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## INTRODUCTION

If you ask most people what they think about what happens in séance rooms—knocks or raps, levitating tables, ectoplasmic forms, disembodied limbs and so on—they'll tell you it's all bunk and superstition. Any skeptic will inform you that it's all done by trickery carried out by skilled magicians to bilk the credulous. Ectoplasm? Nothing more than regurgitated cheesecloth. Houdini even demonstrated how tables could be surreptitiously levitated by sly swamis, especially if the sitters were uncritical bereaved families.

On the other extreme are the spiritualists who believe that these phenomena, which defy the laws of physics, are caused by the spirits of deceased persons who are trying to communicate with the living and are not bound by earthly physical restraints.

My view in this book lies somewhere between these two extremes. Yes, there have been, and are, frauds and magicians who produce miraculous-seeming effects, but there are also many cases in which the fraud theory collapses when they are scrutinized more closely and the evidence is examined.

I already subscribed to this middle view when I first met Gilbert Roller in 1973. I enrolled in Gil's course in "Paramechanics," or physical psychic phenomena, at the New School for Social Research in New York, and although I thought that I knew a great deal about psychic phenomena I was ignorant of some of the more spectacular and mind-bending phenomena of which he spoke. We eventually became close friends and over time I learned that Gil was a multi-talented artist who had had some unusual experiences as a child and even more extraordinary experiences in his teens.

At the time I knew of the psychiatrist named Montague Ullman but had no idea that it was because of his participation in Gil's teenage séance explorations that Ullman had become a parapsychologist. Though he had spoken to other psychic researchers of these early experiences, he had never gone public with them, fearing, I believe, that he would be ridiculed and ostracized by the medical and scientific community, a fate suffered by many scientists who dare report on anomalous findings that challenge the

established world-view.

Some of the researchers who knew of Gil's séances, which became known as the "Bindelof Case," felt that it was incomparable because of the kinds of phenomena produced and because of its careful documentation. They felt that it should be published for more than just the parapsychological community. I agreed. Gil and Larry, another member of the original Bindelof group whom you'll meet later, urged me to write their story for the general public.

I felt it would be more interesting if Gil wrote his own story, but with his usual modesty, he was reluctant to do so. Consequently I wrote it and then had Gil and Larry, both of them known for their wit and humor, add details and go over it for accuracy. I think you'll find the result entertaining as well as fascinating.

In the second part of the book, I will delve into the history of physical phenomena, that is, phenomena such as psychokinesis (PK), or the moving or otherwise affecting of objects by psychic power, as opposed to "mental" phenomena or ESP. I have provided this historical background not only to educate the reader but also to place the Bindelof case within a wider framework and to help clarify what it means in the context of séance research. I hope as well to shed more light on these intriguing manifestations and the special people who produced them.

You will read here about true instances of levitating tables-- *and people*-- real organic ectoplasm (not cheesecloth) exuding from the bodies of entranced mediums and forming hands, limbs, and even phantoms who speak and walk among observers, all under the controlled conditions and the critical eyes of competent investigators.

Who or what the source of these mind-boggling occurrences is, however, remains a mystery. Are these forces the manifestations of discarnate spirits, as believers insist, or are they "merely" manifestations of certain gifted or extraordinary living people? What indeed *are* these forces and what implications do these phenomena have for science?

In the final section of this book I'll concentrate on 20<sup>th</sup> Century mediums, some of them "secular mediums," such as Ted Serios, who could imprint his mental images on film; Nina Kulagina, the former Soviet soldier and housewife whose feats were observed and filmed by Russian scientists; and the Canadian "Philip" group, who invented their own ghostly communicator.

I'll also provide suggestions for developing your own sitter-group, should

you be encouraged to do so, and give additional sources of information on other mediums and paranormal phenomena so that you may continue to explore this mysterious and fascinating subject.

PART ONE:  
THE BINDELOF CASE

## PROLOGUE: GIL'S STORY

**I**t was a Saturday night in the first week of October 1933. In Mayor Jimmy Walker's Manhattan people who had labored hard all week splurged on movie tickets to *Flying down to Rio* featuring the new dance team of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, while young men put protective arms around the shoulders of their dates in the dark theaters where Edward G. Robinson menaced the populace. Six floors above the street at 38 Fort Washington Avenue, behind drawn shades in a small bedroom, a group of teenage boys also sat in the dark.

I was with them, crowded around a small two-tiered nightstand, our hands resting lightly on top of the table, fingers touching those of the boy on either side. On the floor our feet touched also so that any movement by one would be felt by his neighbor.

We listened intently to the sounds of the pencil we had placed on the lower shelf as it raced across a piece of yellow paper, guided by an unseen hand. The writing stopped abruptly. The pencil was slapped down sharply. We heard the sound of crumpled paper. Then silence.

One boy sprang up to turn on the lights. Another reached under and retrieved the tightly crumpled ball, opening it carefully as the others impatiently crowded around to read. Near the end of a long printed message, written faster in the dark than any of us could have managed in the best of circumstances, we read the words "MY NAME WAS DR. BINDELOF . . . WILL YOU BE THE DISCIPLES OF A DEAD MAN?"

This is not a scene from a Stephen King novel. This is a true story of mind-boggling but actual occurrences. How did this scene come about? Who was Dr. Bindelof? Who were these intense young men?

My name is Gil Roller. The first part of this book is my story, a story that may change the way you look at reality. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's start at the beginning.



# CHAPTER 1

## FAMILY AND FRIENDS

### OLGA, LIZ, AND ME

**M**y mother, Olga, was an unusually beautiful and gifted woman. Her lovely lyric soprano voice, her dramatic temperament, and her grace contributed to her success as a singing actress. She appeared in operettas, especially those of Victor Herbert, which were very popular in the first two decades of the century. She met and married the young scion of a prominent Argentinean family, who was in the United States to buy battleships for his government, and after I was born, in 1915, Olga moved to Argentina with her new family.

My mother's idea of marriage clashed with the Argentinean concept of what a wife and mother should be and it wasn't long before she returned to the U.S., obtained a divorce, and little Gilberto became me, Gilbert Roller.

To support us Olga went back to the theater, traveling all over the United States and Europe. I was cared for by governesses and later attended private schools here and abroad. My only playmate was my aunt Ellie, my maternal grandmother's change-of-life baby, who was only a few months younger than I was and lived with us for a time. We required *two* governesses because together we were a formidable team and too much for one poor woman to handle.

My first decade of life is shrouded in a dream-like mystery. I never really had a father, so to speak; I grew up like Topsy. My mother never spoke of my father and I didn't learn of him until I was seventeen or eighteen. We didn't live a normal family life. Mother was on the road all the time. I would be sent for, to join her, so my schooling was pretty well messed up. We went to Europe for a year. I was taken out of school again. Then when we came back from Europe, we took this apartment on Riverside Drive and I wondered why, because it was a fairly large apartment. It was all furnished. It was then that I was informed that the man whom I called Uncle Eddie was to be my father.

My mother was “a mystic.” Two of her fellow performers, the Dolly Sisters, international vaudeville stars in the 1920s, were psychic and held séances in which Olga participated. She had many books on psychic phenomena, which I read avidly as I grew older. Psychic phenomena just became part of my life, like any other “normal” experience, resulting in a certain mystical personal philosophy.

My stepfather, Eddie Fink, was a basically warm, charming and lovable guy. He was a brilliant pianist who would sit at the piano in his pajama bottoms, with his hairy chest exposed and a cigar in his mouth, singing while he played. He was surrounded by women in his work and Olga was away performing much of the time: Trouble was bound to develop.

And, of course, Olga was a temperamental artist. My friends thought our home was wonderful, filled with music and art, and good times, but I remember the earlier times as monstrous and terrible. There was considerable tension between my parents and violent fights: Mother had a temper that was absolutely without equal. She’d scream, “Oh, no you don’t!” and she would destroy a whole kitchen of china. The place would look like a battlefield, and Eddie would actually clean it up. I would of course become panicky. I would scream and yell. It was absolute madness.

These scenes were frequent occurrences. Often, after one of these marital wars, Olga would take me and move out. It became a ritual. I retreated into my many interests. I had inherited my mother’s musical ability and played the piano. I loved to draw, and developed skill as a photographer. But I had troubling dreams.

One day, in the midst of this tumultuous life, when I was about 12 or 13, odd things began to occur at home. We would hear a soft “whizzing” sound followed by a “clink.” Upon investigating we’d find one of the hairpins Olga used to do up her long, luxurious tresses. These hairpins would be “thrown” from her bedroom, when no one was in there. At times the pins would be flung from the dresser at the door as someone left the otherwise unoccupied bedroom. We would hear them striking the back of the door and upon reopening it we’d find the pins on the floor behind the door. Wooden knobs from shoe trees would be “pulled off” and flung across a room. We would enter the living room to find oatmeal scattered evenly over the rug. I was generally in the apartment during these occurrences but not always in the room where they took place. When I was not at home the phenomena were less intense.

Olga tried to make light of it. We named whatever this force was “Liz.”

We'd speak to it commanding, "Liz, throw something!" And, sure enough, "ping," something would go flying across the room. It was exciting fun at times, but the manifestations became more violent.

Dishes would come crashing off counters or shelves. We'd return home to find the words "GO, GO" crayoned in huge--four or five feet tall--printed letters on the walls.

Some of the violence actually seemed directed against me. Once as I was walking in the street a milk bottle came plummeting down, crashing a few feet in front of me. Another time I heard a commotion coming from a wooden cabinet in which I kept my most treasured possessions including a shiny blue Lionel electric engine. The racket stopped abruptly as I opened the cabinet door. To my dismay I discovered the wreckage of my engine. It had been torn into pieces. Its body had been ripped away from the wheels; wires were dangling from it as from a disemboweled animal. It looked as if it had been senselessly attacked with a sledgehammer.

This time Eddie called in the well-known psychical researcher, Hereward Carrington, to investigate the occurrences. The tall, imposing Carrington regarding me with suspicion, went through my pockets, found some hairpins and a rubber band among the contents, and concluded that I was responsible for the outbreaks. What is more, nothing out of the ordinary took place while he was there, strengthening his opinion that "this highly emotional child" was most likely the cause. I was heartbroken. Not only was my favorite possession destroyed, but I was being blamed for these things that I hadn't done (as far as I was aware at the time) as well.

My case, however, might have contributed to Carrington's theories associating poltergeist outbreaks with puberty. In 1930 he was to write: "An energy seems to be radiated from the body . . . when the sexual energies are blossoming into maturity. . . . It would almost seem as if these energies instead of taking the normal course . . . find this curious means of externalization."

Whatever the researcher's conclusions, relations grew even more strained between my parents. Although Eddie loved me, he felt that these were mischievous pranks: He couldn't accept the "poltergeist" explanation. Olga felt, rightly or wrongly, that he had brought Carrington in to discredit *her* son. Their violent arguments escalated until Mother took "Liz's" advice to "GO," and went, taking me with her.

We rented rooms from some of my mother's old friends with whom she had had successful séances in the past with some minor physical

occurrences. Once settled, Olga persuaded these people to sit for a séance. For the first time I was allowed to participate. Following Victorian tradition, we sat in a darkened room around a table. The room was hushed except for occasional muffled street noises. We waited in the dark room lighted only by the street lamps that filtered in through the heavy old-fashioned wide slats of the Venetian blinds. Suddenly the curtains at the closed window began to billow out as though blown by strong gusts of wind, and furniture began to slide away from the walls. A heavy, overstuffed easy chair came sliding toward us from a corner of the room. The landlords screamed and fled. That ended my first séance.

In time my parents reconciled their differences and decided to start again in another location, taking an apartment on the then upper middle-class Fort Washington Avenue. There we lived somewhat more peacefully with only sporadic outbreaks of “poltergeistery.”

## LEONARD AND ME . . . AND LARRY

It was late summer, 1929. New Yorkers went busily about their business, blissfully unaware of the great financial catastrophe about to shake the world. I was new to Washington Heights. I was kind of a loner, without friends or even acquaintances in this new neighborhood. My only acquisition as a friend was Leonard Lauer, another teenager nearly a year younger than I was, but advanced beyond me in school. Leonard was one of the generations of intellectually gifted New York City children who, like human express trains skipping certain stops, were sped through the school system, starting high school at the age of 12. At about 15 they were deposited, insecure and often out of emotional sync with their more mature classmates, at the doorsteps of colleges and universities. Leonard, at 13, was about to begin his second semester at Townsend-Harris High School, a school for gifted boys.

Lenny was handsome, self-assured to the point of arrogance, and convinced of his scholastic superiority. He wouldn't associate with anyone who he thought didn't have a sufficiently large brain. For me, I suppose it was more a matter of desperation than companionship at the beginning. But our chemistry was similar. It came as rather an emotional shock. Leonard was as much of an extrovert as I was an introvert.

He was attracted to my entire family. I suppose we were quite different from any of the other people he knew. He was charmed by Eddie, the personable pianist, and enchanted by the beautiful, talented Olga. As for

me, not only was I someone who could match him intellectually, but in his eyes I had talents he lacked. I was a gifted musician and artist, and, as he told me later, he was in awe of my sensitivity and creativity.

Our intellectual conflict or rivalry, especially his attitude about his intellectual superiority, would result in a chain of events that changed our lives. As Lenny later commented about himself, “I was trying to be smart.” And I wasn’t about to let him lord it over me.

He had been reading H. L. Mencken and was showing off his information in oratorical fashion one day, trying to one-up me, so I retaliated by putting down my cerebral friend’s knowledge as unimportant, especially as compared with the profound truths of which *I* was aware.

“Mencken!” That’s surface knowledge. If you want to learn something really important I’ll give you a few books that’ll educate you to things you haven’t even dreamed of.”

“Like, what, Oh learned one?”

We went up to my apartment and I grabbed T. J. Hudson’s *Psychic Phenomena and the Scientific Demonstration of the Future Life*. “Read this, oh smart ass, although I doubt that you’ve got the brains to comprehend it.”

I started to talk about what seemed to him at first completely “crazy, irrational stuff”—the “occult” is what he called it. He knew nothing about psychic phenomena. He believed that things like this didn’t happen. Up to that time Len had considered these phenomena and psychical research as fraud, pseudoscience, and charlatanism. He considered himself a budding young scientist and had a hard-nosed view of science as “the only source of truth.” But he accepted the challenge. The book was so scholarly that he was willing to give it a go. It smacked of mystery—a sort of adventure that intrigued him.

I didn’t reveal what had happened in my own home at first, but started by telling him about things I had witnessed with my mother at that séance at the boarding house. He trusted my intelligence and I was pretty sure he believed me.

I supplied him with other books from my own and my mother’s library: F. W. H. Myers’s *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, and books by some of the most respected scientists of their day. These included the great French physiologist, Charles Richet; the distinguished Italian physician, psychiatrist, and anthropologist, Cesare Lombroso; and the German physician, psychical researcher, and hypnotist, A. von Schrenck-Notzing.

Leonard was impressed, as I knew he would be, by the stature of these eminent scientists who had devoted a considerable portion of their lives to investigating and attempting to understand these phenomena. They wrote factual accounts of table tiltings and levitations, and of séances in which messages were seemingly communicated through mediums to the living from “discarnate entities” or dead people.

Leonard was fascinated and, as I became more at ease with him, I told him about my poltergeist experiences and of my mother’s sittings with the Dolly Sisters and others. Now he was really intrigued. Well, the two of us decided, if the Dolly Sisters could do it, so could we!

One evening when the Lauers had gone out and Len’s younger brother was asleep we took the opportunity to try our first sitting. We imitated the format traditionally followed in the Victorian séances we had read about in the books and in copies of the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* that we had found in the New York Public Library: You darkened the room, everybody was quiet, some person acted as spokesman, and you talked to thin air as though there were somebody there. And in these things we had been reading about, something responded.

We started with a light bridge table. We pulled down the shades and turned off the light. Of course this was New York City where, except in a blackout, the skies are never dark and light filters in and around drawn shades or blinds. Once the eyes dark-adapt other persons and objects in the room can be seen relatively well.

We held hands across the table sitting for periods of about 20 minutes with no results. Our arms got tired and we leaned on the table. We’d break for a glass of water or milk then resume, changing tactics, experimenting with sitting next to each other so we could just put our finger tips on the table and touch one another’s hands without adding any weight. We rolled back the carpet so the table would be able to slide over the polished wooden floor—we never doubted that it would—but . . . no results.

A day or two later we tried again. This time we began to get “threatened movements,” that is, creakings or slight motions. Every strain, every shift that your arms made produced a sound, and there was much more of that the second night: That was all the encouragement we needed.

In order to determine whether or not there was actual movement we chalked circles on the floor around the table legs and on the third or fourth evening we got what we thought was a sliding motion.

“You feel it move?”

“*You* feel it move?”

“It *did* move, didn’t it?”

We jumped up to turn on the lights and, sure enough, *there* was the ring and *here* was the leg. Over on the other side *there* was the ring and *here* was the leg!

From then on things began to happen quickly. Instead of waiting forever, we’d sit there and wait for a little while and all of a sudden you could feel life in the table. We’d say, “Move to the right!” Zhoom, it would slide. “Move to the left!” Zhoom, the other way. We barely touched the table to insure that neither of us was exerting the force necessary to move it.

“OK,” we said, “Now we’re gonna communicate.” We informed the table that we were going to call out letters of the alphabet and that it should move at the letter it wanted. At first the table would “get eager” and slide at every letter. Then we would recite, “A, B, C, D...” and it would be quiet, as though it were chastised, and wouldn’t move at all.

We decided to try tilting instead of sliding. In a short time we got it to do that too. Two legs would come up off the floor and the bridge table would take a little bow. We asked it questions using the code of two tilts for no, one for yes, and tried to get it to spell out messages. Nothing very significant was communicated. Once in a while we would get a reflection of something that was on our minds, for example, if it was getting late it might spell out, “your mother,” a reminder that Len’s mother would be returning soon and Len was afraid of getting caught doing something “weird.”

With each sitting, however, the table gained in strength and dexterity. At the beginning it tilted rather feebly or indefinitely. Later it became a smart, military kind of response and we were much encouraged.

One evening I said, “Let’s try for levitation.”

Now up until this point there was a great deal of distrust.

“Ya *sure* ya didn’t lean on it?”

“You put your hands on top of mine!”

I was just as suspicious of Len as Len was of me.

Suspicious finally evaporated, however, during the levitation trials. We were working with the table on the bare wooden floor, the rug having been removed. We asked the table to levitate and sat and waited. Gradually it started to rotate under our hands. We tried to follow it around but this became impossible as the table slid out from under our fingers. It began to



gyrate more rapidly, revolving around the room and rotating as it revolved, much the same as the earth's simultaneous turning on its axis and around the sun.

There was no sitting down, of course, or keeping in contact with each other's hands. The table was leading *us*.

On the second night of this wild movement, the table suddenly came up off the floor. It seemed to rise about six inches into the air before settling down again. Rather stunned, we switched on the lights and looked at one another. Had we really done it? We went back and tried again. Before the night was over we were getting the table up to about shoulder height. There was no mistaking it: Wonder of wonders, we had got it to levitate!

We were bursting with excitement. In our exhilaration we needed to share our experience, to show others what we had accomplished. But most people would think we were nuts! Len was afraid to tell his mother: He still felt as if we were doing something she would consider weird or wrong. And my family was still reeling from the poltergeist-like episodes: I thought my mother would be upset to know that we were consciously invoking these same phenomena that had created such dissension in our family.

But there was no sitting on this thing. We had to tell somebody. At the beginning of the new semester, in January or February of 1930, Len decided to confide in another unusually precocious and talented schoolmate of his at Townsend-Harris named Larry Levin.

Larry had an extremely unhappy home life, which he was to describe in black humor, many years later: "I was brought up in a lower middle class family. My father was a professional gambler, unsuccessful, and as a result, we were prematurely poverty-stricken. We had the distinction of having been dispossessed from an apartment in 1926 at the height of prosperity. But we had foresight. We knew the crash was coming and we didn't want to get into the bad habit of living well, so we started early."

This talented thirteen year old, who would leave high school in another few months to become an apprentice actor in the workshop of the famous actress Eva Le Gallienne, was a kindred spirit with whom Lenny had had many profound discussions during their first year at Harris. Larry also hung around the neighborhood because his home life was so depressing. He was part of a group of boys who were interested in hypnosis. One of them was a good subject and someone would put him in a deep sleep and put a penny on his arm suggesting it was hot. To their amazement, it left a



burn mark on the boy's arm. It was Larry, therefore, to whom Lenny first entrusted our precious secret.

Larry reacted predictably with skepticism but went along for the ride. He became an instant believer. In his very first sitting, after a short wait, we got movement of the bridge table at which we sat, and some rapping sounds. Larry was hooked. By the third sitting we got an extremely powerful levitation. The table actually rose far above our heads so that we found ourselves in the peculiar position of feeling that we were holding it down. Larry, who was three or four inches shorter than we were, complained that he could no longer reach the table top. Leonard said, "Hold on to the legs." Larry grabbed the legs—and pulled! The table, which usually gentled itself down, came crashing to the floor, fracturing one of its legs in the process.

The three of us met on and off for the next year or so obtaining movements, tiltings, levitations, and "raps," or knocking sounds that seemed to emanate from the table.

But we saw little or nothing of each other in the summer of 1932. Larry came with my family and me to Sheepshead Bay where we rented a place for a couple of weeks. Then Larry got a job selling magazines that took him on a long trip west. He ended up with a friend of his family in Dallas. The friend gave him the \$7.00 to pay a man who spent his time driving paying passengers around the country, and he arrived back in New York in December. We corresponded regularly during that time, writing nonsense letters decorated with funny drawings and addressing them with weird titles. Unfortunately, neither of us saved them for posterity.