



Good Read

# Kindred Spirit

AFTER A LONG JOURNEY TO GIVE BIRTH TO HER SON, J. COURTNEY SULLIVAN  
EMBRACES A NEW LITTLE BOY IN HER HOUSE: THE GHOST.

**MY HIGHLY RATIONAL HUSBAND** refused to get excited when the cradle started moving on its own.

As advertised, our son's motorized rocker swayed back and forth. But it also inched across the living room sideways, so after an hour it was five feet to the right of its starting place. Often the plug popped out of the socket or the whole thing banged against the sofa, alarming the dog, though never waking the baby within.

It wasn't just the cradle. In the six months since our son was born, lights have flickered overhead. A toy piano once lit up and played music, untouched.



My friend Siobhan, who knows about these things, said it was clear that we had a ghost and that the ghost was a little boy. At any other time, this might have kept me up at night. But we live in the bubble of babyhood. If I, a lifelong insomniac, have the chance to sleep these days, I can get there in an instant.

Still, I went online for answers. Google is such a comfort to me now. Every maternal quandary feels massive and personal until the internet reveals, via all those who have asked the question before, that very few women know innately how to make a newborn's tiny bird mouth latch onto a breast, that all babies go bonkers and refuse to sleep at exactly four months of age, that no child actually enjoys tummy time.

My search about the phantom rocker did not turn up the usual hordes of women in the same boat. I found only one query on the subject, from a mom in Australia. Respondents fell into two camps—what she had witnessed, they said, was clearly the result of either a ghost or slanted floors.

Of course, the two tend to go hand in hand. I grew up in New England, in a house built in 1922. My family blamed the ghost of the former owner, Bob Mitchell, whenever something went missing or didn't work right.

## Why should the presence of a boy from the past be so unlikely, when I knew for certain that my son would exist here?

Four years ago, my husband and I rented our current apartment, on the top floor of a 19th-century Brooklyn townhouse. I fell in love the first time I saw it. The dust and the drafty windows and the three flights of stairs didn't register. I noticed only the tin ceiling in the living room, the antique fireplaces, the sealed doorways that must have served some other purpose when this was a single-family home.

A friend once told me she refused to live in a house that anyone had lived in before. To me, previous owners are a draw, their unknown heartaches and small victories worn into the floorboards. And yet I rarely thought about our house's former inhabitants until we brought our baby home and one of them started making himself known.

Even as I type this, I only halfway believe what I'm saying. But lately it feels like anything is possible. Why should the presence of a boy from the past be so unlikely, when I knew for certain that my son would exist here before he was flesh and blood, that delicious heft in my arms?

We were told three years ago that it would be hard, if not impossible, for us to have a child. The discovery came on fast and unexpected, the ripping away of something we had only just realized we wanted.

The night we found out, I couldn't sleep. The dog stayed up with me. At 4 a.m., we stood side by side in front of the kitchen window, looking up at the sky. The moon was full, enormous. I had a vision of a baby boy. *Leo by the light of the moon*. Those were the words running through my head.

Strange that my mind should conjure a boy, since at that time I still could only imagine creating a child who was a smaller version of myself—a mercurial girl with dark brown hair, who loved all the girly things I once did.

I know how arrogant it sounds to claim kinship with the moon. But in the fruitless year that followed, the full moon was a talisman, reminding me whenever I saw it to keep faith.

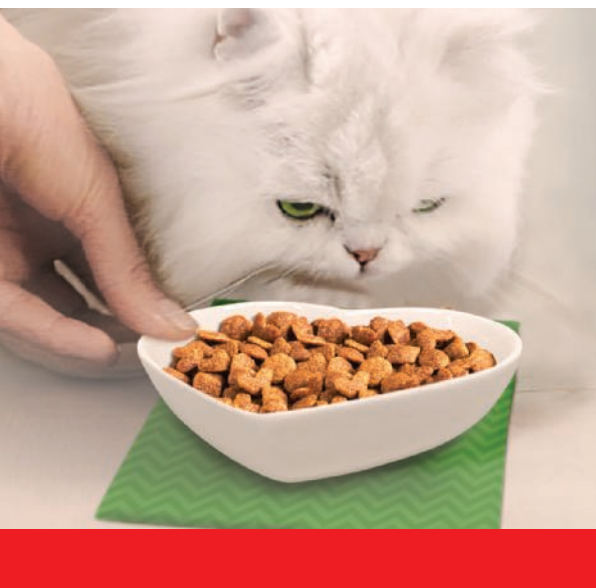
When the doctor said I was having a boy, I cried in surprise. I Googled "Can you take a boy to The Nutcracker?" "Do boys read Laura Ingalls Wilder?" I worried that, despite my list of 40 fantastic girls' names, I had never once thought about what I might call a boy. But on some level, I knew the black-and-white speck on the sonogram screen was my Leo, and that was the name we gave him the night he was born.

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## RELATING

**LAST NIGHT, WE WERE ALL SITTING** on the bed, and Leo kept looking at something—laughing, talking, making his flirty face. Outside, the moon was full and bright.

“He sees the ghost,” I whispered.

My husband shook his head.

As we walked out of the room soon after, the chandelier went dark.

“Whoa,” my husband said.

I said, “If you are a ghost, flicker the lights.”

One bulb in the chandelier flickered and burned out.

My husband repeated the same words, and it happened again.

Then he said, “If you’re a ghost, make the lamp flicker.”

We held our breath. The lamp did not flicker.

“You can’t make so many demands,” I said. “It takes energy to flicker the lights. He’s probably exhausted.”

“I’m sorry,” my husband said to the lamp.

Twenty minutes later, I found him looking at DiedInHouse.com, a site with the rather superfluous tagline “The best way to find out if anyone has ever died in your house.”

In a similar frame of mind, I had been searching the *New York Times* archive for mentions of our address. I found two stories about former residents, both of them young boys. In 1867, at 5 o’clock on a Saturday afternoon, Valentine Wilmot fell from a second-story window, sustaining serious injuries. In 1925, 9-year-old Willie Rabinowitz and his dog, Prince of Wales, had a brush with fame when Prince followed Willie to the Long Island College Hospital and insisted on being by his bedside as his tonsils were removed. Two days later, he sat in Willie’s lap on the ambulance ride home.

As far as I can tell, both Valentine and Willie survived these adventures. I asked my friend Mira, who is writing a book about mediums, whether a ghost always presents itself as the age that person was when he died. She said perhaps the presence is not a ghost but a spirit, since spirits are free to take any form they want.

My friend Siobhan, the ghost expert, says in either case, it’s important to tell him to go elsewhere.

“Where will he go?” I texted her one night. “You know how high the rents are around here.”

The truth is, I don’t want him to leave. I love the idea of boys filling the rooms of the house again—if not the actual boys, then their stories, which must be at least as much a part of a person as toes or teeth or eyelashes. Everyone who has ever lived began as a story one woman told herself.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**  
J. Courtney Sullivan is the author of the novels *Commencement*, *Maine*, *The Engagements*, and *Saints for All Occasions*. She lives in Brooklyn, New York, with her husband, son, and dog.