

GHOSTS

RECORDINGS OF THE PAST

A SHORT BOOK FROM
'THE TINY STAIRCASE' SERIES



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Ghosts: Recordings of the Past

The Tiny Staircase series

by David J. Schmidt

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Introduction

“It is said in Japan that when a person dies in extreme sorrow or rage, the emotion remains, becoming a stain upon that place. The memory of what happened repeats itself there. Death becomes a part of that place...”

-from the film *“The Grudge”*

Do you believe in ghosts?

For a long time, I didn't. I had trouble with the idea that a person's conscious spirit would stay in the place where they died. If humans did have a “spirit”—an immaterial part of us that survives death—I figured it would have better things to do than hang around an old musty house.

This was only the beginning of my doubts. If ghosts were the spirits of dead humans, I wondered, why did they wear clothes? Did the shirt and pants have a soul too? Did the clothes die a tragic death and leave their spirit behind? And what about all the other inanimate objects that appeared in haunted places? People tell tales of ghostly carriages, ghost trains, ghost stagecoaches—did all these objects have a soul as well?

A lot of people are skeptical about ghost stories for this reason. But what if ghosts aren't “spirits” at all?

Over the years, I have collected hundreds of firsthand accounts of haunted places. I'm convinced that many of them are authentic—*something* unusual happens in certain places. This book is about one theory regarding ghosts: the possibility that certain places record events of the past and continue to replay them into the present.

To illustrate this theory, I've gathered a handful of ghostly encounters from my hometown of San Diego, California. While I've changed the names of many of the people involved, all of these stories are true. They were told to me by the people who experienced them.

If you've ever had a similar experience, you know how frightening it can be. While these stories can be chilling, however, this theory suggests that we have nothing to be afraid of. Ghosts might not be supernatural at all. They may be no more threatening than a photograph, a CD, or a digital video.

Join me as we look at several tales of ghosts: recordings of the past.

Chapter 1

“She Felt Hair”: a tale from the Whaley House

Some have called the Whaley House the “most haunted place in the United States.” It would be a good candidate for a haunting. The red brick and whitewashed building, located in historic Old Town San Diego, has a long history of tragedy and violence.

The house was built on the same site where criminals were once executed by hanging. After the Whaley family bought the property and built their house in 1857, they lived through a series of harsh experiences. The family was terrorized when a mob broke in to remove the county records from their home. One of the Whaley daughters suffered through a tragic marriage. After leaving her husband and moving back in with her parents, she fell into a dark depression. One evening, she walked out the back steps of the house and shot herself in the head.

“Luisa,” the woman who shared this story with me, has been working at the Whaley House for years. She told me about some of her experiences there when I met her at a San Diego bookstore, fittingly located on the corner of “Grim Street.”

* * * *

When Luisa first started working in the Whaley House, she was apprehensive about the idea of working in a haunted place. After a couple of months, however, she learned to accept the ghosts as a natural part of life. Strange phenomena, she learned, were just another part of a day’s work in the Whaley House.

Luisa learned that you can’t always trust your senses in this place. You often see, hear, and smell things that have no earthly explanation. You might be walking through the parlor of the house and suddenly smell the acrid aroma of cigar smoke. When the house has been empty for hours, you may suddenly catch a whiff of a woman’s perfume.

In the Whaley House, it isn’t unusual to hear footsteps walking across the wooden floorboards when you’re the only one in here. The first time this happens, you follow the footsteps to the back room where they stopped. You get ready to tell the person they can’t be in here, the building is closed, you prepare to ask them how they got in, since all the doors are locked—then you realize nobody is there.

The second time it happens, you call out and nobody answers.

By the third or fourth time, you don’t even respond. You’ve learned that these footsteps across the wooden floor are a normal occurrence in the Whaley House.

Luisa learned that you don’t just hear phantom sounds—sometimes you see things, too. You might be walking up the staircase, minding your own business, when you catch a glimpse of a person’s arm. The arm darts into your field of vision and then it’s gone.

Sometimes it's a face that you see.

You might be closing up the rooms upstairs when you see a faded, misty human figure standing in front of you. The figure doesn't react to your presence. It doesn't appear to know that you're there. It just stands in front of you, immobile. Then it vanishes.

Like most employees of the Whaley House, Luisa got used to the apparitions, the strange sounds and smells. Every now and then, however, she comes across something that startles even her.

On one particular evening, Luisa and her coworkers were locking up the house after finishing their shift. A warm breeze blew through the grass and trees behind the house. After they were done locking up, the employees sat down around the big wooden table in the kitchen. A man named George set a black digital recorder on the table.

"Everybody ready?" George asked. "Let's get started. Maybe we'll pick something up this time."

The workers at the Whaley House had been experimenting with "E.V.P."—Electronic Voice Phenomenon. After the tourists had left, the employees would gather in the empty house, set the device to record, and sit in silence.

On this particular day, Luisa sat down and watched her coworker hit the "record" button. The employees seated at the table, still dressed in their Old West garb, glanced at each other in silence.

They waited. Five minutes passed, then ten. Luisa glanced out the window. The waning daylight gave an orange glow to the white buildings across the yard. Luisa could see the old outhouse where the Whaley daughter committed suicide more than a century ago.

"Whoa!" said one of the women at the table. "I just felt something."

"Like what?" George asked.

"Something just brushed past my bare leg. I felt the hem of my skirt move, and something rubbed against me. Something...something hairy."

The others stared in silence. "Maybe it was Dolly," Luisa joked. As the other employees knew, the Whaleys used to keep a terrier named Dolly in the house.

"It really startled me," said the woman. "It just came out of nowhere." Her coworkers chuckled, then quieted down again. After ten more minutes, they decided to listen to the recording.

The first ten minutes of the recording were pure silence. Luisa could hear George's breathing from where he sat next to the recorder. Around minute five, a crow cawed as it flew past the window. Every now and then, a cough from one of the employees. Luisa looked at the time counter on the recorder—it was getting close to the time when her coworker felt something brush against her leg.

Suddenly, everyone looked at George. They looked down at the recorder, then back up at George again.

"Did you hear..." George began.

"Shh," said Luisa.

There was no need to say anything. All of them could hear the sound on the recorder, clear as day. At minute ten, right before Luisa's coworker had felt something hairy brush her leg. It was the sound of a dog barking.

Chapter 2

“There’s No Such Thing as Ghosts”: the Scooby-Doo approach

Some folks feel certain that Luisa could never have seen, heard, and felt what she did in the Whaley House. “There’s no such thing as ghosts,” they say. “Houses can’t be haunted.”

Whenever anyone says they saw a ghost, these folks scoff. When someone is struck with a strange feeling in an abandoned building, or hears noises that come out of nowhere, the skeptics are always ready with an answer.

“It must have been their imagination,” they say.

“They were hearing an old creaky water pipe.”

“Maybe they’re just plain going crazy.”

“Some light must have been reflecting off a window.”

“It’s just the power of suggestion, that’s all.”

I call this mindset “The Scooby Doo Approach.” It’s the assumption that unknown phenomena don’t exist—all ghosts and hauntings can be explained away, according to the natural laws that we already understand. “It wasn’t a ghost after all!” these folks say. “It was just a white sheet draped over a chair, left there by Old Man Spunkers from the abandoned amusement park!”

But what if Scooby Doo doesn’t have all the answers after all? What if ghosts and hauntings can’t all be explained away as figments of our imaginations? What if they are something much more real than that—something that our science still doesn’t understand?

Consider this possibility as we move on to our next ghost story, from a haunted Christian college in San Diego.

Chapter 3

The Thumping Footsteps

The campus of Point Loma Nazarene University, in San Diego, CA, has long been rumored to be haunted. Many years before it became a private Evangelical Christian college, the campus housed a colony of Occultists known as the Theosophists. The enigmatic leader of the Theosophists, Madame Tingley, was famous for her public lectures on occultism and ancient spirituality. Some said she was a medium—that she could talk to the spirits.

Madame Tingley's personal home still stands on the campus of PLNU. It is now called "Cabrillo Hall," and contains classrooms and academic offices. Students know the history of the place, though. They know that Madame Tingley used to live here. They whisper rumors that she used to perform black magic in this building, holding dark rituals and calling on the spirits to appear.

Whether or not that's true, there is something unique about the place. Something from the past seems to have stayed behind.

What follows is my own paraphrased version of an account from someone who studied at PLNU in the 1990s. The story was originally published on the webpage "Shadowlands." (The URL can be found in the references at the end of this book.) I attempted to contact Rebecca, the young lady who posted the story online, but was unable to track her down. After reading her account, I just hope she's all right.

* * * *

Becky was working in Cabrillo Hall late one night. The student newspaper's editorial office was located in the basement of Cabrillo and, as a journalism student, Becky had a key.

Cabrillo can be downright creepy at night, Becky thought. The Victorian building was more than a hundred years old, after all. It was always creaking and groaning at night. That "old building" smell hung in the air, especially down here in the basement.

Becky put the thought out of her mind and went back to typing up her article. The journalism office filled with the loud "clack clack clack" sound of the typewriter. Suddenly, Becky stopped. She heard something else, over the sound of her typing. She glanced up at the ceiling of the basement. Someone was running back and forth upstairs.

Becky's eyebrow furrowed. *Nobody's supposed to be in here*, she thought. *The main part of the building should be locked up at this hour.*

Becky's reaction turned from surprise to annoyance. These weren't ordinary footsteps that she heard. It was a loud heavy *thump thump thump* sound that pounded back and forth across the floor above Becky's head. *God, what are they doing up there? It sounds like someone's playing basketball inside Cabrillo!*

Becky decided to do something about it. She felt like she had a responsibility to set things straight. Whoever was messing around inside Cabrillo Hall, they weren't supposed to be in here. And from the sound of those thumping footsteps, they might break something in this historic building, and then Becky would be held responsible.

She walked into the elevator and hit the button to go up to the ground floor of the building. Once the doors shut, Becky was struck with an uneasy feeling. She couldn't explain why, but a slow dread spread across her stomach as the elevator creaked upwards.

The doors finally opened on the ground floor. Becky walked across the carpeted floor of Cabrillo Hall. "Hello? Is anybody up here?"

Silence.

"Listen, I don't know who you are, but you can't be messing around in here. The building is closed. You need to leave."

Still no sound.

"This is a historic building, not a place to fool around. You need to go now." No sign of anyone in Cabrillo Hall.

Becky headed up to the second floor and called out again. Still no sound anywhere in the building. Becky checked every single room on the upper level and saw nothing out of the ordinary. She checked every door, and saw that they were all still locked. There weren't even any footprints in the freshly vacuumed carpet.

Oh well, she thought. They must have left.

She took the elevator back down to the basement and sat at her desk again. As soon as she had started typing, though, she heard it again. The same heavy *thump thump thump*, running up and down the floor above her head.

What the...

As quickly as it had started, the noise stopped. The silence in the basement felt much more heavy now. Becky decided to head back to her dorm early that night.

Later, when she told a fellow journalism student about her experience, her classmate nodded. "I'm not surprised," he said. "That sort of thing has been happening in Cabrillo Hall for years."

Chapter 4

Talking to Dead Dogs: haunted houses and the spirit world

Some folks feel certain that they understand ghosts.

One of the most famous ghost experts on earth is psychic and medium Sylvia Brown. Brown holds a very conventional view of ghosts. She believes that they are the conscious spirits of the dead, and has spent a lifetime making TV appearances and writing books about how the spirit world works.

Brown claims to be able to communicate with the dead. She regularly visits the world's most haunted places, holds séances, and talks to the spirits there. When she feels that the spirits are trapped in the building, she invites them to “go into the light.” Brown regularly converses with her spirit guide, a woman named Francine, about how things work on “the Other Side.”

Francine has taught Sylvia Brown that we are all reincarnated into to this earthly plane to learn lessons about how to overcome negativity and grow spiritually. After we die, we are supposed to go into the light and cross over into the Other Side again. Eventually, we get reincarnated back into the earthly realm so we can keep learning more lessons, in another human body. Some humans are too negative to go to the Other Side, though; others get stuck in the houses where they lived or died.

Sylvia Brown speaks with certainty about how ghosts, haunted houses, and the afterlife work. She feels that she understands the Other Side because she gets “insider info” directly from Francine. In one of her books, she explains:

“Over the many years we have been together, she [Francine] has literally given me tomes of information on a variety of subjects, but the information she has given on the Other Side has been embraced by millions. Naturally since she is on the Other Side she has firsthand knowledge of the Other Side and all that it contains, thus becoming my resident “expert” on all that takes place there.”

Sylvia Brown doesn't just communicate with dead humans—she says she can talk to the spirits of animals as well. (If only she had been in the Whaley House when Luisa heard the dog barking on the recording, she might have explained what it was that the animal wanted.) She regularly meets with people who have lost dogs and cats, and relays messages from the dead animals on the Other Side.

Brown wrote an entire book about what the afterlife is like for our pets. The book is titled “*All Pets Go to Heaven*,” although I hope she's wrong about that one. When I think of the

neighbor's dog named Shep who nearly bit me when I was three, I hope there's a Hell for animals as well.

Brown explains that all animals get to go into the light of the Other Side after they die, since none of them have the negative vibes that humans do. (I insist, she says this because she never met Shep. That dog was *mean*.) In the afterlife, ghost animals get to frolic and play with each other. Sometimes they send messages of happiness to their former owners on earth. The animals eventually get reincarnated, but only as animals of the same species. Apparently, the universe does not approve of cross-species relations.

These kinds of claims make skeptics scoff at folks like Sylvia Brown. "How could any sane person believe in ghosts?" they say. The skeptics dig in their heels even more and insist that the idea of a haunted place is nonsense.

But what if Sylvia Brown doesn't know as much about ghosts as she claims?

What if ghosts aren't conscious beings from the spirit world at all? What if they are something entirely different—something that lies beyond the understanding of our spirituality *and* our science?

Chapter 5

One Last Visit

This is another account from the campus of Point Loma Nazarene University, the haunted college.

A point of clarification: every dormitory at PLNU has its own “Resident Director,” an adult employee of the university who lives in the dorm full-time. The Resident Director, formerly known as a Resident Counselor, oversees the entire dorm. Most Resident Directors are well-loved and respected by the students in their dorms; their job is a combination of counselor, social event coordinator, apartment manager, therapist, and handyman.

“Carl” contacted me to tell me about what he saw. Carl graduated from PLNU in May 1991, and returned to the campus in the fall of that year for Homecoming Week.

* * * *

Carl was walking on the paved pathway that runs alongside the college’s tennis courts. It was a typical balmy, sunny day in San Diego. He had just been to the gym, and was on his way to visit some old friends at a dormitory across campus.

As he passed by the tennis courts, Carl noticed a familiar face coming towards him. It was Vince, a beloved Resident Counselor from one of the dorms on campus. Carl was about to wave hello to Vince when he heard the voice of Bobby, a former classmate of his.

“Where are you headed?” Bobby asked.

“Oh, I’m just on my way down to Hendricks Hall to visit...hey, wait a second.” Carl looked around. He didn’t see Vince anywhere around.

“What’s wrong, Carl?”

“Oh, I just saw Vince Attman, the R.C. from Klausen Hall. I was going to say hi to him, but he must have turned around and walked back.”

After Bobby left, Carl looked around again. He saw no sign of Vince anywhere. He jogged past the tennis courts to a point where he could see far off into the distance—there was nobody anywhere nearby. Carl couldn’t figure out where Vince had gone.

Then he remembered that Vince had recently died.

Vince had been a well-loved employee of the college since he started working as a Resident Counselor years ago. Then tragedy struck earlier that year. Vince was jogging along the seaside cliffs west of campus one night, when he lost his footing. He fell down the cliffs and was fatally injured.

Carl felt shocked, but not frightened. This experience didn’t feel like the sort of ghost story that people told around a campfire, where a “troubled spirit” comes back to haunt someone. This just felt like Carl had seen a dear friend.

Carl had always felt a great deal of respect and admiration for Vince. Carl had been at the tearful memorial service and mourned the loss of Vince along with hundreds of other students and faculty. All these sad memories faded when Carl realized he had Vince walking past the tennis courts, though—the only thought on his mind was that it was nice to see his old friend one last time.

Chapter 6

Ghosts: Shadows of the Past

“These are but shadows of the things that have been,” said the Ghost. “They have no consciousness of us.”

-Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

The ghosts you see in movies act very differently from the ghosts in real-life accounts like those of Luisa, Becky, and Carl.

In the movies, ghosts interact with living humans. They tell someone where their treasure is hidden, or they bring a message of warning, or seek revenge on the person who murdered them. Sometimes the ghosts write messages in the fog of a window. Sometimes they send an e-mail. Sometimes they hold long conversations with the living. Every now and then, they manage to pick up a knife and kill someone.

The real-life experiences that people have in haunted places, on the other hand, are very different. Most of the stories that I’ve collected from people are similar to the accounts of Luisa, Becky, and Carl.

In most real-life stories, ghosts do not react to the people observing them. They often seem to not even notice the witnesses at all. People see, feel, hear, or smell strange things when they are in a haunted house, but it’s a very passive experience. They don’t interact with the ghosts—it’s more like they’re watching a recording from the past.

The idea that ghosts can’t interact with the living is nothing new. There are stories from cultures all over the world that express the same idea. The Barí (Motilone) native people of South America tell an ancient legend of a dead person who comes back to visit his body on earth. He can see his relatives, he visits his old home and sees his lifeless body. But he isn’t able to communicate with his loved ones.

Could this story be based on experience? Is it possible that the Barí caught glimpses of people who had died, and noticed that the “ghosts” seemed unaware of the living?

The Tibetan Book of the Dead contains a similar belief; it warns people that they will not be able to speak to their loved ones after they die. They may be able to visit their home and appear as a ghost, but they won’t be able to interact with the living:

“As you have a ghostly body, you encounter relatives and familiar places as if in a dream. When you meet these relatives, though you communicate with them, they do not answer. When you see your relatives and dear ones crying, you will think, ‘Now I have died, what can I do?’ You feel a searing pain, like a fish flopping in hot sand. But however greatly you suffer, tormenting yourself at this time does not help. If you have a spiritual teacher, pray to your spiritual teacher. Or else pray to the compassionate

Archetype Deity. Do not be attached to your loved ones - it is useless. Pray to the Compassionate Ones, and do not suffer or be terrified!”

Driven by the swift wind of evolution, your mind is helpless and unstable, riding the horse of breath like a feather blown on the wind, spinning and fluttering. You tell the mourners, ‘Do not cry! Here I am!’ They take no notice...”

[quote from the Tibetan Book of the Dead]

The idea that ghosts cannot interact with the physical world exists in many cultures. It appears to have been common in 18th century England—so common that Robert Louis Stevenson referenced it in his book *“Treasure Island.”*

There is a scene near the end of the book when the pirates are walking across the island searching for lost treasure. They suddenly hear a voice echo across the valley, singing *“fifteen men on a dead man’s chest.”* The voice sounds just like Captain Flint, an old comrade of the pirates who died on this very island.

At first, the pirates are terrified. Then Captain Long John Silver appeals to common sense to calm his sailors down:

“Sperrit? Well, maybe [...] but there’s one thing not clear to me. There was an echo. Now, no man ever seen a sperrit with a shadow. Well, then, what’s he doing with an echo to him, I should like to know? That ain’t in natur’, surely.”

This quote suggests that it was “common knowledge” that a ghost could not cast a shadow. Long John Silver appeals to the same idea—that a ghost cannot interact with its physical environment—to say that a ghost’s voice would not cause an echo. The singing voice could not have come from a ghost, he says, because ghosts don’t interact with their surroundings.

The idea appears over and over again in folklore, legends, and beliefs around the world. Ghosts do not block the sun’s light and cast a shadow; ghosts’ voices don’t echo off their surroundings; ghosts can’t communicate with their loved ones. This all suggests that ghosts aren’t conscious spirits—they are a sort of “replay” from the past.

This is exactly what many researchers say that ghosts are—nothing more than a preserved image from the past. According to this theory, certain places hold onto a memory of past events, like a recording. This imprint of the past continues to echo and replay into the present, and certain people catch a glimpse of it.

If this is the case, ghosts might not be “supernatural” at all—no more than a photograph or video or audio recording is supernatural. This is the theory that I call *“the Cosmic Replay.”*

Over the last couple centuries, humans have developed amazing ways to record events of the past. Just a few hundred years ago, however, these recordings would have seemed frightening and supernatural. If you had shown a photograph to someone from the 1600s, they would have

called you a witch. Imagine hearing an audio recording if you lived in the 17th century—what would you think? “There are spirits trapped in that box,” you’d likely say.

Most of us today, however, don’t bat an eye when we see a photograph or hear recorded sound. We record the sights and sounds of our children’s birthday parties and don’t think twice about it. None of us sees this technology as something “spiritual”—we just accept it as part of life.

According to the Cosmic Replay theory, other types of recordings might exist in nature.

Certain buildings may be able to spontaneously record an “imprint” of moments from the past. And certain people catch a glimpse of these recordings. They feel the fur of a dog that’s long been dead; they hear footsteps from a moment in the past; they see a person walking around who is no longer alive. And when this happens, we call a place “haunted.”

Hauntings don’t need to be frightening, though. Ghosts might be just one more part of our natural world that we don’t understand yet.

Chapter 7

The Music in the Dark

This is another ghost story from Point Loma Nazarene University. This conversation between the characters of “Michelle” and “Eve,” which I’ve written in the format of a radio drama script, is based on several accounts I have collected from music students at the college. Many of them spend a lot of time in the Cooper music building and report seeing and hearing strange things.

Interestingly, the Cooper music building was built on the site where the home of Madame Tingley used to stand...

* * * *

[SCENE: Campus of Point Loma Nazarene University. Modern day. Two music students, MICHELLE and EVE, are in the Music Periodicals room, located on the top floor of the library. The two girls are surrounded by shelves of music recordings—records, cassettes, CDs. MICHELLE is leaned over one drawer of CDs, sifting through the discs with her fingers. EVE is standing behind her, scrolling through messages on her phone.]

MICHELLE: What period did the professor say we’re supposed to be looking for again?

EVE: I think we’re in the Romantic Period. You know, after the main Classical. Like late eighteen hundreds.

MICHELLE: So who am I looking for, then? What composers?

EVE: Let me see... [EVE lifts her binder onto her right arm and opens it with her left hand, shuffling through her notes.] I think he said Paganini and Mahler were big at this time. Also, something by Rimsky-Korsakov would work.

MICHELLE: Is it supposed to be, like, an original recording?

EVE: How are we going to get an original recording from the 1800s?

MICHELLE: [Laughs] Oh, I guess you’re right.

EVE: I think as long as it’s the right music, it really doesn’t matter when it was recorded.

[EVE types a text message into her cell phone while MICHELLE continues to sort through the CDs.]

MICHELLE: We’re going to spend all day in here trying to find the right recording. We won’t even have time to listen to it and write up our analysis for class.

EVE: I know, this teacher always gives us too much homework.

MICHELLE: Hey, so...did you hear about Jessica?

EVE: ...who?

MICHELLE: Jessica. From our Music Theory class.

EVE: Oh, yeah. She sits behind me. Volleyball player, right?

MICHELLE: Right.

EVE: What about her?

MICHELLE: It's not a big deal or anything. Araceli told me something about her... Don't tell anyone I told you, though. I don't know if Jessica wants anyone to know. It's kind of weird.

EVE: [*Sets her phone down on the table.*] What's kind of weird? Is Jessica a Russian spy or something?

MICHELLE: [*Laughs*] No, there's nothing weird about *her*. It's something weird that happened to her. In the Cooper building.

EVE: What happened?

MICHELLE: [*Stands up from the shelf she has been leaning over and faces EVE.*] So Jessica plays violin. She uses the practice rooms a lot.

EVE: The ones that are down in the basement of Cooper?

MICHELLE: Exactly. So last week, I guess she forgot some of her sheet music down there. She had been practicing the day before, and she had rushed off to chapel and forgot to grab her sheet music.

EVE: Wait, now I know who Jessica is. She's a T.A. for one of the other music professors, right?

MICHELLE: Yeah, that's her. She's got a key to Cooper and everything. And since she has the key, she went down there late Thursday night to get her sheet music. It was, like, after midnight. Nobody around. So Jessica goes down there to get her music. She walks down the stairs and back to the end of the hall down in the basement, to the last practice room on the right where she had been playing her violin the day before.

EVE: And Madame Tingley was waiting for her down there. Boo! [*Laughs.*]

MICHELLE: Ha ha, no. Not quite. But close.

EVE: No, but seriously, what happened?

MICHELLE: Well, Jessica grabbed her music from the practice room and turned the light off. The basement was almost totally dark; no light except for the fluorescent lights in the hallway. Jessica started walking down the hallway towards the stairs, when—she heard music.

EVE: Music? What kind of music?

MICHELLE: She couldn't really tell. It was something soft and slow, like she could just barely hear it. But it wasn't like any kind of music she had ever heard before.

EVE: What did she do?

MICHELLE: Well first, she figured someone else must be down there practicing. She didn't know how anyone would get down there, since she had locked the doors herself, but she decided to check it out. She started walking up and down the hallway, checking the other practice rooms.

EVE: And? Did she find anyone? [*Eyes wide.*]

MICHELLE: Nobody. Not a single person anywhere.

EVE: Maybe somebody was practicing upstairs?

MICHELLE: I told you, Jessica had opened up the building herself with her T.A. key. It was locked before she went in. She double checked it, of course. Checked all the rooms, all the offices. Even checked the auditorium. But nothing. She was the only person in Cooper that night.

[A dark cloud moves in front of the sun outside. The Music Periodicals room grows suddenly dark.]

EVE: Oh my gosh, that's creepy.

[MICHELLE looks down at the drawer of CDs, sifting through them absentmindedly with one hand.]

EVE: *[Looks out the window at the pine trees behind the library.]* You know what's really weird about that, Michelle?

MICHELLE: What?

EVE: You know what used to be there, before Cooper was built?

MICHELLE: No, what?

EVE: My aunt told me. She was a student here back in the 70s, back when the whole college was new. She told me Cooper was built a long time after she graduated.

MICHELLE: So what was there before Cooper?

EVE: It was—it was Cabrillo Hall. That's the exact spot where Madame Tingley's house used to stand.

MICHELLE: So you mean, the place where the practice rooms in Cooper are now—down in the basement—that used to be Madame Tingley's basement?

EVE: Right.

MICHELLE: So that was the basement where...

EVE: That's right. That's where Madame Tingley did all her rituals.

[MICHELLE pulls her sweater more tightly around her shoulders. EVE picks up a CD from the drawer without looking.]

EVE: Hey, look—Paganini!

MICHELLE: Okay, we've got our Romantic Period music. Now let's go get some dinner. I'm getting the creeps up here.

Chapter 8

The Cosmic Replay: how does it work?

Let's entertain the possibility that the "Cosmic Replay" theory is valid. Certain places record events of the past and replay them from time to time. How would it work? How does a certain house capture images of the past and replay them for certain people?

The short answer is: nobody knows.

A lot of folks might pretend to understand what's going on. When it comes to unexplained phenomena, the easiest way to sound like you know what you're talking about is to use the word "energy."

If we say "the past may leave some sort of residue on a place and some people pick up on that residue through a process that nobody understands," we're admitting how little we know about hauntings. But if we say "it's residual energy that was imprinted on the place!" we can sound quasi-scientific.

The word "energy" gets thrown around a lot these days, especially by people in the "paranormal" scene. Some folks use the word as a catch-all explanation for anything that can't be explained. When you talk with them about psychic abilities, they won't admit "we don't understand how psychic abilities work." Tell them about a woman who knows what her son is doing halfway around the world, and they have an instant explanation: "he was sending her some energy and she picked up on it." Problem solved.

The same thing goes for the idea of prayer. Mention to these folks one of the scientific studies on prayer, like the Harvard "Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer," which suggests that prayer actually works. These people have an instant explanation for it. "The patient was receiving so much positive energy from the people who prayed for them; that's why they got better. It isn't because of God, it's because of the positive energy."

What about witchcraft, the belief that a person can cause bad things to happen to another person without physically approaching them? "Oh, sure witchcraft is real," the energy folks will say. "It's because of all the bad energy and negative vibrations that get sent out. That negative energy can really harm a person."

I'm not trying to make a case here for the existence of any of these things—psychic abilities, the efficacy of prayer, or witchcraft. All I'm saying is, if you're going to entertain the idea that they could be real, be honest about it. Admit that these are things we really don't understand.

I think the over-use of the word "energy" is popular because it sounds modern and scientific. A person might feel backwards and superstitious if they told their friend "I was praying for you when you were in the hospital." They can feel sophisticated, however, if they say "I sent lots of positive energy your way."

This is nothing new. Back in the 1800s, when people studied unusual phenomena like hauntings and ghostly apparitions, they used quasi-scientific language as well. Back then, however, people didn't talk about "energy" or "vibrations"—the buzzword was "ectoplasm."

Scientists claimed to know exactly what ghosts were made of: they were made of ectoplasm, of course. It was a very fancy, scientific-sounding word. Some researchers even took samples of "ectoplasm" from mediums during séances. (One of these samples is still being stored in the Library of Congress archives. Author Mary Roach gives a very entertaining description of it in her book *"Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife."*) Everyone felt like they understood ghosts. But nobody stopped to think about the fact that "ectoplasm" was nothing more than a word that somebody had made up.

The fact remains that we really don't understand hauntings. Nobody really knows what's going on. If the Cosmic Replay theory is valid—if some places do hold a recorded imprint of the past, and sometimes people catch a glimpse of it—we don't know how this works.

While we don't understand the mechanisms of a haunting, though, there are a few theories out there that may shed light on it.

Radioactive or magnetic rocks:

Author and ghost-hunter Paul Devereux researched haunted spots along a road near Oxford, where people reported seeing apparitions. He found that radiation levels in the nearby granite stones were three times higher than those in other points along the road. Devereaux suggests that highly magnetic or radioactive rocks might produce a "geophysical" recording of the past.

Underground source of water:

John Lamb is the author of *San Diego Specters*, one of the finest books about my city's haunted spots. While researching the ghost stories of San Diego, he found that many haunted spots were located near a well, spring, or other source of underground water.

Neurological effects of low-frequency sound waves:

An engineer named Vic Tandy did in-depth research on two haunted places in Great Britain: a factory and an old cellar. He found that in both places, there was a prevailing low-frequency sound in the environment, caused by wind, machinery, and other factors. He theorized that sound waves of this low frequency—around 19 Hertz cycles per minute—might have a unique effect on the human brain. This doesn't mean that the ghosts are a "hallucination"; rather, the low-frequency sound waves could make the human brain more perceptive of something that has been imprinted on the place.

Emotional anguish:

This is the strongest theory out there. If there is one common factor in haunted places, it's a history of intense emotions. Haunted places are almost always associated with tragedy—murder,

heartbreak, suicide, torture, suffering. Tragedy may very well work like the flash of a camera, imprinting the past onto a place like an image on photographic film.

Many ghost stories involve untimely death and physical suffering. Others are not that dramatic, however. It might not take something as intense as a tragedy to imprint the past onto a place—according to some ghost stories, high concentrations of guilt and shame might be enough.

Chapter 9

The Haunted Chapel

This reconstructed conversation is based on my discussions with several former security guards from Point Loma Nazarene University. Stories like this one suggest that maybe even churches can be haunted.

* * * *

Thomas, Pedro, and Dillon were student security guards. The three of them sat in the Public Safety headquarters on campus, playing cards and drinking Mountain Dew. The clock on the wall showed that it was a few minutes after 1:00 a.m.

"I'm not saying the college is haunted," Pedro continued. "I'm just saying, I've heard a lot of stories. People say that some weird things happen here at night. In the old buildings, especially."

"You know where I get the creeps?" said Thomas. "Cabrillo Hall. All those stories about Madame Tingley contacting dead spirits in there, worshipping the Devil, whatever she used to do. It really weirds me out."

"Me, I get creeped out by the Science building," said Pedro.

"Rohr Science?" asked Thomas. "Why would it be haunted? It's a new building! It's not like Madame Tingley ever worshipped the Devil in there or anything."

"It's still a scary place to go into at night. It's all huge and sterile and empty. Not to mention, there's dead bodies in there."

"Oh, right," Thomas said. "For the dissections."

"Yeah, I hate walking through there at night. You don't have to be superstitious to get creeped out about being alone with a bunch of dead bodies."

"I get it. What about you, Dillon? Do you think the stories could be true? Any buildings on campus you think are haunted?"

"Sure. Brown chapel."

The two other officers laughed out loud. When they looked back at Dillon. He was dead serious.

"The *church*?" said Pedro, incredulous. "You're afraid of the church?"

"I'm not *afraid* of the chapel. I'm just saying, it feels like a place that's haunted."

"Yeah, it's haunted," Thomas said. "It's haunted by the Holy Ghost!" He paused after his lame joke, waiting for the laughter that never came.

"I'm serious," Dillon continued. "I think it's one of the all-time creepiest places on campus."

Pedro stood to pull a new can of Mountain Dew from the cardboard case. “But it’s a *chapel*. People sing ‘Shout to the Lord’ in there and read their Bibles. That’s not exactly a haunted house.”

“Still, I get a weird vibe in there when I walk through the chapel at night.”

“All right,” Thomas said. “Spill it, Dillon. What are you getting at, exactly?”

Dillon leaned forward and put his elbows on the table. He took a moment for dramatic pause. “It’s like this, guys. I feel like the chapel is full of all the guilty feelings people bring in there. Being in church—or, here at Loma, attending a chapel service three times a week—it can bring out a lot of complicated feelings in someone. All the stress of trying to be good enough, all the anxiety of feeling like God might reject you, like God might send you to Hell if you’re bad enough. I feel like all that guilt and stress—it accumulates. It all builds up like a big, dark cloud. And it hangs there, somewhere under the rafters of the chapel.”

“But that’s not the kind of message you hear in this chapel,” Pedro said. “It’s not like they’re giving us Hellfire and brimstone sermons every week. Usually, we just sing some worship songs and hear about God’s love or God’s faithfulness.”

“True,” said Dillon. “But for some people, there’s something about being in a church service that triggers all the bad stuff from their previous churches.”

“Sounds like this chick I used to date,” Thomas said. “She used to go out with a lot of assholes. It’s like she got ‘traumatized’ by it or something. When she was with me she was always nervous, afraid I’d end up being just as much of an asshole as her past boyfriends were.”

“Are you sure she was wrong?” Dillon said. He and Pedro laughed and Thomas gave Dillon the finger in mock anger.

“Seriously though,” Dillon continued, “that’s what I’m getting at. People go into a chapel like the one here on campus, and it brings up all the bad memories from their home churches. All the shame they might have learned from their youth pastor back home. You’re a bad person if you get angry at someone, you’re a bad person if you have a sexual thought, you’re a bad person if you masturbate or get to second base with your girlfriend or boyfriend.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend, dude,” Thomas said.

“I don’t mean *you* you. I mean ‘you’ like someone, like anyone who grew up in a strict church. People go to youth group and Wednesday night Bible study and Sunday morning services their whole lives. They hear all these messages about how wicked they are. About how evil premarital sex is. About how evil it is to be gay or to be a Muslim or to be a Democrat. That’s a lot of opportunities to be evil. That’s a lot of guilt. Does all that guilt just disappear?”

Thomas and Pedro were listening to Dillon in silence now. They had much more serious expressions on their faces. Pedro finally spoke up. “So that’s what you’re thinking about when you get the creeps in the chapel, Dillon?”

“I go in there when I’m doing nighttime building checks, and I get this real uncomfortable feeling. It’s like I can feel all the residual guilt of hundreds of people thinking about God’s wrath and sin in there, all the bad feelings accumulated over years and years. Walk in there and you can smell it, you can almost feel it hanging above you. Like a big black cloud,

somewhere up by the ceiling. All that guilt and shame—it doesn't just disappear. I don't know where it goes, but it doesn't disappear."

The three boys sat in silence in the Public Safety office. The wall clock continued to tick.

"I get your point," Thomas finally said. "Still, I don't know why you would call the chapel 'haunted.' There's no spirits in there. It's not like any students died in there or anything."

"No," Dillon said. "But maybe there's more than one way for a place to be haunted."

Chapter 10

The Italian Scientist: a case for the paranormal

“So we don’t understand how places might record the feelings and sights and sounds of the past,” some might say. “It’s just a theory. Science can’t explain it. And nobody knows how it works. Why consider the possibility of this ‘Cosmic Replay’ theory, then?”

The simplest response is: because of electricity.

Travel with me back in time 600 years, to a meeting of an academy of European scientists. Keep in mind, this is the 1400s. Think of all the things that humans still don’t know about, all the things that we aren’t even close to discovering or understanding or explaining. Electricity. Photography. Radio waves. DNA. Atoms. The Shake-Weight.

Now imagine a scientist—let’s call him Giuseppe Putanesco—who is sitting at the meeting of scientists. Giuseppe tells them that he has been noticing some strange phenomena. If he rubs his feet on the carpet and touches his wife, he says, she feels a shock. If Giuseppe does this in the dark, he can even see a little spark of light. He’s been watching thunderstorms from the roof of his Venetian villa, and he wonders about the bright flashes in the sky.

Giuseppe has been observing electricity. But of course, “electricity” has not been given a name yet, so he doesn’t know what the hell to call it. He just knows that *something* is going on.

“I noticed these big flashes of light coming out of the sky,” Giuseppe tells his fellow scientists. “And when I rub my feet on the Turkish rug that’s in my home, and then go touch my wife’s shoulder, she feels a shocking sting at my touch. My wife is getting really sick of it. She’s threatened to never cook me tortellini again if I keep doing it.”

“So what do you call this phenomenon?” the other scientists ask.

“I have no idea.”

“Why do you think it happens, Giuseppe?”

“I don’t know. It’s a strange, paranormal phenomenon.”

At this point, Giuseppe is laughed out of the room. “What a kook!” they say. “He believes in fairy tales!”

Giuseppe hangs his head and exits the room. He has been mocked as a superstitious nut job by all the scientists of Venice. Giuseppe slowly walks down the street, dragging his knapsack behind him. Somewhere nearby, a piano is playing that slow, sad “Christmastime is Here” song from the Charlie Brown cartoon.

Maybe I am crazy for believing in the paranormal, Giuseppe thinks. He continues to slowly shuffle down the streets of Venice. Then he realizes Venice doesn’t even have streets, it’s just a series of canals, and he’s been walking through filthy water for the past mile. This is a crappy day indeed for poor young Giuseppe.

But he wasn’t wrong. The electricity he had noticed was real.

It's easy for us in the 21st century to laugh at Giuseppe's colleagues. Of course electricity exists. How could they be so foolish? They lived in the ignorant past. We live in the present. Science has come a long way since then. We now understand how things work.

Not only was Giuseppe right, though, he was the bravest person in the room. He was the only scientist brave enough to admit that he had observed something he couldn't explain. He was the only person willing to admit that the "paranormal" existed. In a sense, it will always exist—there will always be things that we can't fathom or comprehend.

Unfortunately, the word "paranormal" has gotten a bad rap. A lot of people associate it with anything "kooky" or "weird." They imagine someone who claims to be able to speak to caterpillars, or a woman who claims to be able to create rainstorms with her mind, or a sunburned white guy sitting in the park wearing a loin cloth and chanting "*Mecca lecca hi, mecca hiney ho.*"

The word "paranormal" is very simple, however. All it means is that there is something that we don't yet understand. That's why we call it *para* normal, after all. If it was a phenomenon that we understood, we would just call it "normal."

The fact is, we need more scientific research on haunted places. I'm not talking about the sort of pseudoscience you see on many "ghost hunting" shows, where someone pulls out a Geiger counter and waves it around a haunted house and then the lights on the device start to flash, because of course everyone knows that ghosts are radioactive.

No, I'm talking about real, objective, scientific studies of haunted houses. A comprehensive survey of places that are famous for strange phenomena—location, soil type, elevation, etc.—to see if there are any common factors.

When it comes to haunted places, all we have are theories for now. The Cosmic Replay theory may apply to them—these places may contain recordings of the past that replay for us in the present. When we see a ghost, we might be seeing a glimpse of events that happened hundreds of years ago. Then again, maybe ghosts are much more complex than that.

As we will see in this last story from the Whaley House, sometimes people see apparitions that don't look human at all. Ghosts, like many other things in this universe, remain a great unsolved mystery.

Chapter 11

The Slenderman and the Whaley House

As Luisa spent more time working at the Whaley House of Old Town San Diego, she witnessed more and more phenomena that looked like shadows of the past. A human head and torso that suddenly appeared. A sense of sadness that came out of nowhere. The sound of laughter in an empty room.

But with time, she started to notice other things that had nothing to do with the history of the place.

As Luisa spoke with people who worked in other parts of Old Town, she learned that strange phenomena were not limited to historic buildings like the Whaley House. Sometimes, ghosts appeared in new buildings as well.

“It’s almost like this whole place has a unique vibe about it,” one employee told Luisa. “People see and hear things all over Old Town. Houses get haunted that aren’t ancient at all. It’s like the ‘spirits’ or ghosts or whatever they are, they aren’t confined to places where people used to live.”

As Luisa discovered one cloudy afternoon at the Whaley House, sometimes those “ghosts” didn’t look like anything in the natural world at all.

Luisa was standing by the back door to the Whaley House on this particular day. She had just shown a group of tourists from the Midwest through the house. When she saw the dark clouds gathering outside, she put on her shawl. As Luisa said goodbye to the departing tourists, a blond woman with a camera dangling from her neck approached her. The woman was visibly upset. “Excuse me, can I talk to you?”

“Certainly,” Luisa said. “Is something wrong?”

“Well, you were talking about the...the ‘phenomena’ that people sometimes catch on their cameras, right?”

“That’s right,” Luisa said. “Sometimes people catch spots of light or darkness, or orbs, in their photos.”

“Do you think it’s legit when these things show up on photos?”

“Sometimes it definitely has a natural explanation. A speck of dust on the camera lens, a drop of moisture. Why, did you catch some orbs in your photos?”

“No...not exactly. Here, why don’t you take a look.” The woman leaned forward to turn the screen of her digital camera towards Luisa.

Luisa saw a heavy-set man and blond boy in the foreground of the photo. “That’s my husband and son right there,” the woman said. The man was smiling. The boy was eating an ice cream cone. Behind them was one of the large, two-story white buildings that stand behind the Whaley House. Luisa didn’t see any orbs or unusual shapes near the two people.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “What should I be looking for in this photo?”

“Behind them,” the woman said.

“The white wooden building? That’s actually a brand new building. It wasn’t part of the original Whaley House at all, it was built a couple decades ago.”

“No,” the woman said. She had lowered her voice. “Behind the building. The...the thing behind it.” She pointed at the edge of the white building on the camera’s screen.

Then Luisa saw it. A tall, thin, black profile. It was humanoid, but had elongated, unnatural features. The profile seemed to be leaning out from behind the white house, dangling its arm down towards the ground. Luisa knew there were no trees or objects nearby that could have cast a shadow in that shape.

“Look how tall it is,” the woman said in an even more hushed voice. The figure’s head reached the top of the building, at least twelve feet off the ground. And Luisa knew that there was nothing behind that white building that anyone could have stood on. The figure—the man, or whatever it was—would have to be twice as tall as a human to reach the top of the building.

As Luisa turned to lock the door to the Whaley House, she felt a chill overcome her. She pulled her shawl more tightly around her neck.

* * * *

For more ghostly stories like these see The Tiny Staircase Series of books at <http://holyghoststories.com/the-tiny-staircase-series/>. Happy hauntings!

Sources Cited

With the exception of the story in Chapter 3, all the firsthand accounts were told to me by the people who experienced them. Many of the names have been changed.

Introduction

The quote comes from the U.S. film *The Grudge*, directed by Takashi Shimizu, 2004.

Chapter 3

The original text of Rebecca's account appears on the following website:

<http://theshadowlands.net/ghost/ghost44.htm>

Rebecca wrote several other unusual first-person experiences on this website as well. I highly recommend reading them; many of them are truly chilling.

Chapter 4

This quote comes from "All Pets Go to Heaven," by Sylvia Brown. Touchstone publishing, 2009.

Chapter 6

Quote from an English translation of "The Tibetan Book of the Dead," available on this website:

http://reluctant-messenger.com/Tibetan-Book-Dead_Houston2.htm

The second book quote is from "Treasure Island" by Robert Louis Stevenson, published in 1883.

Chapter 8

The books containing theories about haunted places are:

"Haunted Land: An Investigation into Ancient Earth Mysteries and Modern-Day Phenomena," by Paul Devereaux. Piatkus Books, 2001.

"San Diego Specters: Ghosts, Poltergeists, and Phantasmic Tales," by John Lamb. Sunbelt Publishing, 1999.