

Amy Reynolds

Discernment Of Spirits

Evelyn scattered bread crumbs to the swarm of pigeons around her feet. She seemed completely absorbed in their frantic scuttling, but she was also eavesdropping. Two women sat on a bench across the walk. Their dresses were flowery, pink and lavender, and fluttered against their crossed knees.

One of the women said, "I don't know why she can't just get over it."

A white bird with a pink stub of a foot scrambled after a crumb of the stale bread. One wing dragged, feathers crusted.

The other woman said, "Oh yes, she's just too much to bear."

Evelyn sat on the bench, warm sun on her face. Palm trees glittered in the wind off the ocean. She flung out the last of bread crumbs. Soon the birds wandered away, heads bobbing. Out toward the marina sail boats skittered across the green water. Red sails, blue sails, yellow sails. Evelyn wondered who was too much to bear. What couldn't she get over? They moved on to someone else. The short, high-noon shadows crouched under their bench began to stretch. She stopped watching them.

She'd been coming to the park every day at noon-time for two months, ever since she'd lost her job. She liked to think she was on vacation. First she'd take a city bus across town and then transfer to a Santa Monica Big Blue Bus down Wilshire. She could look at the want ads on the bus. She did this every day, circling the most promising jobs with a blue pen. She had good typing skills and a

pleasant phone manner. She'd been a secretary. The counselor at the Department of Human Resources had been optimistic about her job prospects. She'd said Evelyn had a "front office appearance," which Evelyn understood to mean she was attractive in a neutral sort of way, and young enough at twenty-eight. Her hair was almost blond. A flurry of careful blue circles decorated her newspaper.

The two women looked at their watches and exclaimed at the time. They hurried off. Evelyn had been like them once, rushing around, always busy. Her priorities had changed.

At the employment office last week she had overheard a couple of vets talking.

"It wasn't meanness," one of them said.

"Oh, yeah, my wife just got fed up after awhile."

The first one shook his head. "She says, 'Hey — get over it already.' Like I had the flu. I just looked at her."

After that Evelyn said it to herself in the mirror every morning — "Hey, get over it!"

Evelyn watched the one-footed pigeon pecking at a fragment of orange peel. It kept its balance by tapping the stump of its bad leg on the ground. Tap, tap. Evelyn hadn't slept well the night before. She'd had another attack. A beating like wings against her ears, inside her head. Something pressing down on her chest. She had tried to speak, and then to scream. She heard herself whimpering through the roar which grew steadily louder, like a giant seashell in her head. She couldn't breathe.

Then it had stopped. Silence. And then under the silence the darkness humming a little song, "Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me."

Some gifts you couldn't give back. She would always have her grandmother's purple lamp. The awful cramping pain in her hands would never go away, the arthritis a legacy of the year she spent in bible college practicing scales in ice-cold practice rooms. The young men had gone to Vietnam for a year when they were eighteen or nineteen, and then carried it always like a virus. Everyone was in it for the duration. She had decided that the attacks were caused by a heart murmur. Yes, it was her murmuring heart that mocked

and tested her.

Evelyn gathered up her newspaper and her big leather handbag. It was nearly one o'clock. The wind had picked up, cold off the ocean. She found a phone booth and lifted the receiver. She ran her finger down the tight lines of newsprint to the one that said "CLERICAL — lite typing & phone skills required. Pleasant Westside office." She liked the Westside. She dropped a dime in the slot and dialed the number, listened to the phone ringing and a dim crackle of static.

"All's Well Insurance, good afternoon." A very pleasant phone voice. The static swelled.

"Um — my name is Evelyn Davis, and I understand you have a job opening."

"Yes we do, would you like to come in for an interview today?"

Evelyn listened to the hum behind the voice. A little song, singing in the static.

"Today?"

"Yes, we have appointments available at 3:30 and at 4:30."

She heard her heart through the throbbing of her knuckles, clenched tight against the receiver. Half an aspirin a day didn't seem to do any good anymore.

"Hello?" the voice said.

"Yes — 4:30. I think I can make it at 4:30."

She noted the address and hung up. The office was in Culver City. She still had to do her shopping, and the bookstore, and back toward home and the post office. She crossed Ocean Boulevard past the line of cars stopped for her, expensive, bright colored cars with tinted windshields, so that most of the drivers were invisible. An old woman in a grey overcoat sat on the bus bench. The overcoat was like her grandmother's, from that time when Evelyn was eight, when Evelyn saw her walking down the street, carrying a suitcase. Evelyn remembered the overcoat especially, because it was a very hot day. But it could not have happened, she reminded herself, because Gramma had died the spring before.

Riding the bus was all right as long as she kept very still, as long as she looked at the floor, or out the window. This time a man

kept turning around to look at her. She knew him from somewhere. She held the newspaper up to her face. She thought she saw a scar across his chin, like Matthew's. Or the Lithium Man? She lowered the newspaper surreptitiously. The man was gone.

Yesterday she'd seen the Lithium Man again, this time in front of the McDonald's on Santa Monica Boulevard, a frozen photograph as the bus rushed past, both arms plunged into a Ronald McDonald trash can, a torn green blanket around his shoulders. A few weeks before she'd seen him at the corner of Sixth and Vermont sleeping on a bus bench. Before that, crouched on the sidewalk outside the employment office on Beverly.

The first time was just before she got fired, in the parking lot of the market at Olympic and Western, Korea-Town, kind of a rough neighborhood.

"Eh—eh—excuse me, Ma'am," he'd said.

"What do you want?" He'd come up behind her and surprised her. Usually she kept the scene scoped-out better than that.

He'd wanted to know how to get to the lithium clinic on San Fernando Road, way over the Hollywood Hills in Glendale. Evelyn was afraid of him. He shook all over and lines of sweat streaked his dark, dirt smeared face. He smelled bad. She told him to take the bus all the way north up Western, over the hills.

"You see those hills?"

He nodded like he understood, his head bouncing up and down like a toy. "Then you ask somebody for directions. I don't know that part of town."

"Thank you—thank you," he said.

His round eyes filmed over with things he saw behind her, over her head, on the backs of his hands. His mouth opened and he seemed to have more to say. Something writhed in the back of his eyes. Evelyn turned and ran for the 64 west on Olympic, her grocery bag banging against her hip. From the safety of the bus she'd watched him wander across the parking lot. The northbound 12 stopped at the corner but he walked on, his head down as if into a wind.

Sometimes she dreamed about him, the Lithium Man, clawing

his way up over the Hollywood Hills, the mesquite and juniper scrub tearing at his clothes, and then it would be her, fingers bloody, beginning to see things again, crying for a sweet dose of calm. A little forgetfulness. Lithium Carbonate. She'd looked it up.

As usual, she rode the bus up to the grocery store on Wilshire and bought two cans of Campbell's chicken soup, a quart of low-fat milk, a tin of coffee. Walking swiftly in her old Adidas, she went on up the street and turned on San Vicente, to the grounds of the Veteran's Administration. She knew all the paths through the maze of buildings, some abandoned and ready to be torn down, others with parking lots full of cars. She liked the park-like setting, wide green lawns and a sanitarium's hush over the place. She headed toward the back of the grounds to the Sepulveda Boulevard entrance. Across the street was the entrance to the cemetery, acres of white crosses cross-hatched on the green quilt of grass spread over the lap of the hills.

At the center of the grounds was a big old oak tree. She sat on the bench beneath it in the dappled sunlight. After a moment she pressed her hand against the rough bark of the tree and closed her eyes, and the tree thrummed against her palm. Here something had closed, something finished. She could feel them rushing up the great trunk of the tree into the sunlight, and then curling and falling, a slow settling into forgetfulness.

"Just as I am, I come. I come."

She opened her eyes.

A shadow moved at the corner of her vision, a disturbance in the rippling force through the tree. Just like stray cats and dogs, they were beginning to follow her, and she understood it was the man on the bus.

In the bookstore she browsed through the paperback romances, conscious now of the shadow always just out of sight, behind or to the side. Maybe it was Matthew, with the wild eyes and the torn jeans, lugging his battered guitar into a Sunday night church service all those years ago. She had fallen in love with him. Someday he would come to her, like the others.

The words of the novel she held in her aching hands blurred.

They had covered the ice-cold concrete floor of the Fellowship Hall with remnants from a deacon's carpet store, but it hadn't helped much. The Christian Youth Worship members sat on the floor in a circle, their voices jumbling together — almost the language of angels, that state of ecstasy that she could never reach. Her eye kept straying to the black widow poised in its web under the broken radiator. It occurred to her that the devil was everywhere. They prayed for a long time, calling on the Holy Spirit, and then Matthew anointed her forehead with olive oil in the sign of the cross.

"To some," he said, "Is the gift of prophesy. Others receive at the moment of Pentecost, the gift of healing, or of tongues. God has blessed you with the Gift of Discernment of Spirits."

She paid for the novel without looking at the clerk, then remembered her appointment.

"Do you know the time?" she asked.

"It's 3:45," he said.

She looked up at him. "Thank you," she said.

Something shifted in his face. "That's a beautiful scarf," he said. She could see the vapor forming around his words, slipping out from behind his eyes.

He handed her change back and a shimmer reached past the twitchy movement of his hands, brushed her fingers.

Her hand jerked back. Coins spilled across the counter.

"I'm sorry — I —"

She left the change and escaped out into the sunlight. The clerk's startled face burned in her mind. Sometimes the barriers began to slip. She was supposed to have been useful to Matthew, to be able to spot a good spirit from a bad one. But they were all just the same sad tatters, starved and fading fast. And they recognized her, too.

She waited for the bus. It was getting late, and she hadn't been to the post office. She was cold and her hands ached, were beginning to curl inward, now nearly useless claws. She had been called to be a church musician, like her father, had practiced scales for hours in the unheated rehearsal room, perfecting her craft, thinking about how Matthew had gone without even a small blessing; she had misplaced the honor of her work. God had sent

a punishment to confirm what she already knew — that she would never be like her grandmother, or her father or like Matthew, that if God was to save her, he would have to drag her through the fire to do it. He seemed perfectly willing to do it.

Evelyn looked down at her clothes, her worn tennis shoes, her faded jeans. What had possessed her to agree to a job interview?

Not today, she thought. I can't today.

She had to get to the post office; it was so important to be reliable. It had been difficult losing her job. She had gotten the flu, and her defenses had faltered. A breakdown in her immune system. She'd gone to a party when she wasn't completely well. That was when she realized she'd been seeing them for some time, and had pretended not to notice. They were crowded up into the corners of the room, watching the people with a sort of resigned horror. She tried to carry on a conversation with a man about foreign films and then politics and then they turned to personal computers while the whole time something peeked around his elbow, pulled at his coat. She watched the shadow tear off his really lovely tie and try to strangle itself. She had a hard time concealing her anxiety.

When Matthew left for Texas to be a missionary, she'd hated him for running out on her. She had been his Mary Magdelene, fourteen years old at the time of the anointment. At his feet she had learned his songs, "Amen-Amen-Amen" over and over, "Hallelujah," the harmonies spiraling up and up around the melody until she'd felt the hot chill of the spirit up the back of her neck, as she had when she was seven, when she first was saved.

It was at the annual summer revival, and she remembered the swamp coolers whirring, blowing in the smell of the hot summer pavement and overgrown grass, and in the silence just before the visiting evangelist began to speak, a siren wailed. His voice rolled from the pulpit, the River of Jordan over her head, preaching on the Four Horses of the Apocalypse and the raising of the dead, the Anti-Christ, and The Great White Throne of Judgement. He spoke of the Unfaithful Servant and the Foolish Virgins, cast into Outer Darkness and The Lake of Fire.

Then they sang her favorite hymn, the voices of the old people

bleating while her father's huge, battered, workman's hands played through the familiar chords, "Just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me, and that Thou bid'st me come to thee, Oh Lamb of God I come, I come."

And the preacher had looked right at her and asked her to come, and so she had stumbled terrified up the aisle. She was soon baptized, washed in the blood of the Lamb, Indelible Stain of Salvation.

Evelyn stood in the step-well of the bus and surveyed the passengers carefully.

"Get on or get off, sister," the driver said.

No one looked familiar. She sat in the back, holding the novel open on her lap. It was called *Passion in the Sand*. Then she closed it and pulled her Bible out of her bag. Lately she'd taken to carrying it with her, a talisman of some kind. Tucked into the back was a picture of her grandmother from the time she had visited, back when Evelyn was just a baby.

Her father had taken it out in the Mojave Desert, a Joshua tree and a black clouded sky behind his mother. She looked past the camera, through the horizon line to some future, or listening to something. A storm gathered behind her. Evelyn looked into her eyes. She expected lightning to strike.

It bothered her to think about her grandmother. Her father used to say Evelyn looked just like her, that he could close his eyes and think it was his mother talking. Evelyn couldn't imagine how that could be so. Her grandmother had worked in the fields all day long and raised a big family; she'd nursed her husband for years until he died, then went all over the county visiting the sick. Evelyn had never heard a bad word about her. She was a kind of saint.

The first time Evelyn remembered staying at her house in Indiana, her grandmother had told her, "There's these angels that comes and stays at the corners of the bed, ever since your grandpa passed on in there. Don't pay 'em no mind, they won't hurt you." She was completely matter-of-fact about it.

Evelyn had stayed awake in the great four poster, oak bed as long as she could, listening to mice in the baseboards, a cat mewling

outside the kitchen door. And then she must've slept because something startled her awake and she watched — not daring to move, or breathe, wishing her heart would be quiet — the angels glowing a green phosphorescence like sea creatures, their wide shining wings folded back, paws curled like farm cats on a fence over the knobs of the bed posts. She watched them watching her through green-gold eyes, watching over her, just like they said in Sunday School.

She'd lost her job because of an incident with the office manager at a staff meeting. Evelyn noticed first how thin Barbara looked, how wispy, the bow around her neck just so, and maybe too tight. Then she saw that behind her chair was a creature, dark and huddling, impossibly cold. It began to moan. Soon it started a dreadful keening, drowning out Barbara's discussion about the correct procedure for filling out a systems request, and soon the torrent of grief filled the room. No one noticed. Not one noticed it rising to its feet behind her, crying out for Barbara's mother, dead three days.

Evelyn had stood up and said, "Excuse me, Barbara."

"Yes, Evelyn, you have a comment?"

"No — it's just that — I'm sorry about your mother."

The creature whimpered.

"How do you know about my mother?" She was angry. She had a policy about bringing personal stuff into the office.

"I—I'm psychic." Evelyn didn't know what else to say. She was no more psychic than anyone else in the room. "But it's okay, Barbara, really it is—" she rushed on — "because Gladys was with her —"

"My God — just leave me alone!" The woman started to cry, and couldn't seem to stop. The shade had vanished.

Everyone looked at Evelyn, horrified, and she realized that such things weren't supposed to happen at staff meetings. And then she realized that the room was full of these shadows, hanging onto light summer dresses, squeezing out of three-piece suits, pressing against the walls.

"I'm sorry— I'm sorry—" Evelyn said, and walked out. She

couldn't go back to work after that. So they fired her.

The sun was starting to set. Evelyn caught the bus north on Vermont and walked the few blocks up Franklin to her apartment building. She liked the thirties-style bungalow, her tiny, high ceilinged apartment. But she would have to move soon. She opened the door and there they were, silent as usual. At twilight, their favorite time, she would take them for their walk. At that hour they could pretend that it was just the uncertain light that made them so indistinct.

She didn't know what to do with them. Sometimes she thought a good softball game would loosen them up a little. Sometimes she just wanted to shake them. Their silence unnerved her. Their mournful eyes followed her everywhere.

She put the chicken soup on the counter. There was a knock at the door. She thought it would be the landlord after the rent again, but then she recognized the shadowy man on the bus. The Lithium Man.

"I found you," he said.

Naturally, she let him in. As the chairs were long filled, he lined up with the others along the wall. Some had even taken to bobbing like corks up against the ceiling.

"I got rules here, you know," she told him, her arms folded. "No crying during the night. And stay out of the bedroom."

He nodded dumbly. Her grandmother's purple lamp shone through him — he was quite faded.

Evelyn didn't consider herself a spiritual counselor. She opened the cans of chicken soup and dumped them into a pan. Soon the healing smell filled the apartment and the shadows in the corners brightened, glowing a little. All she could do was feed them. All she could do was keep them warm.