

## SECOND SIGHT

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When my mother saw a vision of Henry Ford standing next to his model T outside our house in England in 1960 she announced to us all that it was a 'sign.' My dad, she predicted, would definitely get the job he'd applied for when the new Ford Motor plant opened the following month.

'Did Mr Ford *do* anything?' I asked.

Had the ghost of Henry Ford raised his hat, Southern style, I wondered? Or had he looked round in amazement when he saw he'd been beamed down to Palatine Road, Merseyside, a dockland suburb in the north of England still struggling to recover from the effects of the Second World War?

'They don't *do* anything,' my mother answered hauling a dripping sheet through the electric mangle of her new washing machine. 'Sometimes it's a warning; sometimes it's to reassure people.'

My father did get a new job and my mother was in no doubt that it was through the ghostly intervention of Henry Ford.

I didn't talk much about 'them' at my school. When the English teacher asked the class to write an essay on our first memory, I invented something. I wasn't game to write about my childhood visits to the Spiritualist Church with my grandmother, Enid. She received messages from 'the other side' using her spirit-contact name: Dorothea and passed them on to the congregation. She and her friend Nellie also had a side-line in tea-leaf reading, at a shilling a cup.

'That child's an old soul; she's got second sight,' Nellie commented once when my mother collected me from my grandmother's house.

Mum grabbed my hand. 'Don't take her to that place, Mum, it gives her bad dreams,' she said crossly.

It was true I had very bad dreams after being at the Spiritualist church. There was also a door in our draughty house which opened mysteriously on its own. It used to give me the creeps. However my mother was partly to blame for my low-grade night terrors. She too believed she had the gift of second sight, though she refused to go to the Spiritualist church. She'd told me many times how she'd 'seen' a woman in

## SECOND SIGHT

an old fashioned nurse's uniform standing at the top of the stairs shortly before I was born.

'I was in labour with you and totally alone. We had no phone and I couldn't get any help. Your Dad was in the pub, *as usual*, and I looked up the stairs and there she was: dressed like Florence Nightingale. She'd come to reassure me and I knew then that I'd be alright.'

She always related this story with total conviction and the recount never failed to give me goose bumps—especially as my bedroom was next to the stairs. In fact she hadn't been alone; a neighbour had called in, gone to the corner shop and phoned for an ambulance. My mother felt vindicated when she another neighbour told her that a nurse had once lived in the house which was built in the 1880's. I was ten when she discovered this and mentioned it to me. My original dread of seeing the ghostly nurse, which had morphed into a vague feeling of unease, returned to haunt me in my sleep.

One night I dreamed that I was Florence Nightingale, someone blew out my lamp and I was alone in the darkness with groaning soldiers all around me, calling out for help. After I told my mother about my dream she kept quiet about 'sightings' and 'the other side' for a while.

My father who was a tradesman, employed now by the Ford Motor Company (thanks to Henry's ghost) was luckier than most of the men in Palatine Road. They worked in labouring jobs at the docks. Being a Docker was very dangerous work, especially in the medieval twilight of an English winter. The decks of the ships were icy and as the vessels had to have a quick 'turn' to save money for the owners, the men worked long shifts often in the dark. The wives were 'homemakers,' a laughable expression for the slavery involved in cleaning an old terraced house with no bathroom or running hot water, an outside lavatory and rising damp.

It wasn't long though, before my mother was dabbling in the dark arts again.

'I heard a knock on the door last night,' she announced one morning at breakfast.

'Who was it?' my younger brother asked stuffing his face with porridge; the real sort made with oats. It was thick enough to use as wallpaper paste.

## SECOND SIGHT

‘It was a warning,’ she said wiping a dish cloth absently over my brother’s protesting face. ‘There’s going to be an accident.’

An accident! Well it would hardly be from a motor vehicle, I thought. Only a few of the Ford’s workers in our run-down suburb owned a car. Several of them ran consortiums, assembling cars in their tiny back yards using parts they’d stolen over many months from the factory. Heaven knows how they got the wheels out of the factory gates, or the finished cars out of the back yards.

Perhaps that was the message the ghost of Henry Ford had been trying to get across! He could see what was going on from ‘the other side’ and he’d beamed down to alert Ford’s Plant managers about the thefts.

‘It will probably be at the docks,’ my mother said calmly.

‘What will?’

‘The accident,’ she answered and stared beyond me, maybe as far as...the ‘other side.’

I was older now and more cynical. There were always accidents at the docks; they were dangerous places. The suburb was full of injured men with broken arms and legs and bandaged heads. I’d heard her discussing the mystery ‘knockings’ with my aunt over the years but I’d never asked her about them because I didn’t want to be frightened. However, my new sceptical self invited her to elaborate.

She took a deep breath.

‘*Well*, I’m woken up by someone banging on our front door,’ my mother began. ‘I get up, look out of the window and there’s no one there, the street’s deserted. Then a couple of days later I hear of a death.’

‘Is that it?’

I tried to act nonchalant—there must be a logical explanation! Our house had an alley down the side and it wasn’t far from a pub called ‘The Brass Monkey.’ We often heard drunks going home—one of them might have knocked on our front door by mistake and then ambled off down the alley. By the time my mother got to the window, they’d have gone. When I said this she said enigmatically, ‘wait and see.’

## SECOND SIGHT

Two nights later loud, crazy knocking on our neighbour's door woke us all up. It wasn't a ghost or a drunk, but a teenage girl. She was screaming as she hit the door with her fists.

'Uncle George! Uncle George! Help! Help! My Dad's dead!'

Our little family huddled round the front bedroom window looking down into the street. It was winter and so cold that you could touch the ice on the inside of the glass. A shaft of light from the street lamp illuminated our neighbour's niece, Bridget who lived up the road. Her dark hair was tousled and unkempt as she thumped and yelled, distraught with grief. It was snowing quite hard but she was only wearing her bedroom slippers and a pink dressing gown. Her Uncle George flung open the door and she fell into his arms. He pulled her into the house, slammed the door shut and silence descended with the snow flakes.

'Show's over,' Dad said turning round. 'I'm going back to bed.'

I knew I wouldn't sleep. After my father and brother had gone to bed, I followed my mother downstairs. She made some cocoa and we sat at the kitchen table drinking it, clutching our hands round the mugs to keep them warm. On the other side of the wall we could hear sobbing. My mother sipped her cocoa contemplatively.

'So, it was Bridget's Dad I got the message about,' she nodded. 'Poor man I had a dream just before the knocking woke me up. A man was calling up to me from the bottom of a deep hole, begging me to help him.'

I shivered and goose bumps broke out all over me. Mum poured hot water into my stone hot water bottle and as I took she said, 'Get back to bed, try not to think about it.'

As if...! I hugged the clunky hot water bottle and attempted to blot out Bridget's terrified voice: '*Me Dad's dead! Me Dad's dead! Uncle George, me Dad's dead.*'

A few days later I read a report about the accident in the local paper *The Liverpool Echo* and a chill ran down my spine. Bridget's Dad had slipped on the icy deck of the ship he was unloading. He'd fallen into the hold and been killed instantly. '*Mr O'Rourke leaves a wife and two children aged 15 and 12,*' the bald statement in

## SECOND SIGHT

the paper hardly described the terrible drama of that night. My mother took the newspaper from me, turned to the Obituaries page and sighed.

‘The funeral’s on Friday. They’ll be having fish afterwards, being Catholics. So Bridget’s 15 is she? Same age as you,’ she remarked.

She didn’t mention the psychic knocking again for a while. I think her accurate powers of clairvoyance had rattled even her this time.

When I came to live Australia many years later, I wanted to live in a brand new house with no ghosts at the top of the stairs or banging on the front door. When a neighbour told me that our houses had been built on an Aboriginal gravesite, I have to admit I felt a bit edgy.

Then our new front door bell developed a creepy habit. Sometimes it rang in the middle of the night. Like the old days in Palatine Road, there was no one there when I looked out of the window or opened the door. There was an explanation of course, the bell picked up the same radio frequency as passing cars, though sometimes I hadn’t heard a car go by when it rang.

‘I thought I’d fixed this,’ my husband said the third time it happened. ‘I’ll move the receiver to a different place again. There’s nothing spooky going on,’ he reassured me with a smile. He knew all about the women in my family.

I have never been to the Mind Body Spirit Festival in Sydney; in fact I avoid it. I’ve had enough of ‘the other side’, second sight and clairvoyance, to last me a lifetime. However, I went for the first time this year to help my friend Kathryn. Her husband had died suddenly when she’d been out and she was desperate to have a ‘reading’. She clung to a shred of hope that he was still around somewhere in the ether trying to say goodbye to her.

The Exhibition Centre at Olympic Park was heaving with people when we got there. The atmosphere was heavy with the scent of healing oils and somewhere I could hear a group settling down for a long drawn out ‘Ommmm...’ The thought of hundreds of people like my mother and grandmother in one place was daunting.

## SECOND SIGHT

There were long queues at the all the booths so we moved to a quieter part away from the central area.

A small young woman with funky dyed auburn hair called out to us:

‘Hi there! Would you like a reading ladies? I’m Bethany.’

She looked about twenty years old. Her face was pierced all over—metal rings in her eyebrows and a stud in her nose and beneath her bottom lip. It was a far cry from my grandmother and her alter ego Dorothea. It crossed my mind that Bethany was doing ‘readings’ instead of waitressing somewhere. It paid much better.

‘You go first, see if she’s any good,’ Kathryn whispered to me.

I sat down in a rickety cane chair opposite Bethany. She took my hand and looked up quickly. Her deep set green eyes met mine. She tipped her head sideways as if taking the measure of me.

‘I see a strong line of intuition;’ she traced a semi-circle from below my little finger to the edge of my right hand. ‘You’re psychic. You *see* people don’t you?’ she said looking up at me.

I was startled. How on earth did she know? Maybe she was genuinely clairvoyant?

‘Sometimes,’ I admitted reluctantly.

‘Why aren’t you using your gift?’ she asked, with a hint of accusation.

‘Well it’s a bit...well to be honest, I don’t really want to go down that path.’

‘You can’t escape it, you know,’ Bethany admonished. ‘You’re one of us, don’t block it.’

I sighed and turned to my friend Kathryn who hadn’t a clue what we were talking about.

‘She’s okay,’ I told her. ‘Take my place.’

When Kathryn sat down, I shivered when I ‘saw’ her dead husband standing beside her. He looked very sad. And there was my grandmother smiling at me from behind Bethany’s chair. *Two* people from ‘the other side,’ my mother would be quite jealous but I’d never tell her. Bethany was right, I *had* ‘seen’ people over the years, but I’d told them to push off.

## SECOND SIGHT

The clairvoyant looked up at me and nodded as she cradled Kathryn's hand in hers. So, she'd discovered my secret—I should never have come. I blinked and when I looked again, the phantoms had disappeared—or maybe I'd just imagined them.

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