

The Haunting

There are certain things in life which defy logic. Our five senses limit us to what we believe to be the 'truth' about this world. Many people hold the contradictory view: that it is acceptable to believe in the supernatural being that is God, but are opposed to the notion of ghosts or spirits, as though such entities are an abomination of negative energies to be stoutly renounced. Fear of the unknown is a powerful impediment to any kind of exploration in this regard.

We journey through life so attuned to the realities of the material world that we blind ourselves to the manifestations of the incorporeal. But sometimes the spectral universe clamours for our attention to such a degree that we are forced to confront its reality. I was forced to confront this world when I turned eleven.

Up until then I had never thought much about death or dying, much less about ghosts or spirits. As a child I had listened to stories from the mouths of old-timers about wailing banshees and menacing fairies, and always been careful to vitiate the terrible endings with fingers stuck in ears.

Although I was unaware of the existence of these ethereal visitors, they remained incomprehensible abstracts. They were as elusive as the heavenly firmament that I roamed in my dreams, or that piece of sky I tried to clasp in my cupped hands as I lay on my back in the sunlit garden.

All my innocent musings were to undergo a dramatic shift in the autumn of 1970, and my notions of life, death and the hereafter would be altered forever. One late autumn evening an extraordinary visitor arrived in our midst, unannounced and unrecognisable. It remained for six harrowing

weeks, rupturing the calm, amber days and ripping through our senses with an urgency and vigour that is unforgettable.

The story begins with the waning of Great-aunt Rose, and that in turn was preceded by another incident: the raging goat that drove us to her door on that hot May day. These things held the genesis of an awesome future event. For one fateful hour old Rose had been forced to exhibit unthinkable kindness; offering us tea and cake had stirred her heart and quelled our terror. It was the first and last time she'd shown such generosity of spirit towards us, and we were not to know that it came with a price. As I've remarked before, benevolence and compassion were not features of my father's forebears.

In late August that same year Aunt Rose slipped while carrying turf from the shed, and the injuries she sustained put her in hospital for a time.

My mother saw the fall as a long overdue comeuppance for a selfish life. Aunt Rose barely countenanced Mother's existence, despising her for having corrupted one of her nephews and having the gall to bring forth children as tangible evidence of that corruption.

But Mother – always the forgiving, dutiful soul – offered to take care of her until she'd regained her strength. Uncle Robert didn't know how to; he knew how to take care of money, but not of people. Aunt Rose had quite a stash; the mean-spirited often do. Money, it seemed, was her very purpose in living. For Robert, the thought of getting his hands on it was what kept him attentive to her needs.

So the boys' bedroom was cleared to accommodate the patient and the parlour became their temporary sleeping quarters. However, despite Mother's unstinting care and devotion, Aunt Rose never recovered from the fall;

it had propagated the cancer that would release her from the bitter past and agonising present, and into the ‘painful’ future of the hereafter. She spent six weeks with us, after which Robert moved her to the guardianship of the nuns at the Nazareth House in Derry.

She died soon after. The nuns were paid handsomely for their trouble; my mother received absolutely nothing for hers. Robert’s attentiveness paid off as well. He received the bulk of her squirrelled-away £300,000 fortune.

The clergy fared handsomely too. It is a rather depressing feature of the miser’s canon that he will seek reprieve from punishment in the next life by generously greasing the palms of God’s representatives in this one. It seems that God takes on the role of the last great banker in paradise. Who knows how many monastery farms have expanded or priestly purses have fattened, on the logic of this fallacy?

On 31 October, approximately six weeks following Rose’s demise, nine-year-old John was woken by the sound of a light tapping from under his bed. It was the same bed his dying great-aunt had lain in, and he shared it with his brother Mark. He wandered into Mother’s room and told her that he couldn’t sleep. She listened, concluded that the tapping was caused by an agitated water-pipe, and sent him back to bed. But the tapping persisted and, with Mark’s help, Mother and I dragged the mattress from the bed and into the kitchen. The boys eventually fell asleep there.

The following day, however, the tapping could still be heard, only this time it had travelled, and continued to travel: we heard it coming from various points on the floor of the boys’ room. This disproved Mother’s noisy water-pipe theory.

With each passing day the frequency and volume of the eerie sound increased. After a week, when all efforts at a logical explanation were exhausted, the bed taken apart and reassembled, the floor inspected, the foundations checked, we were forced to come to the unnerving conclusion that we were dealing with a supernatural entity.

As a child, having to face this reality was extremely terrifying. It was a truth I would never fully have the measure of, or be able to banish from my thoughts. It was like witnessing a horror that had occurred within my field of vision, while I was innocently focusing on a beautiful landscape.

There were no ready answers to my questions because they lay outside the limits of human understanding. This was a malevolent invasion and it gripped me with a fear more terrible than anything I'd ever experienced. I thought I'd known dread in Father Monacle's confessional and Master Bradley's classroom. Such fears were nothing compared to this.

The growing terror inside me kept apace with 'its' progression. After a week it began hammering on the walls and floor of the boys' room, furniture would groan and the bed shake. Every nerve and sinew in us began to tighten in response to those awful sounds, only easing briefly when we thought they'd at last gone away. I don't know how many times we'd turn from the door to that room with tremulous hope.

'It's gone,' one of us would say without much conviction. 'Shush . . . listen; it doesn't usually take this long. That's it. It's definitely gone.'

I can still feel the hope that flickered in me then and grew to a blaze of pathetic longing. We'd enter the boys' room and wait in the testing silence, in the calm before the storm, in the chill of that room. We'd wait, praying, hoping, standing stock-still, not daring to blink or swallow or breathe

too deeply in case – just in case. But as sure as hell and heaven it would come: the thunderous communication from another place, and it would tear screams from every throat and precipitate a headlong dash, back into the terror we'd tried to escape from. It acted like some kind of demon doctor at a sickbed; at any given hour it would deliver a dose of fright and panic to keep us mindful of the fact that it had the power. We were the patients in need of healing, but the big question was: Who or what had caused the contagion in the first place?

Mother went frantic. Her only recourse was to multiply and prolong the rosaries; we often said ten a day. The parish priest, Father O'Neill, came to listen to the noises, and said that prayer was the only weapon we had. He concluded that it was the soul of Great-aunt Rose. She was in torment in purgatory, he told us, and needed our invocations in order to be released. He got down on his knees and assured her of our continued devotion, beseeching her to be gone to her rest. But she refused his plea and continued to fill our sleepless nights with fresh assaults.

We noticed that the phenomenon seemed to follow John. He was the youngest of the trio who had supped at our great-aunt's table that fateful day. During that first incursion it had tapped its way from under the wardrobe at the far end of the bedroom, and settled under John's side of the bed.

We experimented with it. The oilcloth was lifted from the floor so as to dampen the sharpness of the raps, but the noise continued unabated, the volume shifting in consonance with the stone floor. We'd evidently angered it. Suddenly the tapping ceased and something altogether more horrifying replaced it. We heard the excruciating rasp of fingernails being dragged, sometimes rapidly, sometimes slowly, along the underside of the mattress.

Whenever John left the room the knocking, thumping and scratching would stop. Whenever he was laid on the bed it started up again; if one of us lay down beside him it quietened; when he was lifted free of the bed, it stopped. A crucifix placed on the bed would cause it to shake violently; when it was removed, the shaking ceased. All these variations in sound and movement demonstrated to us that the being had an uncanny sense of awareness. Sometimes when visitors called we'd have to turn up the volume on the TV to drown out the unearthly racket in the bedroom.

My parents viewed the menace as an aberration somehow brought on by the family, and therefore something to be mortally ashamed of – on a par with the ignominy of a daughter going out with a Protestant, as had happened on one memorable occasion. They'd cut short that particular liaison with prayers, holy water and a threat to disown the luckless sister. Now those same prayers and holy water were being used to help banish the terror in the room.

Such scruples also prevented us calling in the psychic detectives, experts who could throw authoritative light on the mystery. By the same token we couldn't have cheque-book-toting journalists – and, God forbid, banner headlines in the local newspaper – or the prospect of a book perhaps and the sale of the film rights. Mr Blatty had *The Exorcist* and Mr Anson *The Amityville Horror* (the latter since unmasked as a hoax), and there we were with the screenplay for *The Forgetown Phantom* being hammered out in our midst, blocked by Mother's shame and Father's ignorance. Oh, to have even raised the idea of a public airing would have been looked upon as sheer insanity, and would no doubt have brought 'the priest and the doctor in their long coats running over the fields'.

A consistent theme running through rural Ireland is the inability of the people to challenge the resolute belief systems of an introspective communal ethos. Many choose to live, suffocate and die in a 'safe', benighted fog. My parents thought that the manifestation might simply go away, given time.

We were halfway through the ordeal when the two boys were moved to the girls' bedroom: Rosaleen and I in one bed, Mark and John in theirs, against the opposite wall. The parents hoped to prove by this experiment that the scourge was confined to one room only. It surely wouldn't have the nerve to travel. The electric light was left burning in the hallway; ever since the beginning of the episode, the thought of darkness was unbearable.

So all four of us lay there in the stillness, terrified and longing for the sleep that would transport us from this nightmare into gentle, soothing dreams. I lay with the blankets clutched tight around my face, my eyes concentrating on my brothers as they too tried to sleep; the whispered prayers fell helplessly from my lips as I begged 'it' to stay away.

I kept watch over the boys, snug in their blankets, and willed them *not to move a muscle*. I felt that the merest shift from them would bring on the haunting. The sheer dread of those hours carved such fearful pathways in my psyche that even now the most innocent knock on a door or tap on a table has the power to jangle me.

Was God listening to my prayers that first night? I do not know. For about an hour I watched and waited, and then it happened. What I witnessed next was terrifying.

The strike was sudden, swift and brutal. The boys' mattress lifted clean off the horizontal, hovered for a second above the frame and, in one brisk,

motion, sent Mark and John crashing to the floor. We all dashed screaming from the room. We set up a howling that was as uncontrollable as it was unreasoning and seemed destined to stretch over an entire lifetime. I felt certain even at that moment that I would never have need to scream like that again. A turning-point had been reached.

We had hardly slept during those first three weeks, and that was bad enough. Now we had to contend with a new and frightening development: the first physical assault.

My parents decided to take John to the shrine at Knock – an appropriate place if only because of its name. They'd pray for a solution that would give him a few nights' release, and the rest of us some sleep. My mother, like so many women of her generation, was devoted to Our Lady and had visited the shrine many times.

The village of Knock, County Mayo, is a famous place of pilgrimage. On 21 August 1879 the Blessed Virgin Mary allegedly appeared to fifteen locals. This apparition remained for two hours, and was not witnessed again. The incident was unusual in that the BVM neither moved nor delivered a message. At other more famous sites, such as Lourdes and Fatima, the witnesses have all received messages.

She appeared on the gable wall of the village church as the central figure in a tableau, flanked by St John the Evangelist and St Joseph. To the left of the group was an altar with a large cross surrounded by adoring angels, and at its foot a lamb. Not a word was spoken during the apparition, but many words have been written about it since.

The pilgrimage undertaken by my parents appeared to yield results.

While they prayed with John in Knock, we waited at home for results; twenty-six days had passed since the haunting had begun.

All seemed well that night. The sleep we yearned for was restored; the house was quiet, there was a glimmer of hope in the long darkness. The Virgin Mary had routed our weird visitor, had sent it packing for good.

Or so we thought. The following day John and my parents returned, sleepless and demented. The entity had followed them all the way to Knock and back; it had kicked up a racket under the bed in the B&B they stayed in and continued its pestering in the car. John could not sit anywhere now: stool, chair, sofa, bed, it followed him everywhere. It got to the point where sending him to school was a risk that could not be taken.

In the sixth and final week of the 'visitation' a third mass was offered in the room, but to no avail. The racket continued as before. The hands of the most devout – several holy men and women from various orders and parishes – and relics of the most sainted were laid on John's head, but the evil cacophony persisted, wreaking havoc in our hearts and all around us.

We thought things could get no worse, but they did.

From *My Mother Wore a Yellow Dress*
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