

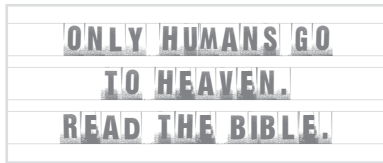
they walk among us

Embrace Your Gifts

A church sign from Lady of All Saints Catholic Church reads:



The First Presbyterian Church across the street countered that message by posting:



“YOU SEEM to be a magnet for really bizarre shit,” my friend Steve Cochran said during the commercial break of his radio show. He was interviewing me for my first book, *Stay Tuned*.

“I like to think of it as being a gatherer of information concerning paranormal or metaphysical circumstances that many consider to be a coincidence,” I said. “But *crazy shit* works too.”

“You’re like “The *Medium* Whisperer,”” he said.

He was kind of right. Total strangers now felt safe sharing their “I See Dead People” stories with me for some reason.

“So do you think it happens more often to you because you’ve done all these interviews with mediums and gurus? Or does it happen to *everyone*, and you’re just more aware of it?” he asked.

“I think it’s a little of both,” I said.

“JENNY, IS that you?” the man said. I was standing on Michigan Avenue just *staring* at a person who looked vaguely familiar, hoping a lightbulb would go off.

College? No. . . . High school gym class? Nahh. . . . One night stand? Oh dear God!

“Yes?” I said, still not placing him.

“It’s James,” he said, like I knew only one James in the world.

James . . . James . . . James . . . J—oh, JAMES!

This wasn’t just *any* James. This was the James who stopped me in my tracks in the fourth grade. The guy who made my stomach “flip” with a simple smile. The jock who was good at everything and dated the cheerleader. *That* James.

“Oh my GOD!” I yelled. “How are you?”

“Great! Jesus, it’s been what, twenty years at least?”

We hadn’t seen each other since high school, and now we were standing on the Magnificent Mile debating where we should catch up over a panini.

“So I HEAR you were a reporter on television?” he said, looking over the menu.

“Yeah. I quit that job after a few years, when I got sick of the negativity in the newsroom.”

We filled each other in on the basics—he’s married with two kids and lives on the East Coast. Works in technologies or some career with computers. I’m married with one kid, I explained, and live in the Chicago area. I mostly write these days.

"I was so sorry to hear about your dad," he said. "My parents sent me some articles when he died. He was so young."

"Fifty-six," I said.

"Didn't you write a book? I thought I remembered my parents saying something about that."

"Yeah."

"That is so amazing. You are an *author*," he gushed.

Everyone seems to think that once you write a book, you're either some sort of expert or you're rich.

Ha!

"There are days when I wonder if leaving my broadcasting gig was the right thing to do," I said. "I was making great money. Had health insurance. But I was miserable. I just hated reporting on tragedies and felt there was more out there for me, you know?"

"Yeah, I definitely get that," James said, taking a sip of his martini. "But things are going well for you now, right?"

"Of course!" I said. But that was only partially true. I was happy not working in the news business and doing my writing, but as a freelancer, I never knew where my next paycheck was coming from. I was getting tired of the panic that came with being self-employed.

"How did you get the courage to quit?" James asked.

I always struggle with this answer because it sounds so insane. "I sort of went on a quest and interviewed a bunch of mediums and psychics after my dad died, and I decided that life was too short to be miserable."

"Really?" James started chewing on one of his olives.

"Yeah. One of mediums was right here in Chicago, and she started telling me things that only my dad knew."

"And you believed her?" He was understandably skeptical.

"I never would have believed any of this if I hadn't experienced it for myself," I said. "I didn't give her my last name before I went in

because I didn't want her to Google me, and she relayed an exact conversation that I had had with my dad when he was alive. Nobody was there for that conversation except myself and my dead father, so I don't know how she could have gotten the information."

James seemed interested. "You're a journalist. You probably know when you're being bullshitted, right?"

"I'd like to think so, yes."

We sat there for a moment. James ordered another drink. He was on his third, and we'd only been there for about forty-five minutes.

"I've met a lot of people who have *gifts* most people don't truly accept or understand," I said. "I'm just starting to think that maybe we don't have all the answers yet. So I keep asking questions."

Part of me felt like I was sixteen years old again, worried that the most popular boy at school wouldn't invite me to the keg party. What if James thought I'd totally lost my mind? But then I noticed something "click," as if it were now safe to share what he was about to say.

"You know, I don't really talk about this much, but I've had some experiences," he said.

"Experiences?"

"Well, for me, it's always been with colors. I see colors around people," he said, almost whispering.

"You mean auras?" I asked.

"Some people call it that, yeah. It's really helped me, especially in business."

Oh my God! The Homecoming King sees auras?!

He sipped his cocktail to see how I would react to what he was telling me.

"Go on," I smiled.

"If someone has brown or grey energy, I won't work with them," he said. "Purple, green, or yellow, then it's a done deal. My closest friends have violet energy."

James was very successful. Whatever he did with technologies had gotten him a very high title within his company.

“How long have you been able to see colors and energy?” I asked.

“Since I was about eight,” he said, in a matter-of-fact tone.

No shit?!

“Everything is energy, so everything has a color. Even the trucks on the street,” he said, pointing to a delivery van outside.

“That is so incredible. Do you know that people spend decades taking classes and meditating in hopes of being able to do what you can do naturally?”

I'd been *questing* myself for several years, interviewing every *woo-woo* author I could get my hands on—trying yoga, energy work, and intuition workshops. I'd been to drum circles, sweat lodges, spirituality conferences, even angel seminars. And after all that, I wasn't seeing any fucking colors, okay? I was just exhausted!

James took a big sip of his drink.

“I interviewed a psychic who drank a twelve pack a day,” I said, trying to lighten the mood. “She told me it was to help quiet her gift because sometimes she didn't want to deal with it.”

James let out a nervous laugh. He could sense my concern with his mid-day boozing.

“I'm finding out that there are a lot more people out there like you than you'd think,” I said, trying to let him know that this “seeing energy stuff” was not a curse. “It's an incredible thing to be able to do what you do.”

James just stared at me. I wondered what he saw.

“Do you see any colors around *me*?” I asked.

“Yes. You've got yellow coming from all sides,” he said without hesitation, as if he was giving me the weather forecast.

Yellow? Is that good?

“But there's a slight sadness in your eyes,” he said. “They're grey.”

I started to panic that James could read my thoughts, too. If he

could see auras, then maybe he could sense that I was scared about my career? I did my best to look away and not make eye contact. Feeling my discomfort, he quickly changed the subject.

“When you were on stage in high school, you were bright yellow and violet,” he said.

“You saw me in plays?” I was afraid I was going to start blushing. While I had been in all the school productions, I didn’t think a jock like James took notice.

“Of course,” he said. “You are a natural. Do you ever think about getting back into it?”

Funny he should bring that up. I had just been talking to one of my girlfriends about turning my first book into a one-woman show. It had always been a dream of mine. “I’ve thought about it, yeah.”

“You should do it. When I mentioned it just now, you lit up. Literally,” he laughed.

Oh shit! Now he can see me light up?!

“You know, that medium I was talking about who supposedly saw my dad? Well, she says being intuitive is like playing the piano—everyone has the ability to strike a key, but some can only play chopsticks and other people are Mozart. It’s different levels, but everyone has it.” I felt like I’d been stuck in “chopsticks” mode for a while now, and here I was sitting with Mozart.

James nodded, but my words didn’t seem to ease his mind.

“What does your wife think of your ability to see colors?” I asked.

“We don’t talk about it,” he said.

I started to understand a bit more why he might have been drinking so much.

After lunch, we went our separate ways. We vowed to keep in touch, but I knew that probably wasn’t going to happen.

“I’m going to write about you,” I said, as we waved goodbye.

“Okay,” he said. “Just be sure to change my name. . . .”

THE FOLLOWING week, I was walking with my son Britt, when he got sidetracked by the firemen washing their trucks in the street.

"Mommy, can we see the fiyah twucks?" he blurted out. It was a hot summer day, and he was entranced by the flurry of activity.

"Are you a junior firefighter, little guy?" one of the firemen asked. He was holding a plastic fire hat that he handed to Britt. Thus a love affair between my toddler and loud, shiny red trucks was born.

"Whoa!" Britt said, as they let him ring the bell.

"You look familiar," a man with the nametag *Danny* said, approaching me.

"Really?"

After a little small talk, we discovered that Danny used to watch me when I was a reporter for CBS.

"I think you and my mother were our only viewers," I joked.

Danny laughed. "So what are you up to now if you're not on CBS anymore?"

"Well, I wrote a book, and I do talks."

"What's the book about?"

I hesitated, trying to think of a description that didn't seem too weird. "I left my cushy broadcasting job to *find myself*, and then traveled the country to try to talk to my dead dad through mediums and psychics," I said, waiting for a reaction along the lines of "Oh, so you're *nuts?!?*"

Danny leaned in to talk to me, as if he didn't want the other firemen to hear him. "Step into my office for a second, won't you, Jennifer?"

I looked back at Britt. He was sitting in fireman Joe's lap pretending to steer the big rig, happy as a clam.

"I've got him," Joe said, as I looked over.

Danny closed the door.

"I've had angels whispering in my ear since I was about six," he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

I looked into the fireman's eyes. He seemed very sincere. He had a sweet face and a rock-solid frame that could probably lift a car if he put his mind to it.

"Angels?" I asked. "What kind of stuff are they whispering?"

"All sorts of things. From 'turn left at the light' to 'call in sick today.' I hear them loud and clear."

Danny went on to explain that he'd been guided by what he called the *voices of angels* since his childhood, and the voices have never steered him wrong. They've even saved his life on several occasions.

"I also see spirits," he said, in an intense whisper. "My one buddy that died in a fire walks around here all the time, giving me shit." He laughed. "He moves our equipment around and flickers the lights. But I can't say a damn thing to any of these guys around here because they'd think I'd lost my fucking mind!"

But you can tell me . . .

"I'm going to bring you a copy of my book, Danny," I said. "I think you'll enjoy some of the stories in there."

We exchanged emails as I tried to peel Britt off one of the engines.

"No home!" Britt yelled, as if I were putting hot pokers in his eyes. "NO HOME!"

A FEW days later, I dropped off a book for Danny; within two days, he had read the entire thing. We became email friends, sharing stories of "coincidences." I brought Britt back to the station, and our conversations continued.

"So tell me about this Therese lady," he asked, referring to one of the mediums from the book. Therese Rowley is a Catholic CEO consultant, with a master's degree and a PhD in business, who also happens to read energy and see dead people. I call her the ultimate "combo platter."

"She's a genuine Catholic, huh?" Danny asked. He, too, was Cath-

olic, and he was concerned that his talk of mediums might mean he wouldn't be let through the Pearly Gates.

"She is very Catholic, yes," I said. "Goes to Mass. Almost every day, actually. One of eleven children. Been able to see spirits since she was a very young girl. Kept it secret for years because she's Catholic. I think you should meet her for sure, Danny. She'd love to hear your stories. You two have a lot in common."

Eventually, I sent Therese an email mentioning my new fireman friend, and she quickly wrote him a note asking to meet for lunch. Could you imagine being a fly on the wall for *that* conversation? Two practicing Catholics who see dead people?!

A few weeks went by, and I didn't hear from Danny. I asked Therese if they met for lunch, and she told me that they had set up a meeting, but he cancelled. I sent an email to Danny, and after a few days of silence, I finally got a response:

"I don't think I should be meeting any mediums. My priest says that it's the work of the devil, and I surely don't want to mess with that."

I never heard from him again.

"ISN'T THE Bible *all* about talking to dead people?" I asked Therese one night as we were chatting on the phone. I was so disappointed that Danny had gotten too scared to even have a sandwich with her.

At that moment, I heard my son making noises through the baby monitor.

"Hey, Therese, I've gotta go. Sounds like my son is still up," I said, as I headed upstairs. When I entered his room, Britt was rolling on his bed, looking at the ceiling, laughing at nothing.

"Who are you talking to, honey?"

He pointed to the ceiling. "The guy."

"What guy?"

"Right there!" he said, pointing again at the air.

“Well, what’s he doing?”

“He’s giving me a fiyah truck,” he laughed.

“Oh really? That sure is nice. You can play with your fire truck in the morning.”

I closed the door and heard laughing for a few more minutes. Eventually, he trailed off to sleep.

The next day, Britt and I were playing in the basement when his ball went under my husband’s desk. He stopped at the desk and pointed at a picture of my dad from my wedding day.

“There’s the guy, Momma,” he said.

“What guy?”

“Who gave me the fiyah truck,” he said with a smile.

I almost fell over. “That’s the guy who was in your room?”

“Uh-huh,” he nodded.

So apparently, even dead grandparents can shower their grandkids with presents.

“That is your grandpa, sweetie,” I said, trying not to cry.

“My gwampa?”

“Yes. Mommy’s dad. He is an angel now up in Heaven.”

AS THE weeks went by, I struggled with how I was going to share these stories with my husband Clay. He had been supportive when I went on my journey to interview mediums for my first book, but I was worried he’d think I was going to run off and join a cult if I told him I thought our son could see dead people.

But Britt’s late-night chats kept coming . . .

“Stop it!” I heard Britt say through the baby monitor a few weeks later. He was laughing.

I walked in, and he was squirming around as if he was being tickled.

“What on earth is going on here, cutie?” I said, sitting on his bed.

“It’s Gwampa!” he said, with a smile.

“Your grandpa is here? What’s he doing?”

“He’s smacking my butt,” he said, rolling to his side as he pointed to his fanny.

My jaw dropped.

My father had a thing for whacking people in the ass. Especially with his wives and his kids. It was his answer for everything—from affection to annoyance. Whether I was five or twenty-five, I could always count on my dad coming up from behind and hitting my tush with great gusto, while chanting: *must-be-jelly-cuz-jam-don’t-shake-like-that* [pause] *BABY!* (He would use particular force and volume for “BABY!”)

This was really embarrassing at my college graduation, by the way.

“How is Grandpa smacking your butt?” I asked.

Britt pushed me off the bed and stood behind me.

“Like this, Momma.”

He then took his right hand and proceeded to smack my rear end *Weigel style*.

As his cute little fingers patted my buns, I tried to think how this could be possible. Britt was only a toddler. Even if he had heard Mommy and Daddy talking about the way Grandpa used to “whack our asses,” would he really be savvy enough to hold on to that information and then use it down the road as he’s drifting off to sleep?

How come he can see you and I can’t, Dad?

Perhaps Britt overheard a story when my uncle Tony was in town? Maybe he was just intuitive and picking up on my sadness that Grandpa wasn’t around to take advantage of his grandson’s precious little booty?

I went to my computer and composed a blog post on the subject before heading to bed.

When I woke up the next day, the responses from readers started coming in like wildfire. Parent after parent shared their children’s “conversations with dead people.” From secret nicknames being

voiced by unknowing three-year-olds, to first graders finding lost pieces of jewelry on command from a dead aunt, the stories were extraordinary.

“Our two-and-a-half-year-old daughter knew the day her grandmother died,” one woman wrote. “Before we even told her, she looked up at us from her crib and said ‘Grandma is with the angels now. She just told me how beautiful it is in her new house.’”

I started to think about fireman Danny and James—men who have an ability that they’re ashamed to talk about. I wondered how many other people might be walking among us who are struggling with gifts they aren’t encouraged to nurture. And how different their lives would have been if this behavior were considered “normal.”

THE NEXT time I tucked Britt into bed, I decided to tell him that whatever he saw, was okay with me. “A lot of kids can see angels, sweetie,” I said, as I tickled his back. “Even some grown-ups.”

“You?” Britt asked, as he sucked on his fingers.

I wish!

“No, honey. But next time Grandpa comes, you can tell him Mommy says ‘hi,’” I joked.

“Mmmm hmmm,” he said, as he drifted off to sleep.