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## Medium

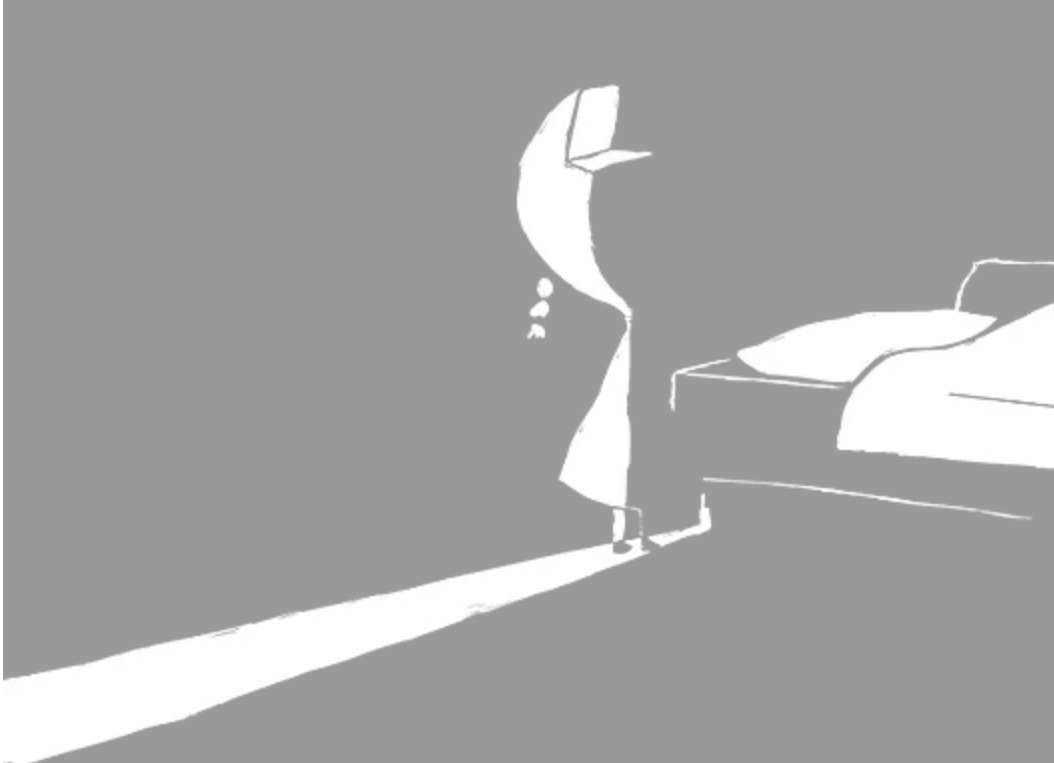
Kevin Clouther

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## KEVIN CLOUTHER | Medium



One ghost and Andrea was hooked. She had to talk with more.

But where to find them? The Internet knew, or claimed to know. The question was who to trust. That was always the question. She could trust her husband. If Nick said he knew where to find a ghost, then she would believe him, but he didn't claim to know this. He didn't even know she wanted to talk with ghosts, not since the first one.

The first ghost was his idea. Although Andrea found the medium, it was Nick who sent Andrea looking. It was fun, in a way, because how often does one go looking for mediums? In her experience, never. Plus, it was easy. Mediums were ranked like everything else on the Internet, where the lowest she would go—for a roast beef sandwich, an electric toothbrush—was three-and-a-half stars. Four stars was better. Four-and-a-half stars—given a certain threshold of reviews—was best. The medium she selected was four-and-a-half stars.

The medium was very particular. She wouldn't meet in person. It wasn't a matter of cost or accessibility. She lived nearby, in an apartment complex Andrea had driven past a million times. It was a matter of integrity. The medium couldn't afford distraction. Even scent was a distraction when you were serious. Andrea wondered about that but not about the medium's seriousness. The medium's fee was more than she expected, but she knew the cost would make the medium worth more to Nick.

Because he'd grown up with money—a lot, to Andrea's mind—he never feared it would disappear. Go down, maybe, but not go away. Spending money might hurt, but it wouldn't kill. Her position was different. She remembered what it meant to covet a bike, a blouse, a sandwich with no imaginable way to get it. No legal way, in any event.

She wanted the medium to be valuable, which wasn't the same as wanting the medium to work. Andrea didn't expect the medium to talk with Nick's mother—that would be insane—but she thought the medium might bring him comfort, a task Andrea had failed to do herself, even if Nick was adamant this wasn't the case. The husband doth protest too much.

When she spoke with the medium, Andrea was surprised by the medium's tone, which was exceedingly normal. The medium arranged the appointment the way one might arrange a car rental, only with greater professionalism. Andrea wondered what other occult activities she could set up appointments for.

The day she and Nick were scheduled to speak with his dead mother, Andrea had second thoughts. Or maybe they were grave reservations. What was clearer than the line between the living and the dead? Who were they to cross this line? She was about to cancel the reservation when her husband came down the stairs looking, for the first time in weeks, happy.

"Thank you for doing this," he said. "I know it's all nonsense, but I feel better."

"I can tell you feel better," she said.

"You know what it's like."

Andrea nodded quickly. She felt, standing at the bottom of the staircase, like it was time to go somewhere. Like it was date night. The boys were at Nick's father's house (his father didn't know what they were doing). But Nick and Andrea weren't going anywhere beyond the living room, where they opened the laptop to video chat with the medium, who looked—truth be told—a little crazy.

She didn't sound crazy. Once she started talking—she started immediately—she sounded like she had on the phone. This put Andrea at ease. It put Nick at ease too. He was the first one to talk when the medium stopped. He thanked her for her time, which she completely ignored. Andrea respected this. The medium was all business.

"I'm getting something," she announced.

"Already?" he asked.

"Shhhhh."

They did. The medium closed her eyes. She was wearing a lot of eye makeup. She hadn't applied it well. Instinctively, Andrea reached for her own eyes. Nick didn't notice. He was waiting for the medium to say something else.

"Well, this is a surprise" was what she said.

How often, Andrea wondered, was it a surprise? The surprise seemed to her well scheduled. The surprise was this: Nick's mother was busy. The next life had more going on than she expected, which wasn't much, considering her Christianity had centered on Christmas.

"Who's there?" Nick asked earnestly.

The medium shook her head. It was unclear just what role she was playing. Was she an interpreter or a conduit? Whose words were Nick and Andrea supposed to be hearing? She wondered if they'd failed to watch an instructional video.

"Is Baby there?" she asked, referencing Nick's mother's beloved cat, who died shortly after they started dating.

Nick's mother never forgave Andrea for this coincidence. He grimaced, and she felt reprimanded. Then she considered how *baby* might sound to someone who wasn't actually speaking with the dead.

"Baby," the medium said sadly, as though she also regretted Andrea's poor taste, "is not here."

"What's my mom doing?"

"I'm getting something else."

Andrea studied her husband, this sweet man, still sometimes a stranger after all these years. He wanted, she could see, to believe. That was understandable. But his openness, his lack of skepticism, his *eagerness*—where did that come from? What happened to nonsense?

"Billy is coming through," the medium said.

Andrea startled. There was only one Billy, the beautiful boy from her adolescence made more beautiful—kept eternally beautiful—by an incomprehensibly early death. Once a month she still thought of him, or the funeral.

Mostly, she thought of his mother, who sat alone in mute horror throughout the ceremony before unleashing a cry unlike any Andrea had heard. So that's what love is, she thought. It never occurred to her you could hear it.

What was Billy doing in her living room? Who invited him here? Nick turned to Andrea like she had an answer.

"What's Billy doing?" she asked.

The medium smiled. She was enjoying herself. Andrea resented this. She resented her own interest. Then a wave of sympathy washed over Andrea. She reached for Nick's wet hand.

"He doesn't want you to worry," the medium said. "It's very important to him that you not worry."

"Who's Billy?" Nick asked.

"You know who Billy is," Andrea said.

"He's at peace," the medium said.

"Where did my mom go?" Nick asked. "Didn't we pay for my mom?"

Andrea tightened her grip. It meant I'm here for you. But also: you don't sound so hot right now.

"He has a message for you." The medium looked at Andrea. "He says it wasn't supposed to go like that."

"Like what?" Nick asked.

"Andrea knows," the medium or Billy said.

It was true. She knew. And while she resented the elliptical strategy the medium was employing, Andrea also appreciated it, for the thing she knew, Nick did not know. She wasn't eager to explore that thing now. They'd paid for his mother, after all.

"Enough," he said unconvincingly.

"Billy doesn't want you to feel any guilt," the medium said. "He doesn't want you to take responsibility, period."

"This is ridiculous."

"He wouldn't have come through if it weren't important to him."

Andrea studied the medium. Did she love her work? It seemed possible. What did that mean she loved—tricking people? Or was it possible she really believed? Andrea had met people delusional in this way, people so synchronized with their lies that they came to believe them. Everyone, probably, is like that to an extent. It wasn't as though she told the truth about everything. She wouldn't trust someone who did.

Billy had lied in the manner of all teenage boys. She didn't mind. She was content to watch him, the way he moved, like the world was a place designed for his gangly grace. Not that *grace* was a word he would use. Where they grew up, *grace* was reserved for a different universe; only the long-dead would think it applied to them. Certainly, there was nothing graceful about the thing he—or the medium—didn't want Andrea to take responsibility for. She attempted to strike this thing from her mind.

She turned her attention to her husband, who looked hurt, impatient. That was her fault. She would make it up to him. It was time for the medium to go. Andrea said this.

But the medium didn't go. She continued to channel Billy while Andrea and Nick waited for things to run their course. When they finally did, the medium looked bereft, and Andrea felt bad. Could the medium be both authentic and full of shit?

Nick leaned into the couch so hard all the cushions moved. She closed the laptop and placed it on the floor, which was forbidden, but the boys weren't here to call her out. She faced her husband, who placed both hands over his face. A lot of things, she thought, could happen next. He might remove his hands to reveal he'd been crying. That would be frightening and unprecedented but also understandable, considering. Or maybe he'd be trembling with rage. He could say anything. What happened was this: he fell asleep. His hands fell away, and he was snoring. She poked him to confirm.

She draped a blanket over him, though it was warm inside. She put the laptop somewhere the boys couldn't reach. Then she poured the amount of white wine she poured when nobody was watching, which was nearly to the top of the glass. She dropped in one ice cube, gently, so nothing spilled. She drank quickly.

They didn't talk about the medium again. They barely talked about Nick's mother. He treated his grief as something better left concealed. This saddened Andrea, though the truth was she didn't want to talk about his mother either. She wanted to talk with more ghosts, which was another thing that felt better left concealed.

What was it about ghosts? She'd never been interested in them before. She'd actively disliked Halloween. She wondered if this interest reflected some late-in-life change. Not that she was late in life. She was barely middle in life. Then she wondered if curiosity was something that required an explanation. Couldn't curiosity exist for the sake of curiosity?

Mostly, she felt like talking to ghosts. She looked up the second highest-rated medium, four-and-a-half stars but fewer reviews. She hoped this medium wasn't friends with the other medium. What if they all hug out at medium bars? Andrea hoped professional code prevented them from discussing their clients.

The second medium—Jane, she insisted, as if to normalize the occult—didn't operate via video chat. Jane liked to meet in person. She selected a coffee shop known for women meeting other women to sell makeup to still other women. Andrea knew because she'd been unsuccessfully recruited on several occasions.

"Andrea." Jane stood when Andrea entered the coffee shop. "Please. Sit."

"How did you know it was me?"

Jane ignored the question. Andrea thought that was a good sign. She sat.

"Tell me," Jane said.

"Tell you what?"

"Who you're trying to reach, of course."

"It's more who I'm trying not to reach."

Jane nodded as if this weren't an insane response. Andrea considered that perhaps it wasn't.

"You like talking to ghosts?" Jane asked.

"I think I might. I don't have a lot of practice."

"You're not being honest with me."

Although Jane stood abruptly, she didn't seem upset.

"Hold on," Andrea said. "I think you misunderstood me."

Jane placed a hand on the back of the chair she'd exited.

"I didn't mean to seem like I wasn't serious," Andrea said.

"I can tell you're serious."

"Good. Because I am."

Saying it made it so. Jane opened her purse. Andrea wanted to look inside, but she resisted. She sat still. She wanted the medium to like her.

"Read this." Jane extended a pamphlet across the table. "Then we'll see."

She left. Andrea remained at the table. She thumbed through the pages, though she had no desire to read them. She wanted to talk with ghosts, not read about them. She pulled out her phone to find the third-best medium. Before she could open the app, her husband called.

"I just realized something," he said. "About who Billy is."

"Was."

"He's the kid you were all obsessed with."

Andrea was accustomed to these realizations. Invariably, they were about something other than the realization.

"The one who died from opioids before anyone had heard of opioids," Nick said.

"We don't know that."

"Back then we just said pills."

They both fell quiet. It meant the conversation was over, though that was only temporarily the case.

Throughout her drive home, Andrea thought about Jane, and Andrea thought about Nick. She wasn't happy with either conversation. Maybe that was her fault. Or maybe it wasn't. She didn't want to take responsibility for something prematurely. She'd taken responsibility for so many things.

Andrea stopped at a gas station. She waited for someone to pump her gas before remembering it wasn't that kind of station. She went to pump her own gas, but the credit card machine didn't work, and she was forced to enter the sad little store adjacent to the pumps. There, behind thick glass or maybe thick plastic, a girl regarded her fingernails with skepticism.

"You think they're too long?" she asked.

"The machine won't take my card," Andrea said.

"Won't take anyone's."

"Twenty dollars on pump whatever." She reached for gum she didn't want. "And this, please."

The girl's fingernails made little clicking noises on the cash register.



"Can I ask you something?" Andrea didn't wait for an answer. "Can I ask if you've ever seen a ghost?"

"Like in real life?"

"Like that."

"Sure."

"Really?"

"Of course."

Andrea signed her receipt. She started scraping at the cellophane around the gum. She'd bitten her nails to the skin. The girl didn't volunteer anything further, and Andrea didn't ask.

In the car, she returned to the pamphlet. She tried to imagine the woman she'd met in the coffee shop going to the copy shop to have the pamphlet created. Andrea buried the pamphlet in her purse. She drove to the cemetery, though she didn't know anyone there.

Most of the gravestones were gray, but some were white. She looked at those carefully. They were all from the last year or two. She was the only person in the cemetery. The only living person.

It was quiet. Even the birds stayed out of the trees. There were a lot of trees. The only things in the cemetery, not counting Andrea and the grass she walked on, were trees and gravestones. Sometimes there were flowers too. Andrea knelt beside each of these gravestones. She wondered who'd left the flowers. Probably everyone wondered that, though maybe not. She doubted many people came to cemeteries without a person in mind. Andrea had a person in mind, just not a person in the cemetery.

One gravestone was smaller than the others, so small she nearly tripped over it. She had to get close to read the name, and even after she did this, it was hard to make out the letters. Eventually, she decided the first name was Liz, though it might have been Liza. There was a wide space after the z where an *a* could have gone.

"I don't mean to bother you," Andrea said. "You probably can't even hear me."

A gust of wind moved its way through a birdless tree. The leaves rustled faintly. There was nobody to tell her it wasn't a sign.

"I don't know who you know or don't, but if you could check on someone, her name is Maureen Ramirez. Five foot three, maybe a hundred forty pounds. Short black hair, which she dyes. Her nose turns red when she's cold."

The leaves were still. Andrea waited for another sign. For her mother, Andrea could wait a long time.

**Kevin Clouther's** debut story collection, *We Were Flying to Chicago*, was published by *Catapult*. His stories have appeared in *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *J Journal*, and *Puerto Del Sol* among other journals, and he has contributed essays to *The Millions*, *NPR*, *Poets & Writers*, *Salon*, and *Tin House*. He has worked on the staffs of *The Iowa Review* and *Meridian*. He holds degrees from the University of Virginia and Iowa Writers' Workshop and is the recipient of the Richard Yates Fiction Award and Gell Residency Award. He is an Assistant Professor at the University of Nebraska Omaha Writer's Workshop, where he serves as Program Coordinator of the MFA in Writing. Stay up-to-date with Kevin Clouther on Twitter [@kevinclouther](https://twitter.com/kevinclouther)