Geminis

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It wasn’t difficult to keep this year’s stakeout from my husband. He was going to visit his parents and brother in California for Memorial Day, so I convinced him I should stay home. I’m not feeling well, I said. I don’t want to get everyone sick. When I told Mom last week that Jasper may be home, she panicked, and I imagined her drawing chains of flowers on a paper napkin at her kitchen table. A therapist once told her drawing flowers helps with anxiety. I don’t know what kind of therapy it is, but I’ve seen her do this my whole life. Fields of flat flowers bloom in each room of my parents’ house.

Every year Mom and I stay awake on her mother’s birthday during the dead hour in case she wants to haunt. Mom never reminds me of anyone else’s birthday. She told me when my grandmother, Elizabeth, was alive too. It’s like a tic she only has once a year. Tomorrow’s your grandmother’s birthday.

I agreed to stay up the first year after she died. Mom and I lived in the same town then, so it wasn’t too much effort. I went to her house with its steps that sound tired when you walk on top of them. We knew from watching so much reality ghost TV that 3 AM was when paranormal activity was at its peak. She brewed coffee for me so I would stay awake. I hated the taste, but I knew she wasn’t done with my grandmother yet. I also knew no one else would do this with her. We stayed awake until 4:30. We only heard a step sigh around 3:15. I told her, Maybe she hasn’t made it to the next place yet. With both creased hands gripping her mug that read “1. Coffee 2. God,” she said, Maybe.
Elizabeth was a Gemini like me. I learned about astrology around the same time I realized I didn’t like her. At first I blamed our sign and then I blamed her. Mom, an Aquarius, didn’t have the best relationship with her mother, either. She assured me—she sees so much of me in you and this makes it hard to get along sometimes.

I managed to keep our yearly séance away from my Aries husband. It wasn’t that Jasper didn’t believe in the paranormal. I was just embarrassed for Mom. I don’t know if she told Dad. She couldn’t do anything without telling him, though. She was best at relaying inane situations at the paint your own pottery studio I run with Jasper, Fired for You. Like how one child’s father got angry because we ran out of the *Tyrannosaurus rex*. Or how a drunken couple came in and bought and painted eleven pieces of pottery before leaving. They never came to pick up their order, which happens sometimes. Our policy is to keep the pieces for ninety days before getting rid of them. I have exceptions, though. I sneak home pieces I love best—mostly for the colors or the brushstrokes.

I pull down the Ghost Hunter Depot box from the back of my closet. Last year was our third year and the first time we had equipment. It was also the same year Jasper and I moved two states west of my parents. Mom retired a month after we moved—as if her being at home would bring me back. With her abundance of time, she researched websites with meters, thermometers, and recorders for ghost hunting. Since she didn’t need proof ghosts existed, she only bought us tools that would ensure we could hear my grandmother communicate with us. She ordered two of everything—EMF meter, EVP recorder, and ghost box.

I met Jasper in college. On our first date we went to a pub even though we don’t drink. I asked what his sign was. He laughed into his hand because he thought I was saying it like a line, like
a joke. I smiled and said, *No, really*. He told me he was whichever one was the stallion. *There isn’t a stallion*. I couldn’t stop laughing. *When’s your birthday?* I couldn’t imagine not knowing all the signs.

I tell her I don’t think it’s a good idea to stay on the phone the entire hour this year. *We might miss something. You’re not the quietest breather.* I had the feeling if something didn’t happen this birthday my mom would never stop. We would be doing this until she was too old to even hear her mother. *I’ll call you at 4:30 just to be safe,* I say to her. Reluctant, she agrees.

My grandmother wore her nails long and when she painted them, they looked even more violent. Before I found out about the zodiac, I looked to people’s nails for who they were. Dad’s nails are always clipped so short that he almost has no nail tip. I looked for those kinds of nails in men I dated. I looked for them in dads with their daughters painting in the studio. Mom’s nails are short, square, and rarely polished. They’re necessary nails for a sewer and a knitter. They’re nails that don’t get in the way of touching a daughter’s face, of drawing invisible flowers on her back. I looked for them on my grandmother’s hands, but I never saw them. Geminis are the third sign of the zodiac and ruled by Mercury. An air sign, Geminis are restless and impulsive. We are masters of communication.

I blot out all the light in the bedroom and lie down for a nap. It’s completely dark but a determined frog or cricket sings into the side of the house. The alarm blares at two, and I go to the kitchen to make the strongest tea. If Mom saw me drinking tea instead of coffee, it would set off the largest bouquet of flowers. Gently, I slap myself on the cheek because I’ve seen it done in movies when people need to wake up. I’m just grateful we closed the shop for the holiday weekend. I set up the meter, recorder, and ghost box in the bedroom. Positioning the motion sensors in a circle around my body, I look down at
them—snuffed votives in a low church. When it’s finally three, everything is set to record and the room is lightless again. I step out of the circle of sensors and open the closet door. Without turning on the light, I reach up for the other box. Standing outside the circle, I know it’s the green whale a customer never came for in my hand. I’ve kept it two years. Placing it in the middle of the circle, I wait for my grandmother to move it, for her terror red nails to scratch the hardwood floor. When the whale hasn’t moved in five minutes, I pick it up by the tail. It slips from my hands and shatters. It’s enough to ignite the lights. The inside of the whale is white, of course. I turn away from it and pull out the polka dot monster truck, my favorite. I pitch into the mess. The floor glows again, temporarily.