for the exit marked MYSTIC AVENUE. This seemed prophetic since I was on my way to a meeting of Spiritualists. No, I'm not into parapsychology or the occult, and up to that point in my life I'd been secure in the belief that there is no afterlife. You live, you die; end of story. If something in my house goes bump in the night, I set mousetraps. But my struggle to understand what was happening to my friend Laura (not her real name) had drawn me to Medford to mingle with a group who claimed to be able to talk to ghosts.

If it had been anyone but Laura, I'd have written her off as a nutcase. A single mom and successful real estate agent, she was smart, grounded, endowed with a wonderfully wry sense of humor and a healthy distrust of artifice and flimflam. We'd

GHOSTED

been friends since high school, and I'd never known her to be the slightest bit unhinged. At least not until her brother Josh was murdered.

Laura and Josh had been business partners. They worked together so closely that Laura often felt as if she could communicate telepathically with him across the glass partition that separated their desks. The client who shot Josh arrived at their office first thing that morning, gunning for Laura. He was convinced that she'd cheated him. But Laura got to work late, and by the time she arrived the building was surrounded by police cruisers, its entrance was blocked by crime-scene tape, and an ambulance with its rear doors flung open was backed up to the front door.

Laura was wracked with grief and guilt. Josh had been her best friend as well as her younger brother. The killer had been her client, not Josh's. She tortured herself with what might have happened if she'd gotten to work on time. Maybe she could have placated the killer. Talked him down. At the very least, she would have been the victim, and Josh would still be alive.

Josh's killer escaped, and in the weeks after the murder, Laura grew more and more terrified to leave her house. She felt safe in her car, a big old Cadillac she'd inherited from her mother. It had power windows, power door locks, and a car phone. But simple acts like walking out her front door to pick up the newspaper or crossing a parking lot from her car to a supermarket entrance triggered panic attacks. Even at home, where at least she felt safe, she was in constant, unbearable pain. "Like when you hurt yourself," she told me, "and the hurt is so bad that you have to cry. It's as if [the killer] blew a hole in my body, too, a

Hallie Ephron

gaping wound that everything I see, everything I do, causes to ache. Only sleep numbs the pain.”

Laura became a virtual recluse, barely able to get to her appointments with her therapist, who diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder and prescribed medication for anxiety and depression.

My understanding of what happened next comes from long conversations that Laura and I shared over the months that followed. She'd talk. I'd listen and record her words, transcribing them later and sending her a copy with the idea that her experiences might become the basis for a book we'd write together about what it's like to lose a loved one to homicide.

Here's how Laura described Josh's first visit:

Early one morning, I'm lying in bed, fully awake. I'm looking out the window when something makes me look up at the ceiling. Josh is here, floating right above me. I feel as if my body isn't mine. For a while I just stare up at him, cemented in place, the whole of my being focused on his presence an arm's length away.

I can't communicate with him at first. He isn't talking to me. He's just here. I want so badly to communicate with him, but it's hard. In my mind I keep saying, "Tell me how to do this." No response. I beg for a sign that he can hear me. For what seems like a very long time I lie immobilized, looking at him. Finally I hear "Laura, you always knew what was on my mind. Just do it!" And all of a sudden the floodgates open. I can hear him, and I can talk to him.

GHOSTED

What he says is very simple. He says that I can trust Uncle Albert. He also tells me that my Aunt Irene is with him. Aunt Irene has been dead for about five years. All I can do is nod to let him know I hear and understand. It feels as if he's draining me, drawing off my will and strength.

Then, before I know it, he's gone. It's a cool morning, and I'm under the blankets, sweating. All the energy has been sucked out of me to make room for accepting Josh. When I get out of bed my legs are trembling. The physical sensation lasts most of the morning.

I know this sounds like a scene out of a movie or TV show—*Truly Madly Deeply*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Ghost*, *Sherlock*, or *The Kominsky Method*, to name a few. But to Laura, this was real. Josh visited her many more times. Often when she was in her bedroom. Sometimes in her car. Once while she was walking on a beach. The “visitations,” as she called them, were tiring but never as intense and draining as the first time. Soon she was looking forward to them. Only her therapist knew.

A turning point came on a Sunday morning about six months after the murder.

I am reading the Sunday *New York Times* in my living room. All of a sudden Josh is here with me. Aunt Irene is with him. I try to stand, a skeptic, outside of myself. Wondering. Doubting. Are they really here? Or is this my imagination?

Laura talked to them for a long time. At one point Josh suggested that she write down the things he was telling her. She

Hallie Ephron

was afraid to leave the room, afraid that they'd vanish while she was off fetching something to write on. But she went to her office, and when she came back with a yellow legal pad, Aunt Irene and Josh were still there.

A short time later, as Laura was writing what Josh was telling her, she realized that her fifteen-year-old son, Brian, was standing in the doorway. She had no idea how long he'd been there and what he'd heard. He asked her what was going on.

I ask him if he sees anything in the living room out of the ordinary. He looks around and obviously sees nothing. I decide to tell him. I say that Uncle Josh is sitting in the red chair. Aunt Irene is in the rocker. He stares at me for a moment, then sits down next to me on the couch. He stays there for another fifteen or twenty minutes. I'm interpreting Josh and Aunt Irene to Brian because Brian can't see or hear them..

By the time Josh and Aunt Irene left, floating out the living room window, Laura had been with them for nearly an hour. It was only then that Laura registered the fear and confusion in Brian's eyes. He'd lost his favorite uncle, the man who had filled the hole left in his life after Laura split up with his father, and now it must have seemed as if his mother were losing her mind.

Listening to Laura, I was shaken, too. Nothing in my own experience prepared me to make sense of hers. She was talking to a ghost yet describing the conversations so matter-of-factly that she might have been talking about conversations with the mailman.

GHOSTED

There are no ghosts, I reminded myself. These had to be waking dreams, hallucinations cooked up by grief, abetted, perhaps, by lack of sleep and the medications she was taking. But she was so convinced and so convincing that, for the first time in my life, I was open, if just barely, to the possibility that Josh's restless soul really was reaching out to her.

I hoped that the Spiritualists' meeting would give me insights, if not answers.

Spiritualism goes back to the mid-1800s, and one of its adherents was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of rationalist detective Sherlock Holmes. Doyle's friend, the great magician Harry Houdini, spent decades debunking psychics and mediums. Those who practice Spiritualism today believe that some people can act as channels through which spirits can communicate with the living. The term *Spiritualism* conjures images of musty Victorian houses with darkened rooms, windows shrouded with heavy drapes, candles flickering, people gathered around a table and holding hands as they summon the spirits of the dead. Cue spooky music.

The setting for this Spiritualist meeting was a fifth-floor apartment in an undistinguished modern brick building. I parked, rode up in the elevator, and was greeted at the door with a warm hug by the host, Reverend Ida. She was an older woman, generously proportioned, wearing a flowing coppery caftan with amber beads and earrings that seemed to glow. We'd talked on the phone earlier, so I knew that I'd have to wait until the second half of the meeting to learn about mediumship. First there'd be a psychic healing.

Hallie Ephron

Reverend Ida ushered me into the living room, where about a dozen others were already waiting. Folding chairs were set up in a circle around a mirrored coffee table topped with porcelain angels, votive candles, and lava lamps. The air was heavy with incense. I overheard one of the men saying, "Some people. They have rocks in their heads and don't see the truth of healing, the power of the mind." He punctuated the thought with a clenched fist. I made my way to the opposite end of the room, afraid that if he were at all prescient, he'd take one look at me and see how much uncertainty and doubt was knocking around inside me.

We all took our seats and introduced ourselves. The people seemed utterly ordinary. There was a librarian. A nurse. An insurance agent. A retired attorney. Most of them came to these monthly meetings regularly.

Reverend Ida lit the candles, turned on the lava lamps, and lowered the overhead lights. We held hands and sat in silence for a few minutes as she began to chant. The words were about love and the spirit, so simple and repetitive that soon I was able to join in. Then she asked us to form a "healing circle" around Jeanine, a slender, pale woman about my age who was wearing dark jogger pants, a zippered sweatshirt, and a rust-colored turban. She sat slumped in her chair, her eyes rimmed with dark circles, her long fingers with stubby painted nails knitted together in her lap. Jeanine asked us to please be gentle since she was "wired." She showed us a tube that snaked out from beneath her loose green sweatshirt and explained that this was how she was getting her regular doses of chemo.

GHOSTED

Reverend Ida instructed each of us to close our eyes and concentrate on sending healing thoughts and energy to Jeanine. Feeling very self-conscious, I kept my eyes open a slit. Everyone else stood with their eyes closed, their hands hovering over Jeanine's head or touching her back or shoulders. I reached out and let my hand rest lightly on her arm, trying to smother my inner skeptic.

This went on for about ten minutes, but it seemed much longer. When it was over, spots of pink had appeared on Jeanine's cheeks, and she was in tears. She thanked us. There were murmurs all around of "God bless you."

Several people commented on the breeze they'd felt during the healing circle. It was more than a breeze, one woman remarked. More like little tornados and whirlwinds whipping around the room. Reverend Ida said those were spirits. Several spirits, in fact. Others said they'd felt a tingle of electricity in the air. It was so strong, one woman said, that she was nearly swept off her feet.

"If you don't feel a healing tonight," Reverend Ida said, "you're never going to feel one."

I nodded and smiled, but I'd felt no breeze and not the tiniest tingle of electricity. All I'd felt was sympathy for this poor cancer patient and pressure to say that I sensed something that I did not.

But psychic healing wasn't what I'd come for, so I was glad when Reverend Ida eased the group into a discussion of the "astral plane," an intermediate world between heaven and earth where disembodied souls hang out. She explained that the liv-

Hallie Ephron

ing can travel there in dreams, during deep meditation, or even while conscious. *Like Laura*, I thought. Tonight, Reverend Ida promised, she'd guide us there.

One woman wanted to know if people like Jeffrey Dahmer would be there, too. No, Reverend Ida assured her, because he was evil. Not even, the woman pressed, if Dahmer's motives were pure? What if he truly he believed what he'd done had been done for a good reason? Not even then was the answer.

Reverend Ida turned off the lights and left only a single votive candle lit. The flame and its reflection in the coffee table's mirrored top cast an eerie circle of light on the ceiling. "If you open yourself up to it and create a circle of light," Reverend Ida said, "the spirits will step into it."

The woman who was worried about Jeffrey Dahmer had another question. What if she opened herself up to the spirits, and someone she didn't much like when they were alive visited her? A perfectly reasonable question, in my opinion. Reverend Ida dismissed the concern. Another woman said she talked to her dead grandfather all the time in her dreams, and he was a whole lot nicer than he'd been when he was alive.

Dreaming that you talk to your dead grandfather was one thing. I looked around the circle and wondered if any of these people had experienced anything even close to what was happening to Laura.

The room fell silent as Reverend Ida turned the music back on and led us through a guided meditation. It began "Close your eyes and envision in your hands a flower. Any flower. Feel it. Look into it. Then look up and see a beautiful field. A brook.

GHOSTED

Deer and antelope frolicking on the other side. Go stand in the brook. Feel all of your cares and anxieties washed away. A beautiful monk comes toward you with a basket of flowers.”

This went on. And on. It was warm in the room, and soon a man across the circle from me was softly snoring. A few minutes later Reverend Ida told us there was ectoplasm and electricity in the air. She said we should open ourselves up. Not be afraid. “We are safe within the circle of light.” Then she summoned spirits to step into the light and announced, “The meeting is yours.”

After a long silence, people on all sides started to talk. They brought images to one another. A silver teapot. A hairbrush. A single pearl. A man with a pick. Sometimes there was a name with the image, sometimes only an initial. There were messages, too, like “P says, do what you have to do.” Or “J wants you to follow your heart.” One woman brought the woman sitting next to her muffins with needles sticking out of them. No message, but she wondered, had someone close to her died who was into cooking and sewing?

Reverend Ida cautioned that the symbols were not to be taken literally. The person receiving the message would give it meaning. And, she said, she’d received a message for me.

The circle fell silent as she asked me if I knew a man who’d been crushed to death. Perhaps someone who’d fallen to his death? Because she saw concrete, slabs of concrete. “He’s here, telling me . . . the message is . . .” She strained, listening, then lowered her voice. “I’m feeling pressure from two sides, but I will be able to reconcile them and stand up straight between them, on my own.”

Hallie Ephron

Everyone looked at me expectantly. I knew no one who'd been crushed to death, not literally. But people who'd been conflicted? Pressured in opposite directions? You could say that about Laura's brother Josh, needing to reach out to Laura but realizing it wasn't healthy for her to keep taking him in. It could have described me at that moment, feeling as if I should see meaning where I found none. In fact, that description—pressured from two sides—could be forced to fit just about anyone at any time, dead or alive.

Then Reverend Ida brought me a name. *Victoria*. It meant nothing to me, amazingly, since mine is a generation of Vickys and Susans and Nancys. Almost as an afterthought, she added, "And there's a message from Mom or Mommy. She says hello." A murmur of approval swept through the circle.

I almost laughed because it seemed so unlikely. My mother, a Hollywood screenwriter and a confirmed atheist, would have been appalled to have found herself waiting around for years on the astral plane to deliver a line as prosaic as *Hello*.

Finally, I was the only one in the group who hadn't brought a symbol or message into the circle. I apologized, saying I was new at this. But I thanked everyone and assured them that I felt light, luminous light. And gratitude for being able to bear witness. I was relieved when that seemed to be enough.

As the meeting broke up, I realized how ebullient they all were, their own spirits genuinely uplifted by the evening's experiences. Reverend Ida urged me to come back. I thanked her and said I would, though I knew I would not. She told me not to be discouraged, that I'd get the hang of it. And I suspected that was all too true, because how many meetings like this could