**I’m a Ghost**

Olive Lowe

“You would think there was a better way he could have let me know he was still around,” Tamara said. She had just finished telling me the story of how she found a single, fresh Brussels sprout on the bedroom floor the week after her husband of 59 years had died. Its appearance was inexplicable in any natural terms. In life, her husband had loved Brussels sprouts, but she does not. He must have put the rolly-polly vegetable there on the floor, she thought, as evidence of his continued existence.

“Maybe he just wanted you to laugh,” I said.

I’m a listener by trade. A writer, too, but a listener first and foremost. I ghostwrite memoirs, which I believe is the best job in the world. In living rooms and over FaceTime calls I get to listen to the most important stories of peoples’ lives—their triumphs and tragedies, their love stories and birth stories, even secrets they’ve never told anyone before. I’ve done books for close family members and complete strangers, ranging in age from 43 to 93. None of my clients are famous. Their stories are curated as an essential part of their legacy, to be shared with family and friends. Most think their lives have been ordinary, but that is never the case.

When Michael’s son hired me, he told me that his dad’s childhood stories were legendary.

“My plan was to break rocks open until I struck gold,” began a story that Michael told me in our first interview. As a seven-year-old, he had walked with his little red wagon up a steep road to the base of a mountain peak, filled the wagon with 150 pounds of rocks, rode it down the street, lost control, crashed into a gutter and became, in his words, “one giant scab.” Within the next couple of years he would build a go-kart with wheels that didn’t spin and a plane that couldn’t fly, light a barn on fire, fry a jar full of grasshoppers in the tubes of a T.V. set, steal a popcorn cup from a dead guy at a football game, and attempt to send his two-year-old sister to the moon on a homemade rocket.

Legendary, indeed.

I am human, which means I am hardwired to love stories. When someone spins a tale, I lean forward in my seat, attune my ears, and conjure images in my mind that replace the tangible world around me. It’s as natural and involuntary as breathing. Storytelling connects me to others in a way that even physical touch cannot, satisfying an ever-present hunger to understand and relate to the people around me. If I have a healthy soul, perhaps it’s because I subsist on a steady diet of stories.

Suzanne, my oldest client at age 93, told me about when her six-year-old son was very sick and close to dying. In the hospital he was surrounded by a tent of plastic and connected to tubes as he held his favorite blanket. She watched his chest slowly rise and fall.

“I wish I would have asked the nurses to let me hold him,” Suzanne said. “Even though he was unconscious, I wish I would have held him.”

She recalled that, weeks before his death, in church one day he had turned to her and whispered, “Oh, Mom, I feel so love-ish.” She treasured those words, and believed that if his soul returned in the body of another child, she would know him by his saying that phrase.

When someone tells me a story like this, it’s as if they place a fragile treasure in my hands, giving with it an unspoken plea to take care of it. There is no greater honor than this, and I feel the sacredness and gravity of the task. At the end of each interview I feel more human and I think the storytellers do, too.

I imagine how I will someday tell the story that I’m living right now, newly 30 with three little kids. The stories I’ve heard are like guideposts that point me in the direction of the good life. Thanks to them I know that you’re never too young or too old to build an airplane. I know that you should never despise your mother for making you grow long hair as a little boy because it just might be the means by which your brother snatches you from a flowing canal and saves your life. I know that dandelions can be flowers if you want them to be and that the 23rd Psalm can help you dodge a bullet in Vietnam. I know that a Tony Bennett song on a brand new record player can get you through a long hospital stay and that a mother’s promise to God is more binding than blood. I know that poetry is one of the verified paths to a woman’s heart and that CPR works on dogs, too. I know that a goose might show up on your doorstep just in time for Thanksgiving and that sometimes it isn’t until the very end of your journey that you realize what is true.

Yes, I want to be a ghost for the rest of my life. We’ll see what happens after that.