

SPOOKS

AN ACCOUNT BY

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Origins

Three spooky incidents from my life, for which I hope there is a mundane explanation, otherwise the accounts I relate here don't bear thinking about.

Spooks

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Spooks

Did you feel something just blow across the back of your neck? Does the furniture creak in the dark, just after you've turned out the light? Was that a shadow flitting across the wall of a darkened room, or were your eyes playing tricks on you? You can never be sure, but you tell yourself there's nothing there. You probably noticed these things because you've just put down a book of ghost or horror stories

I enjoy reading them too. Sometimes I have to put them down before bedtime, and I'll admit that I have also left the hall light on at nights, just in case. For me, the essential element of a good story is that it should be just about plausible.

In our every day lives there is no concrete evidence that such spooks and horrors exist. Many of us live in modern houses and work in

offices or factories that are not old enough to have accumulated a burden of spooks. Yet we know the spine chill that comes with a good ghost story. Why? Ask friends and colleagues if they really believe in these nether spirits and most will reply that they don't. Then they'll tell you of something that happened to someone they knew.

Could it be that most of us have experienced something that leaves us with a suspicion that can be teased by the ghost story writer? When I look back on my own life there are events that just might not have an explanation in the solid physical world we see around us.

Let me tell you of three incidents that might, or might not, have been due to real live spooks. Each of the incidents that follows is true, in the

sense that these things really happened to me. The interpretation is, well, let's leave that to the imagination.

* * * * *

I was twelve years old. I was suffering from a dreadful cold and had been kept at home from school. It might have been one of those 'flu epidemics that come out of Asia every so often. We lived in an old Victorian house. It had beautiful tiled fireplaces and marbled mantel-pieces, a little conservatory where I grew cacti, and a garden with some waste land at the back, where poplars swayed in the nighttime breezes. There was nothing spooky about the house itself, it was just home. Familiar, safe, the place where I grew up. However, there were some odd things that used to happen now and again. Like the twitch I'd get in my leg when trying to get to sleep, as if someone was tapping me to get my attention. Two taps, just that. I thought nothing of it, because I sometimes suffer cramps in my legs at night, even now. It was just a muscular twitch. My sister, when I left home, claimed my room for herself, and later reported that some nights, as

she tried to get to sleep, she would feel something tapping her leg. Just two taps.

That night when I was twelve and suffering from 'flu, I was laying in the darkness, trying to sleep. My room had French windows leading to the conservatory. Beyond the conservatory was our garden, lit by starlight and a little light from street lamps out front. What happened that night has remained with me for the whole of my life, but not with the dread terror I experienced then. I was looking at the French windows when part of the darkness coalesced into something darker. It took on the shape of a broad-shouldered human figure, and there in the darkness I knew it was looking at me.

I tried to convince myself that my eyes were simply struggling to make sense of the lack of light, and failing. Like the light switches that seem to wiggle in the dark when there isn't enough light to see them properly. I was trying to convince myself that my eyes were playing tricks in the dark.

Imagine my shock when the dark form moved, and slowly walked toward my bed. The shock

turned to terror as this piece of darkness came and stood over me. I did then what every twelve-year-old would do in my place - I took a deep breath and hid under the blankets. Every time I came up for air, there was the same darkness standing over me, blocking out the little light that came through the French windows. I sank beneath the blankets again, convinced that night time terrors could not penetrate that magic barrier of blankets. Then something tapped my leg, twice. I screamed. And screamed and screamed and screamed. One of my parents came to the rescue and turned the light on. There was nothing in the room but my feverish imagination. Or was there?

* * * * *

Later in life, when I was a junior manager in a computer company, I was sent to a junior manager's course. We were one of those newly rich technology companies. Like most of them, we thought that old houses and mansions used as offices and training centres would give us some kind of legitimacy with our more established customers. The junior manager's

course was held in just such a mansion. It was a small 17th Century manor house, typical of southern England.

We arrived on Sunday afternoon and worked through to Friday afternoon. The day's lectures, role-playing sessions, and simulations began after breakfast and continued through the day, with breaks for lunch, tea and coffee, and dinner, until ten at night. It was intensive, and we were tired at the end of the day. We were also young, and stayed up until three each morning.

The rooms were magnificently furnished. Mine had a massive old fashioned bed, heavy drape curtains, and a view over a driveway shaded by old trees. I couldn't sleep properly in that room. Each night I went to bed tired enough to drop, but I'd wake up, listening. Once I woke up feeling as though some kind of weight was pressing down on me. Another time I felt as if someone had jogged me awake, but there was nobody there. One breakfast time I told the others sitting at my table, and a couple of them reported the same things. Some of us had the feeling of being accompanied along the upstairs corridor when

we were on our own.

On Wednesday night, after a particularly hard day's learning and role-playing, some idiot suggested that the house was a good place to hold a seance. We were young and unafraid, willing to try anything that promised a laugh at the end of it. The night porter came in with a tray of mugs, the nightcap he made for us about eleven each night. We had written the letters of the alphabet on slips of paper and arranged them on a low circular table. The porter dropped the tray onto the table and pointed to one of the locked rooms, an office. He was trembling and genuinely afraid.

"Things have happened in that room," he said, then pointed to our preparation for the seance. "Don't do that in this house."

He went back to his night office and locked himself in. We laughed at first, but none of us had the courage to continue. The next morning we asked the woman who managed the house what the porter was afraid of. She told us that students on previous courses had reported noises from the room, and the next morning office staff would

find that papers had been thrown around. If a piece of paper was left in a typewriter, random letters would have been typed across the paper. The room had a heavy security lock on the door, and the windows had security devices, but no alarm was ever triggered.

Intrigued, we asked for the history of the house. It seems that the house was once owned by a man, the local squire, who was in love with one of the village girls. Such was their power in those days that he was able to force her to marry him, but she loved a young man in the next village. Married against her will, she refused to give herself to her husband, and terrible fights occurred that were the talk of the area. One night, he couldn't contain his rage any more and beat his reluctant bride to death, in that very room, so local legend tells it. The power of the local gentry was not absolute, however, and he was hanged for her murder. We were fascinated, and still unafraid of the house, though afraid enough not to try another seance.

The course finished and we set off for our homes around the country. On the train into London, talk

turned to our haunted house. Most of the men reported the same things that had happened to me, but none of the women had experienced them. Did the spirit of that unfortunate young woman still roam the house? Did she relive that fateful night when the moon was bright and the season of her death returned?

Our company sold the mansion during one of the frequent rationalizations that swept our industry. Someone involved in the decision told me later that some managers wanted to keep the house, but were overruled by those that had stayed there. 'There were too many disturbances' was my contact's excuse. Students couldn't concentrate, some even moved into local hotels rather than sleep there.

All these years later I'm left with the feeling that perhaps the spirit of that young woman was pleading with the young men who stayed there, pleading for help, for protection, and we failed her. None of the women who stayed in the house ever reported any disturbance, just a feeling of great sadness.

* * * * *

The next account is probably the most unspooky ghost incident you have ever read, and possibly the only time I have ever been confronted with a ghost 'in the flesh'. The event probably has a mundane explanation, but I've never found one.

I had left my job and was leaving the area for pastures new. I needed some minor dental work done. I climb walls of terror simply making an appointment for an examination, but overcame this because I knew the terror would be much greater if the work was left.

Just down the road from the house was a dentist, and I went in to make the appointment. I sat in the waiting room on my own for several minutes. The receptionist came in and asked me what the problem was. I explained the situation. She told me the dentist was retiring soon and wouldn't take any new patients. I said that I understood, but just needed this work done before leaving the area. She made an appointment for me, on the understanding that the dentist might refuse the treatment when he returned. I thanked her and went on my way.

I have a terrible memory for appointments, and

have a simple system for forcing them into my every day memory. I put the appointment card in the corner of the mirror of the dressing table in the bedroom, even cleaning around it so as not to lose the card. I had the card for my dental appointment in full view for three weeks. When the day of the appointment came, the card was nowhere to be seen. I searched the dressing table, the floor, the back of the dressing table, everywhere that the card might have fallen. I searched the rubbish bin in case I had sub-consciously thrown it away. Nothing, absolutely nothing. I shrugged, and went down for my appointment.

I waited in the reception room while the dentist was busy on another patient. A woman in her sixties came in and I mentioned the lost card. She checked the register, but there was no appointment, not for that day, nor any on either side. She asked me how I had booked for that day. I explained about the other receptionist, and how I knew the dentist was retiring, but I just wanted some simple work done before I moved. "Who made the appointment?" she asked, a

puzzled frown on her face.

"The other receptionist," I explained.

"What other receptionist?"

I described her. A slim attractive woman in her late thirties, auburn hair flicked up at the end around her shoulders, the sort of hairstyle that was popular in the late 1950's, though this was 1971. The receptionist standing before me stared at me.

"Just a moment," she said.

She went into the surgery and spoke to the dentist. He stopped working immediately, and I heard them talking together in the corridor. He came in to see me. He was in his sixties too, his hair grey, his face lined, but what struck me most was that he was shaking like a leaf. He asked me for a description of the other receptionist, then sat down heavily.

"Where's the appointment card?" he asked.

I told him how I had saved it but lost it that very morning. They checked the register again, but my name was nowhere to be seen. He agreed to

do the work after his present patient. Half an hour later I was out, work done, though I'm not sure who was more frightened, me or the dentist.

I left the area within the month and settled in to my new job and house. Some time later I returned for a visit connected with my work, and curiosity led me back to the road where I had visited the dentist. The surgery was closed, the dentist had retired. I went into the little grocery shop just down the road run by an elderly lady who had been there for years. I often called in to buy things when I lived in the area.

We said hello, I explained how I had moved away and was back for a visit. I asked her about the dentist. She said he was retiring the following year, but had suddenly closed the surgery and moved away. I asked the elderly shopkeeper about his receptionist, and described the woman I had first seen. She said that the receptionist looked nothing like my description, then she paused, thinking.

"That's odd," she said, "his first wife looked like that, but she died nearly twenty years ago."

While packing in my last few days at my old house I had made a point of searching for that card, but didn't find it. Who was the mysterious receptionist, and why did the dentist look as though he'd seen a ghost when I described her? Was she still looking after him, long after her own death? He had nothing to worry about, I was the one who had seen her, if indeed she was a ghost.

* * * * *

Spooks? Or are there simpler explanations? Our perceptions of every day things are made possible by elaborate mechanisms inside our heads. The eye is not a camera, it is much more complicated than that. The mind is not a computer program, it is infinitely more complex, and may forever deny analysis. No matter how complicated the mechanisms by which we perceive the real world, it is not difficult to confuse those things going on inside. That's how stage magicians, and charlatans of all kinds, manage to trick us. My own view is that when we perceive these things, we have caught our perception on the hop, it was still trying to make

sense of sights, sounds, and feelings when we stop it with an irrational explanation. Our perception stops analyzing and says 'Okay, if you say so, that's what you saw'.

The events I described above are all true, I have no reason to trick you, and as an experiment you can describe them to others. They will tell you similar stories. We all know of things like this. You do yourself, if you care to admit it.

That cold draught on the back of your neck is just a minute air current, a house is full of them, it isn't something from beyond trying to attract your attention. The furniture creaks deep in the night because it's settling after a day of sunlight on it, no ghostly visitor has sat down in your favourite armchair. However, there is always room for doubt between perception and imagination, between what you saw and what you thought you saw, and ghost story writers depend on those doubts.

Tonight, when you go to bed and you hear the house and furniture creak, tell yourself there is nothing there. But perhaps you had better leave the landing light on, just in case.