



BOOK EXTRACT

KARINA
MACHADO

The reluctant medium

**A NURSE REVEALS
HER VERY SPECIAL
RELATIONSHIP WITH
THE OTHER SIDE**



Speaking at her home on a Saturday afternoon, Bev is uncomfortable at first. From her small, tense voice, it's clear that it's literally hard for her to expel the words. Apart from one or two trusted friends, few know that straight-shooting Bev can see the people, as she calls them. For Bev's spirits don't waft or glide or float, they walk with their feet on the ground and seem built of flesh and blood. But there is one way she can tell that they're not: "It's usually the look on their faces," she says. "A look of despair."

Like so many of the women I have spoken to, Bev can peer into a landscape that isn't quite this world, nor quite the next – it's a place where the dead tread the same earth as us, watch the world push past them in the supermarket, stand sentinel at the side of the road and take the empty seat in a classroom. Bev can't forget the lonely children she saw at school, though she never did get a sense of why they were there, or who they'd been in life. "They all seemed to be not well-off," she recalls. "This little boy who used to sit in one classroom, he never had any lunch, he never ate. He would just sit in class and listen to everything."

How did she know he wasn't alive? "Because none of the other children could see him," she says.

blunt by the years, but I find the image of the skipping girl hot and sharp, something to be held then swiftly released. Instead, she sticks fast. Arriving early to pick up my daughter from school one day, I can almost see the sepia girl in the empty playground, her skipping rope slapping the asphalt like a heartbeat.

The spirit schoolkids weren't the only 'people' Bev saw as a child. Between the ages of 3 and 12, she had a "spirit person friend" named Madge, an apparition who was "solid; I wouldn't have known her any different from anybody else", states Bev. "She was a very old lady. She had grey hair with a little bun in the back, and she always wore a very faded brown

dress with a creamy-coloured half-apron over the top. She would have been lucky to have been five-foot."

From her style of dress, Bev thinks Madge lived in the Victorian era and that she was a spirit attached to their home, where Bev lived with her family – her mum, a nurse, her dad, who was a bookmaker and fruit delivery man, and her three siblings. After Bev let slip about Madge to her mum one day, she learned quick-smart never to do it again. "My brother and sisters started teasing me about my imaginary friend. And I know that she wasn't imaginary, I've seen people like her all the time."

Bev believed Madge was a living person until she had to go

into hospital as a 7-year-old. "She wasn't there! When I went back home I asked her where she'd been. She said she can't come and visit me, she can't leave [the house]." Looking back, Bev believes that Madge, the kindly old spirit nanny who "looked like a wrinkled-up little apple", was assigned to her, that their coming together was no random event. She only stopped seeing her when the family moved homes.

"I think she was there because I needed her to be there," reflects Bev, who would sit with Madge in the cubby house to play dolls, or make mud pies with her in the backyard. "I think she was my guardian angel."

Was Madge a ghost – an earthbound spirit who hadn't

entered the light, as the theory goes – or a spirit who had crossed over and returned in visitation to guard Bev in her most vulnerable years? Either way, it is only in the last 15 years that Bev says she has realised that not everyone had a version of Madge in their childhood.

Not everything is as simple in Bev's dealings with the spirit world. It troubles her, for instance, that she doesn't know how to assist the dead who flock to her. While some apparitions seem mere snapshots of the past – like the old man with the wood-churning machinery who would materialise by Bev's bed, waking her up with his noisy task – others expect more from her.

"I used to have one lady who would keep singing out for help: 'Help me, help me, help me,'" says Bev, who couldn't see the woman, but could hear her as clearly as if she were in the next room.

Exasperated, she would yell, "I don't know how to help you!" while her kids stared at her, wide-eyed. Eventually, the pleading ceased.

Similarly, four years ago, a boy in well-to-do turn-of-the-century dress began appearing to Bev at her former home. When the family left that house, he moved with them, and of all the spirits she has encountered, Bev, the reluctant medium, says this sweet lost boy affected her the most. Wearing breeches, his long hair in ringlets, the boy – aged around 10 – would whimper the same stark refrain. "I could be watching TV of a night and he'd be standing there, saying 'Help me, help me'. I could be in bed trying to go to sleep and he'd be standing there saying 'Help me, help me'. I could be cooking tea, I could be anywhere ..."

Through gritted teeth, Bev could only throw out her standard retort – "I don't know how to help you" – until one day, she knew he would never return. "I'll never forget it. It was a Sunday afternoon and the three children were watching a movie. He appeared where the children were and he smiled. He looked so content. I smiled back at him, and he never came back. I just think that he found somebody who could help him."

Bev's 13-year-old son, Trent, has inherited her gift. One day, at the cricket, amidst the hubbub of Saturday sport, mother and son spotted a lone child, barefoot, perched on a camping chair following the game, unnoticed by anyone else. "What's that little boy doing by himself all day?" Trent asked his mum. "He's right, mate," she replied.

This everyday mum, from an everyday country town, feels blessed on the days she goes to work and witnesses proof that life survives death, that love survives death. "Someone could tell you that and you'd have doubts. You'd think, 'Is this what really happens?' But when you've seen it for yourself and you know that there really are family members sitting there waiting to take you when it's your time to go, I just think it's so beautiful for people to know that."

"And I know that I know that. Out of everything, that's probably peace, for me."

burn me at the stake."

Growing up in the 1960s, she spent her primary school years alongside ghostly classmates only she could see. She just let them be, never wondering why no-one else spotted the sad-eyed outsiders, never publicising that she could. "I tried not to be noticed," says Bev, whose scrawny frame made her a target for bullies. Only rarely did she drop her guard and mention the children to a friend.

"I feel sorry for that little girl over there," she'd say. "Which

"I ABSOLUTELY LOVE IT WHEN I SEE THE FAMILY WAITING FOR THEM."

little girl?"

"The one over there, the one with the dirty clothes on." "I don't know what you mean," shrugged her friend.

"Eventually, I stopped mentioning it to anybody."

Today, Bev has three children of her own, and a husband whose credo is: 'What's black is black and what's white is white; unless you can see it, it doesn't happen.' The 46-year-old still lives in the same country town where she grew up, and still keeps her secret wound tightly inside herself.

"I knew that if they'd seen him they would have been tormenting him." She never approached the loners because in that sense at least, she could be like the other kids. "It was usually the ones who never ate lunch, I knew they weren't there [in body]. And nobody played with them. A lot of the time this little girl would be standing there, watching everybody else play, but sometimes she'd have a skipping rope and she'd be skipping by herself."

For Bev, the memory is worn



Edited extract from 10th anniversary edition of *Spirit Sisters* by Karina Machado, \$32.99, published by Hachette on Jan. 28.



DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO SHARE ON THE GHOST FILES PODCAST? WE'D LOVE TO HEAR ABOUT IT. EMAIL KARINAMACHADO@OPTUSNET.COM.AU WITH A SUMMARY OF YOUR EXPERIENCE AND YOUR CONTACT DETAILS.

