

Amber Spirit

By Olga Godim

Bouncing off the walls, I hurtle around a hospital room. Amber sparks scatter in the air. Why do I do that? The only people in the room, the three green-clad nurses, don't notice my antics. They are fussing with the machines, trying to revive an old lady on a bed. At such speed, I can't be sure, but I don't think my body looked so ugly when I was alive.

I almost stop from a shock. My body? Yes! I am dead. I am free! Free at last from the constant ache in my bones, free from the hated wheelchair. Free from worry about my loutish grandson Colin. Why am I flying? I never believed in any god when I lived, sure I would be rotten meat when I died. Why am I whizzing in all directions like an agitated fly?

I have to slow down and think but I can't. I fly even faster, darting from wall to wall like my great-granddaughter Lily, when she is happy. The silly girl is happy all the time; it is easy to be happy at three. Am I happy? And what am I, if my body is cooling down on the bed? Am I a demented firecracker? Nah. Am I a ghost? Unfortunately, I can't see myself at such velocity. I only see the occasional amber motes trailing in my wake.

Eventually, I manage to grasp a chromium IV stand. I perch on top of the plastic medicine bag. Some useless drug is still dripping into the dead body.

Am I a spirit?

I look towards a dark hospital window for enlightenment. Three reflections are very busy in there. A tall green man's reflection pumps my former chest vigorously. The reflection of a green woman fiddles with the switches on the headboard. The reflection of the third man says, "Once again, on my mark."

Then I notice another reflection in the dark mirror of the window. On top of the IV stand, a vaguely heart-shaped blob, looking like a living amber pendant, pulses with golden highlights.

Is it me?

I switch my gaze back to the room but can't see amber in the dim bluish nightlight, only the green wrinkles of hospital uniforms and the dull metal of the switchboard. I probably can't see my spirit, just like I could never see my eyes, except in a mirror.

But I can see the other people's spirits inside their bodies!

The woman's spirit is a splash of teal. It throws turquoise confetti in my direction. The men's spirits are both maroon, similar like twins. They don't pay attention to me.

Why am I here?

In all the religions I have ever studied, spirits go to some deserved place after death. Where is that place for me? I take off again, slower this time. I practice circling the small chamber, weaving my way over and around the medical devices, even diving under the huge bed. The longer I exercise, the easier it becomes. The old adage is working after all: even for a spirit, practice makes perfect. But where should I fly? I waft closer to the woman, intent to talk to her spirit. Maybe it knows.

It flinches away. "Don't touch me!" it screams. The shower of confetti intensifies. They sting, and I veer off.

"Stop the damn machine, Thomas!" the woman says. "She's gone."

Thomas stops pumping my chest. "Yeah."

The third man turns off every switch on the board, extinguishing all the tiny lights. "Let's do the paperwork. Why is it always on my shift?" His grumble trails off, as all three disappear down the corridor.

I linger, but nobody wants me here. My children probably haven't been notified yet. Even when they are, they wouldn't need me. They will use the corpse. Should I attend my funeral? Nah. I have never gone to a funeral when I was alive: too gloomy for my

taste. I wouldn't change my opinion just because I died. I would leave and search for a new abode. It ought to be better than here.

I sail to the window, attempt to push through, and recoil. An unpleasant brown tingle permeates my being. Is it spiritual pain? I shake it off and bunch myself into a tight amber ball. No brown nuisance will stop me!

I push harder, maneuvering between the stinging strands of grayish brown. I have to zigzag around them like a fish on an obstacle course, but finally, I burst outside, into the crystal-clear night, unhampered by brown.

I speed up over the lights, vibrating with joy. I am climbing to the stars! Alas, when I reach the top of the science building, the tallest in the university compound, I bump into a barrier. An invisible force field is blocking my triumphant ascent. Bummer.

Thwarted in my star-bound flight, I glance around. If I have to stay below, I might as well find myself a comfortable roost. I float above the houses until I locate a cozy slate roof with a huge blooming apple tree over it. I settle at the side of a chimney, on a nice spiritual settee, and try to sort out what has just transpired.

I am a spirit. I know it now, although I am not sure how. In my experience as a reader and a moviegoer, a spirit only stays on earth if it has an unfinished business. What is my unfinished business? I was eighty-three years old my last birthday. I have three decent children, five grandchildren, and even one great-granddaughter, my sunny, wee Lily. I buried two husbands. I worked. I sinned. I planted begonias. What is left?

Of course, I have regrets, who doesn't? Still, the only thing really undone in my life is my writing. I started writing late, although I have always had stories in my head. They have been my best friends, my stories. They kept me going through rough times, and I hoarded them like a miser, never letting anyone know, never sharing.

I started writing when the stories could not sit inside me any longer, and when I had enough leisure to write them down. But then, my first husband died, and I had to work long hours to help the children through college. And then my grandchildren appeared, one after another, and I didn't have time at all. And then, I had just given up. It was too hard to juggle work, husbands, children, and writing. Something had to go, so the writing went, but the stories remained with me. How many of them do I remember?

They rush to my call like old friends, at least a dozen of them, swirling around me and my apple blossoms.

"Write about me first," Andrey insists. His story started in June, 1941, the day the WWII broke the Russian border and the German tanks poured through, spreading destruction and horror over four long, bleeding years.

"No, write about me first." This is Daphne, my historian. "You don't need to write about war. My adventures are much more fun. You can play with magic in my story." I almost see her brown eyes twinkling.

Before I can object that spirits don't write stories, another one intrudes. And another. They all crowd around me, real and fantastical, stretching hands and wings, so dear, so close: my unborn children. Do they keep me here? How can I finish this business?

Then a simple and brilliant solution hits me. Of course! I must look for another body, a living one, here on campus. With so many young and foolish student bodies around, I should be able to find one and take possession. I don't know how, but I would cross that bridge when I come to it. I would live again. And this time, no matter what, I would write.

***Will this displaced spirit find a body?
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