

## A Ghost Story

Some people swore that the house was haunted.

That's what the realtor told me as we entered the house on Sycamore Street for the first time. I didn't say anything, I just smiled, giving the impression that I was a typical cynic, but the idea of a haunted house didn't bother us.

I mean, how could it?

"Nice place LT," Dominguez said "Damned sight better than that last place at the hospital, eh?"

I agreed with Dominguez, with a silent nod. Dom is a good kid. He joined the Army right out of high school to avoid the gangs that ran his part of Los Angeles. He liked to joke that he just joined a bigger gang with better colors.

While we looked about the house, the realtor continued to regale me with stories of past residents and their untimely ends. The house itself was built before WWII, but it showed the improvements and updates that investors have done to a house they are looking to sell.

The contractors had done a very good job, the house was very nice. I admired the hardwood flooring, the size of the rooms, and even made the appropriate noises about the color scheme that flowed through the old house. This seemed to spur the realtor on to new heights of urgency to convince me of the haunted nature of the house. I ran the taps in the kitchen, the laundry room and both the baths as a matter of course, listening to the pipes knock, and remarking on the distinct lack of blood flowing from the faucets.

"Blood from the faucets?" Hoover laughed, "Damn LT, were do you get this stuff?"

Doug Hoover is another of my kids. He grew up a frustrated surfer dude in Virginia Beach Virginia. He dressed the part, he spoke the part, and he even collected old surf movies on DVD. The fact that he never actually learned to surf never really bothered him. Hoover was also a bit of a scrounge. I learned soon after getting the squad that I had to be careful what I said around Hoover. If I was to mention that some piece of equipment would be handy, more often than not, that piece of equipment would show up in the squad inventory suspiciously lacking any of the normal paperwork. I ended up having to protect Hoover a lot.

The guys spread out through the house to give it the once over while I stayed the realtor. My cynicism never dampened the enthusiasm of the realtor, who wanted... no, needed to help a poor damaged veteran. It was the leg. Women always want to protect me when they see the leg. The look the realtor gave me when she spotted my new left leg when I got out of my car was one I'd seen before, as was the immediate change of attitude. She no longer wanted to sell this particular house, not to a crippled vet. She didn't want to be that person. She made it her mission in life to save me from myself by convincing me that I didn't want this house. I however wouldn't be dissuaded.

During the tour it became very apparent that she had slowly come to the conclusion that I was bat shit insane.

I could have told her that and saved us both time.

As nice as it was, the house's best feature was its price. Evidently enough people were convinced of its being haunted to push the asking price to half that of the other homes in the neighborhood. I instructed the realtor to offer twenty percent below that asking price and we returned to my hotel.

My offer was accepted inside of an hour. I felt like kicking myself. I'd known I should have gone lower.

The closing was on a cold November morning. I mindlessly signed what they put in front of us, smiling quietly to myself as ownership of the property and its associated spooks was transferred from one bank to another with the seller paying for the privilege. When it was over, the former owner and I shook hands. It was quite clear that he wanted to get away from us and anything else associated with the house on Sycamore Street.

We spent the rest of the day arranging to have the utilities put in my name, started trash pickup service and arranged for a three day period two weeks in the future when a tech from the cable company may or may not show up between 9 am and 6 pm to hook me up. All the things that were on the list that the Separation office had given us when we got out.

Then we called for my things to be delivered. My furniture would be there in three days.

We had a house. We celebrated that night with a special meal. Jacobs ragged on me for going to the trouble. Hoover sang one of his dirty songs that had us all in stitches, even Jacobs who may well be the straightest arrow ever to come out of Bolivar Missouri. Dominguez and Nofsinger told me about the prettier girls in the neighborhood, and Wilson... Well Wilson pointed out that any women in the area near my age were most likely married, and suggested for the thirtieth time that I should go back to college and in between classes hunt some college split-tail, because that is what he would do.

There was a massive temptation to break out the bottle of my largest suitcase, but I didn't think it would be a good idea for us to show up for our appointment in the morning hung over. So, I went to bed at about 10:30.

Of course that meant that one of the ghosts bound to the house decided to make itself known. I was kipped out in the master bedroom in my sleeping bag on a high end inflatable mattress when I first heard him... her... It?

"Get out!" that first one said.

I opened my eyes to find a misty form coalescing over me highlighted by the LED lights on my leg in its charging station.

"Leave now." the specter said.

"Look Spooky," I said, trying to be reasonable. "This is a big house, big enough for all of us. You stay out of our way and we'll stay out of yours, ok? We've got an early meeting in the morning, so can you just go do whatever it is you do when you aren't waking someone up in the middle of the night?"

Evidently, ghosts don't encounter reasonable people all that often and this one in particular didn't really know how to deal with someone trying to be reasonable.

"Get out!" the ghost insisted.

I responded the way any reasonable adult would in my situation. "Fuck off." I suggested before rolling over and going back to my dreams about my mistakes at Wardak

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There are few things worse than a 7 am appointment with a Shrink. Especially a VA Shrink. Dr. Patricia Gibbs was the very worst kind of VA Shrink, the 'never served a day in uniform but knows all about it' kind.

I sat in the chair facing her. I refused to lay on the couch on general principles.

"So, you've purchased a home?" she asked, while making her usual notes.

"A house," I corrected. "Home implies family and permanence."

"John, you've got to stop blaming yourself,"

Yeah. That was going to happen. Of course that was the moment that Hoover decided to chime in. "She's right LT. It wasn't your fault."

I shut Hoover up with a glare, while Nofsinger gave him a dope slap to the back of his head. Dr. Gibbs noticed and made even more notes. "I don't blame myself Doctor," I lied, "I've just not decided to put down roots. I may stay here, and I may not. In the mean time, well, I needed a place to live and my father always told me that only a fool pays rent."

"Is it nice?" She asked, and continued with her note taking.

I shrugged. "People say it's haunted."

She stopped taking her notes and looked at me piteously. "Oh, John."

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First Sergeant Clyde Jacobs is almost old enough to be my father, and he is the type of senior NCO who specialized in the gentle training of young officers. When I first got the Platoon, Jacobs sat down with me and patiently explained that I was an idiot.

"Lieutenant, strategy and policy is decided by the Brass," Jacobs told me, "Your job is to look after the men, to make sure they are trained to be able to do their jobs and that they have what they need to come home after the shit hits the fan."

I nodded wisely, the way they taught us in ROTC. "What about you First Sergeant? What is your job?"

"My job, Lieutenant," he said with a smile, "is to look after you, to make sure you are trained to be able to do your job and that you have what you need to come home after the shit hits the fan."

"And who trains First Sergeants?" I asked petulantly.

Lieutenants do Sir. It just takes twenty years of watching Lieutenants make mistakes" he said with a grin, before taking me out to the men for morning PT and running my ass into the ground.

It was a month before I could keep up with the old bastard, but I have to admit that he taught me my job and made me look good doing it. After I screwed up in Wardak and got my brand new leg, Jacobs and the boys stayed with me. The six of us have been inseparable since.

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Everything had arrived. No more air mattresses and cheap plastic lawn chairs for sitting on, actual honest to god furniture. My furniture.

Well, sort of mine. I hadn't actually chosen very much of it, but Peggy had left it all when she called it quits. Her letter and the divorce paperwork arrived three months to the day before Wardak. After putting everything into storage and paying the bills she emptied our checking account and returned to her parents house.

I guess it could have been worse, and no, I don't blame her. It couldn't have been easy to be left alone for so long. She had barely managed my tour in Iraq. To be alone again less than eighteen months later I left for Afghanistan... Well, at least there weren't any kids.

I had chosen the wall opposite the television in the living room to be my 'I Love Me' wall, a place to hang my mementos of my time in the Army. I had just stepped back from hanging one of the photos I was especially proud of when I noticed Nofsinger.

"Nice one LT," he said in that soft tone of his. "I always liked that picture. My parents took the copy I sent them and had it blown up poster sized. It's over the mantle in my father's study now."

Tommy Nofsinger was an odd duck. When I first interviewed him upon assuming command of the squad, I thought him to be something of a weak sister, soft and likely to be a hindrance to the squad. Went to show what I knew. Short of First Sergeant Jacobs there wasn't a more driven man in the squad. The pudgy kid routinely produced the highest scores on the firing range, but wasn't interested in Sniper school because he thought it would be boring. He aced pretty much every challenge sent his way and routinely ran my ass into the ground during PT.

Then came the day I pulled his Service Jacket in preparation for writing his annual evaluation. The kid had a two Masters degrees from Caltech! One in Physics and another in Math. What the holy hell was he doing in an infantry platoon as an enlisted man? By this point I was well used to my soldiers being more proficient than I was, stronger than I was, and more knowledgeable than I was, but to find out that at least one of them was smarter than I was?

Prior to that day I had been rather proud of my BS in Electrical Engineering from KU.

I called Nofsinger into my office to find out what he was up to. It turned out that while working on his doctoral dissertation he had become bored with school and decided to take a few years off 'doing something interesting' before returning to his Post Graduate studies. He carries a copy of his unfinished dissertation everywhere so that he could work on it when inspiration struck. He even gave me a copy 'for my insight'.

I would never admit to him that I didn't understand a single thing he was saying in that paper.

I finished hanging the residue of my military career on my 'I Love Me' wall and then moved to fussing with the television's rabbit ears. The cable appointment was still two weeks away and I was starting to miss the news. It was funny how many of us became news junkies during our tours of the Sand Box. Nofsinger watched what I was doing and made a few helpful suggestions.

And they worked as the picture suddenly lost its 'snow' and came in crystal clear.

Sometimes I really hate that guy.

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Spooky came back that night, and he brought a friend.

The ghost's "Get Out!" woke me up from a sound sleep. What is it with some ghosts and the middle of the night anyway? Can't they haunt someplace during the day?

"What now?" I asked the specter that was hovering over my bed, again all lit up by the LEDs of my leg's charging station.

The Ghost gestured to another vaporous apparition hovering near my leg. This one was quite obviously female, at least in the shape it took on. "You must go!" she/it insisted in that echoing voice that ghosts use when they are trying to talk to the living. "He comes!"

I will readily admit to not being my best when woken from a deep sleep, especially when it's a ghost spouting a nonspecific threat like 'he comes'. "No problem," I said sitting up to punch my pillow a few times before lying back down and rolling to face the wall. "We'll set another place for dinner. Go away."

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Dr. Gibbs dropped by unannounced for what she called a 'home visit' the next day.

My boys were all out for PT with Jacobs. We made conversation for a while before I excused myself to fetch coffee for the both of us. When I returned she was standing in front of my 'I Love Me' wall, paying specially attention to my Silver Star commendation.

"I'd forgotten that you won this," she lied. The Doctor had mentioned the medal and stated that she felt I had been robbed at our first session.

"All in all, I'd rather have never been considered for the silly piece of ribbon and still be on active duty," I responded. I hated these exchanges and wished she would just ask her questions.

"So, are you still seeing the ghosts?"

There it was. "Seeing, interacting with and for some of them, trying very hard to ignore."

"The women from the village?" she asked cutting to the chase. She was always so interested in the Afghan women for some reason. I sometimes suspect that the good Doctor believes they are manifestations of my guilt for having murdered several women from the village out of sexual frustration.

I'd had sexual frustration by the boatload by the time of the Wardak incident, but we hadn't killed anyone who wasn't shooting at us. The women had been killed by a bomb planted by the bad guys to get us, though I must admit to being rather startled when I woke up in the field hospital minus my left leg from just above the knee with eight women that no one else could see all screeching at me.

"No, they left a while back, as I've told you before." I had never been so glad as the day I woke up to find that the various Afghans had finally left me. Having a small crowd screaming at me in a language I didn't understand hadn't been good for my concentration.

"No John, you don't understand, I was just confirming that the number of ghosts you are seeing is becoming smaller over time. As you heal, you won't see them as much. I know you don't believe it John, but you're getting better."

"Am I?" I asked, not really believing that there was anything wrong with me beyond the pronounced limp on my left side. "How does this explain the two new ghosts I've been seeing since moving in here?"

Her look of pity sealed it for me. And here I always thought shrinks were supposed to give an air of professional detachment. I decided right then and there that before the next time I went to her office for an appointment, I was going to be wearing my 'Nucking Futz' tee shirt from college.

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I enrolled at the local JuCo so that I would have something to do. The fact that it shut Wilson up about going back to school to troll for girls didn't really hurt.

So, there I was sitting at a table (thank god they didn't use student desks) for the 8am required orientation class. I tried to get out of this particular 'required class' by pointing out that I had been to college before, that I was a big boy and knew that when I showed up for class I should have my pencils and notebook, and I really didn't need a seminar on 'good study habits'.

I sincerely hope that there is a special corner of Hell reserved for administration types who believe that all rules are sacred and must be followed at all times, with no exceptions.

That corner in Hell should be expanded to include overly enthusiastic instructors who feel the need to force socialization on people. When it was my turn I dutifully 'stood up and introduced myself to the class'. I hated doing that the first time I encountered it the first time I went to college, and the experience hadn't improved with age. Of course Wilson sitting there mocking me didn't help, nor did the looks of pity I got as soon as they spotted the leg.

I first met Staff Sergeant Kevin James (call me KJ) Wilson, at a platoon party that the First Sergeant suggested I put in an appearance at. My first thought of the man was that he was trying to pull something. But that turned out to only be my own preconceived prejudices. Wilson is, to this day, the only black cowboy I've ever met. His father owns a small ranch in Oklahoma and I discovered that Wilson's goat-roper appearance was no act. He did the whole routine. The pickup that appeared to have never been cleaned, the cockroach killer boots, the \$140 Stetson whenever he was in civilian clothes and a dip of Redman in his lip. He always told stories of his time on the youth rodeo circuit and how much he hated growing up on his father's ranch, all the while dreaming of owning his own someday.

KJ Wilson has two loves and one obsession in his life. He loved books and horses, not necessarily in that order, and he was totally obsessed with women. Never any particular woman, just women, one after another and occasionally two at the same time. Hoover always joked that Wilson's dream woman was a cowgirl librarian with a twin sister and a father who owned a stable.

After two hours I would never get back, and a psychology class I decided to take so that I might eventually come to understand myself, Wilson spent the entire time I took for lunch regaling me with the attributes of various classmates.

I really could have done without that review of the available female flesh. I'd not managed to get all that interested in any specific women since Peggy left me, but if it made Wilson happy I could live with it.

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At dinner that night I let the guys know about the ghosts that had been coming to me at night. It only seemed fair. Their reaction was fairly muted, with the most visual reaction being from Nofsinger whose raised left eyebrow showed how he didn't believe in ghosts.

Yeah, irony.

None of the others had been bothered by night time visitations from Spooky, his vaguely female companion, nor from the 'He' who is apparently coming, though they did seem to be a bit concerned about me.

"Lieutenant," Jacobs began hesitantly, "maybe we left the hospital too soon."

"I'm fine First Sergeant," I said calmly.

"Some researchers have suggested that infrasound might be present in certain allegedly haunted locations and be responsible for people feeling uneasy." Nofsinger said in that quiet voice of his.

"I'm not feeling uneasy Tommy," I responded.

"The infrasound idea was first proposed by Vic Tandy and Dr. Tony Lawrence of Coventry University. Tandy had been working late in an allegedly 'haunted' laboratory when he saw a grey shape coming towards him. The shape disappeared after a few seconds, but reappeared the following day when Tandy was doing some work on his fencing foil. He had the handle clamped in a vice on a workbench, when he noticed that the blade had started vibrating. Tandy wondered why the blade vibrated in one part of room but not in another. The explanation was that infrasound was coming from a large extractor fan. Subsequent measurements revealed that the infrasound being produced was at a frequency of 18.98 Hz, and that this may have made Tandy's eyeball resonate and produce the optical illusion of the grey form."

The five of us just stared at Nofsinger, who finally noticed and shrugged. "I read a lot. There have been instances of infrasound found at other allegedly haunted locations."

"I've not noticed anything vibrating have you?" I asked. After no one said anything I continued. "So the idea that I'm bat shit insane is still the best all around theory isn't it?"

"Hell LT, if you're insane, what does that make us?" Dominguez asked.

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"Get out!"

Oh good. Spooky was back, waking me up again. It had been most of a month since his last visit, I had hoped that he had gotten bored and gone to bother someone else.

"Hurry, he is here!"

Fantastic, he brought his girlfriend too. Wonderful. Even ghosts have stable relationships while I flail about on my own.

"Go away, I don't care. I've got an early meeting with my shrink in the morning." I said without opening my eyes.

"He is here!"

There was a moment of silence, and I lay there hoping that my 'ignore them will and they will go away' strategy would continue to work. After all, it had before.

Then my left leg burst into agony, pain worse than when it had been blown off when I was trying to drag Jacobs back to my defensive position after he had been hit. I was suddenly suspended in mid air dangling from my nonexistent left leg.

I opened my eyes to find I was being held upside down by... by... oh hell, no way to describe it beyond the Lovecraftian 'Eldritch horror'. Its head roughly resembled a goat, but with far too many eyes and nightmarish teeth, its upper body was basically humanish, but again, with too many eyes. I

was held aloft by its right hand, where I could see a ghostly specter of my missing lower left leg. I decided right then and there that I might have been a bit blasé in the days coming up to this. Ghosts I could handle. This was no ghost. This was a demon, and it was apparently quite capable of handling me.

"Hoomon!" it bellowed. "Yoo die now!" The creature (demon?) swiped a clawed left hand through my midsection. The claws passed through me without causing any physical damage, but the pain was beyond anything I had ever experienced before.

"Bah! Can not tuch yoo!" It bellowed again. "I kill yoo slow!" and I was flung across the room impacting the wall face first before slowly sliding to the floor.

The demon bellowed as it attempted to reach for me. It seemed that it couldn't easily leave the spot it was standing on I noted as I rolled over to face the horror again. Had I survived being stupid at Wardak only to die at the hands of this thing?

"There a problem Lieutenant?"

I looked up, blinking blood from my eyes to find Jacobs standing next to me, still dressed in his desert camo. The rest of my boys were on either side of us all of them looking at me expectantly.

Could it be that easy?

"First Sergeant, secure the area." I said in my best parade ground voice.

Jacobs reached down and drew his fighting knife from its entirely non-regulation boot sheath, all the while wearing that evil grin he always saved for teaching a ignorant newby lieutenants the finer points of knife fighting. "You heard the Lieutenant boys, fuck that bastard up."

It wasn't a fair fight in the remotest sense of the term. An eldritch horror facing off against five soldiers armed with fighting knives and Wilson's use of his personal wire saw in a most unregulation use as a garrote.

The demon never stood a chance. The creature had evidently never faced anyone like my boys before. They were after all examples of some of the world's most capable soldiers before I got them killed through my stupidity. Chunks of the beast were cut off by the men and I watched in amazement as those chunks seemed to evaporate into some kind of vapor. It was only when KJ's garrote severed the beast's head that the fight was over.

Then as one the man looked to the sky and performed a howl, they way they did whenever we lost a man in combat. It was a warning to the demons in Hell that a warrior was coming, and that they had best stay out of his way. It was then they turned their attention to me.

"You ok LT?" Nofsinger asked, leaking some sort of vapor from wounds in his chest. Tommy had been the first to get hit when the IED went off. I had pulled his body back while the rest of the platoon had setup up defensive fire to cover us. Tommy would never finish his thesis. His parents came to see me when I was at Bethesda; they thanked me for my stories of their son and told me that Tommy had told them that I had given him several ideas in our discussion of his paper. I didn't know what to say.

Wilson was pulling Hoover back from the line when a RPG shredded them both. KJ never got his ranch and Hoover never learned to surf.

"It'd take more than a demon to mess with the LT," Dominguez said with that big grin of his. Dom never made it back to LA, or to his girlfriend. She writes me occasionally, and I try to write back, but I never really know what to say.

"You two," Jacobs barked out at the two ghosts who took it upon themselves to warn me. "You go tell whoever that piece of shit reports to that they should never try that again. This is a soldier's house, and if we ever get as much as a whiff of demon up here, me and the boys will be coming to kick some ass and we won't give a damn about any names."

The two shimmering apparitions seemed to blink for a moment, and then rushed to the spot the demon had been and disappeared. Jacobs turned to face me, his left arm appeared to be shredded and that odd vapor roiled from it as it did from the wounds of all my men. "The area is secured Lieutenant," He reported with a salute.

I returned the salute as best I could. "Well done. Are you alright First Sergeant?"

"Not a problem Lieutenant," he grinned. "We've got lots of medics. The men and me will be just fine."

I struggled to the bed and used the frame to pull myself up so that I could sit on the bed. As soon as I was balanced I continued. "Very well, go to the medics and get yourselves tended to."

Jacobs nodded and the men faded from view, leaving only the First Sergeant and myself in the room. "Lieutenant, you done good." And then he faded away as well.

"Thank you First Sergeant," I whispered. Jacobs never returned to his family's farm outside Bolivar Missouri, though he is buried there in his family's private cemetery. I visited the farm at his younger brother's request when I was released from the hospital. The Jacobs family had me stay for dinner and thanked me to coming.

No one ever listened when I told them it was all my fault, that I should have done a better job. All the families just told me that my men knew the risk,

that I brought them back and that was what counted.

The men said that they had stayed with me because I had been there for them. That's just how it is for Soldiers.

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Dr. Patricia Gibbs looked up from her chair expectantly when I entered her office spot on 7 am, only to have the expression of expectation change to one of concern when she saw me.

"John! What happened?"

"I forgot to charge my leg," I lied having anticipated the question. "Damn thing powered down on me and I lost my balance. Bang, face first into a wall."

"You've got to be more careful." she said, stating the obvious.

I paused for a moment trying to ignore Wilson making hand motions to signify Dr. Gibb's rather attractive figure, and then giving me a pairs of thumbs up. He had been advocating my attempting to get sympathy sex from the Doctor since our first session. "I know that now," I said with a grin.

"So, any new visitors since out last session?"

The incident with the demon from the night before flashed through my mind. What had I learned from the entire situation thus far? Lie. Lie often, lie loud. Deny, deny, deny.

"Nope. Outside of a couple of Girl Scouts hawking cookies I haven't been visited by a soul." I thought about it for a moment. "I ordered you some thin mints."

That won me a smile. "Gifts like that might have you ending up being cured."

She had a very nice smile, and Wilson was right, she was put together nicely. Maybe Wilson is onto something with the sympathy sex idea.

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