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Everyday Haunts

A Real Life Ghost Story

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Everyday Haunts: A Real Life Ghost Story
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My husband Greg and I live in a plain brick house set in the side of a hill. It's a basic suburban shoebox—like a child's crayon drawing, only bigger. There's nothing creepy about it. Death and despair do not drip from the dogwoods or ooze from the trunk of the magnolia tree in the front yard. We know, or know of, every owner or renter, and they're all very much alive. In fact, the couple who built it still lives next door. Our house is the last place in the world you'd expect to be haunted.

Welcome to Ghost Central.

My first spectral encounter occurred on a sunny afternoon shortly after we moved in. I was carting a pile of boxes through the kitchen door. I couldn't see around them very well, so I was watching my feet to make sure I didn't fall over the stoop.

Something streaked past my knee into the kitchen. Talk about scary—there's a tangle of bushes and trees along the property line which serves as a high-rise for rabbits, raccoons, cookie-loving opossums, rowdy bird frat houses, the fattest squirrels in three states and the local chipmunk mafia. Much as I enjoyed watching their antics outside the house, I didn't relish the thought of chasing any of them around inside. Plus, with raccoons, you always worry about rabies.

But when I checked out the part of the kitchen where the white blur seemed to pause, there wasn't anything there. I put the boxes down and searched the first floor of the house. Nothing new to the mix but my boxes and me. I called downstairs to Greg and asked him to keep an eye out for stray critters. But we never found anything in the house that wasn't supposed to be there.

I chalked it up to exhaustion and forgot about it until a couple weeks later when it happened again. This time, however, it was after dark. I also caught a glimpse of the culprit out of the corner of my eye—a little gray and white cat, which vanished the instant I turned to look at it.

Okay, that was weird. But I was tired, and you see things when you're tired, right? Nobody in the neighborhood admitted to having a cat resembling my apparition. The neighbors who built the house thought one of the interim owners might have kept a cat. But the elderly woman who lived in the house across the driveway from our kitchen door insisted the house had always been feline free.

Things got marginally freakier when out-of-town friends who knew nothing about my cat sightings sent a housewarming card featuring a cat doll with almost the same white and gray markings as my ghost. I dismissed it as coincidence. So I kept seeing the cat in my peripheral vision when I was tired or stressed. Nothing ever happened in connection with the sightings, except they made me smile. I'd always wanted a cat, but for various reasons, I never got around to adopting one. Maybe my apparition was wishful thinking.

Besides, if anyone was going to see a ghost in this house it wouldn't be me. I'm pretty good at recognizing the kinds of places that *should* be haunted, but I seldom experience the phenomena the way other people do. In the past, whenever I saw what other people might call ghosts, I perceived them as shadows where no shadows should be or shimmering ripples in the air. I never saw anything recognizable as a person, much less something as particular as a small cat with clearly defined markings.

My husband didn't see it, and he'd received a personal goodbye from his dead grandfather when he was a kid. No one else admitted to seeing it either, even people who consider themselves very psychic.

A couple years after we moved in, my friend Kate drove down from Maryland for a visit. We hadn't seen each other since before Greg and I bought the house, so we hunkered down with tea and pastries at the dining room table, and talked for hours about our families, our jobs, books, TV...in other words, everything *except* ghosts. Every so often her gaze would wander,

or she'd jerk her head to the side. When I came back from the kitchen after brewing our second pot of tea, I thought she was going to jump out of her chair. Her eyes looked a little wild.

I set the pot on the table. "Gray and white?" I asked casually.

Kate let out a deep breath. "Yeah."

"Little thing—five to eight pounds?"

Kate eyed me suspiciously.

"Ghost cat," I said.

"Oh, thank God! I was beginning to wonder if I was seeing things. I didn't think you'd get a cat without telling me, but it kept darting in and out of my field of vision."

"I think it was checking you out."

"Did I pass?" she asked.

"Well, you're the first person other than me to talk about it."

My late writing partner, Teri Smith, and I used to debate whether the ghost cat was an individual entity or somehow connected to the resident hill spirit. After all, the cat had scooted into the kitchen from the great outdoors. I'm still not sure. The cat manifests whenever I let my guard down, regardless of time of day. Whatever abides on the hill only shows up at night.

I'm not sure when I realized something other than people, animals, trees and a corporeally challenged cat shared the hill with us. It was a gradual process. Remember, I live in a suburban subdivision created from farmland within living memory. It's not the sort of place you expect to find ghosts. A block southeast of us, it might be another story. There are rumors one of the big houses set back from the road was used as a Civil War hospital. But I never found anything to substantiate the rumors—no histories of the area or longstanding residents willing to identify the house.

Our hill's history seems to have started much later, when our neighbors' family built a farmhouse at the crest in the early part of the twentieth century. The farmhouse was dismantled to make way for the subdivision, its bricks recycled for various projects, including our carport. Our driveway used to be a street leading to the farmhouse's front door. Most of the asphalt was dug out and grassed over. But you can still see where it used to go by following the line of trees and bushes where the rabbits and birds like to nest.

Over a period of months or years, I grew accustomed to seeing the air ripple beside one crooked pine angled over the old roadway. Like the cat, it was odd, sometimes unnerving, but there was nothing to link the presence with anything bad.

In fact, it acted more like a protector. Every so often a hurricane flips northern Virginia the bird. In the past ten years, tornadoes have touched down as close as half a mile away and lightning strikes have split some of the tallest trees on the hill, but the trees always fall away from the houses. The local wildlife remains healthy and diverse, and aside from the inevitable mourning dove sacrifices to the neighborhood cats, everyone gets along pretty well.

Except for the dogs. The hill doesn't like dogs.

The builders' black spaniel mix gets along the best. A total beta, inside the big house on the corner it's happy, friendly and eager to please. Outside, the dog nearly yips itself into a heart attack.

After the elderly lady across the driveway died, her son sold the house to a young couple with three fox terriers. The couple surrounded the property with a handsome picket fence so the dogs could run free. The dogs didn't want to run free. Every time the couple put them outside on their own, they whined and whimpered and scratched at the door. When the couple would go outside, the dogs would drive them crazy, barking at nothing, until the humans gave up and herded them back into the house. The couple moved out less than six months after building the fence.

A string of renters followed. Most of them had dogs. None of them lasted more than three months. The house finally sold to a family without dogs. The father promptly nailed

plywood boards behind half of the fence. I can't help wondering why, but they've lasted the longest.

Teri opined the spirit of the hill doesn't like fences any more than it likes dogs. The granddaughter of an Ozark wise woman, Teri was profoundly psychic. She glommed on to the hill spirit the first night she visited the house after dark. Her gaze zeroed in on the tree where I was accustomed to seeing the ripples of air, and she paled.

"Yes, I know the hill is haunted," I told her. I hoped she'd tell me what the shimmer looked like to her. "It goes with the cat."

"That isn't a cat. It only shows you the cat so you won't be scared of it."

"Is it a ghost?"

Teri's mouth thinned.

"It's not evil." That much I was certain of. Even when the sense of presence sent chills running down my spine—like the time something invisible but irrefutably bipedal strode through the leaves of the driveway at one o'clock in the morning—nothing harmed us or our guests.

"It's not good or evil," she said eventually. "I'm not sure if it ever was human. It just is what it is."

She never would tell me what she saw. Her granddaughter Bree saw it as a horror movie cliché. Its face was "all messed up" with empty shadows for eyes and shreds of skin hanging off its skull. Its clothes were torn and ragged.

This is how Teri usually saw ghosts—as their bodies appeared at death or after the scavengers had been gnawing on them a while. But Teri didn't have any problem talking about that. This was different. She treated our outdoor haunt like one of those ancient beings who shouldn't be named aloud. Certainly not in their presence. She said the hill spirit tolerated us, protected us even, because we didn't get in its way. In addition to letting the ghost cat in the house, we hadn't put up any barriers to its movement.

That made me laugh—and not just at the idea of a ghost being troubled by anything as mundane as a wall. When we bought the house there were gates at both ends of the patio. They rotted within months, and we removed them. It wasn't as if we needed them. Who were we trying to keep out? The squirrels? Fat chance. The peculiar thing was the rest of the fence lasted another ten years. Go figure.

Teri reached an accommodation with the spirit even if she never grew exactly casual about it. The turning point came about a year after she moved into the area.

I'd invited a few friends over to keep me company while Greg was out of town. Almost everybody except Teri had left when word came over the radio that an escaped inmate from Lorton, a nearby penitentiary, had been seen in the area. I asked the remaining guests to spend the night.

Teri chose to stay in the first floor guest bedroom, which overlooks the backyard. As a result, she got to hear whatever it was that took the one a.m. stroll up my driveway pace until dawn. Thankfully, it wasn't the escaped inmate. As far as we could tell from newspaper reports, the inmate never got within a mile of the hill.

With experiences like that behind us, you'd think I'd be cautious about dragging Teri to reputed haunts. But you tend to forget somebody is psychic if they don't make a habit of succumbing to vapors or warning you about green-eyed men with one black shoe carrying a London newspaper on a Washington, DC, train. Plus, I'm a foodie. If the chef's good and I'm in the neighborhood, I never stop to think whether the restaurant might be haunted. Any ghost who tried to get between me and something I wanted to eat would have a real fight on its hands. Heck, it might find itself on the menu. I've always wanted to know if fried ectoplasm tastes like chicken, too.

Which is part of the reason Teri and I wound up at Pennsylvania's General Lafayette Inn one fine Saturday evening in June. The other part was my father's ill health.

My dad had been dying by inches for over twelve years. He'd recently lost his sight to macular degeneration. Frequent interruptions in the flow of oxygen to his brain had robbed him of the nicer parts of his personality as well. Mom couldn't leave him alone. She didn't know from one minute to the next if he'd rage, hurt himself or expire.

My monthly visits were among the few breaks she got, but they were depressing as hell. Coward that I am when it comes to emotional pain, I wasn't above asking Greg or a friend to make the trek with me. This time Teri volunteered to tag along to keep my spirits up. She hadn't planned on taking the phrase literally.

I'd spent the day carting Mom around on the errands she'd been saving for a month, while Teri dealt with my dad. We were both wiped, and the best meal in town was just a half block up the street at the General Lafayette Inn.

The inn is even older than the rebuilt St. Peter's Church and graveyard next door. The first inn was established on the site in 1732. By 1778, when Lafayette was spying on the English from the church steeple, the inn was a thriving concern called the Three Tuns. Not that Lafayette or his men would've recognized it as such. The current, three-story white building with its slate roof and wrap-around porch owes more to a nineteenth century renovation than its colonial past.

Let's see—really old building, lots of history related to major Revolutionary war battles, graveyard just down the street containing over two hundred years of dead people, a day spent in severe emotional stress... What were the chances we *wouldn't* see ghosts?

Naturally, I didn't think about any of this until we were waiting for a table and I noticed Teri staring into the bar. The hairs on the back of her neck were doing their best to stand straight up, despite being gathered in a ponytail. I followed the direction of her gaze.

The bar was packed. But every so often a space opened between the patrons, as if something or someone were edging in to place an order. The people on either side would scrunch away from the emptiness. They very carefully never looked at it, though a few rubbed the backs of their necks like their hair was standing on end, too. Occasionally, one of the bartenders served the space a drink. Once the bartender realized what he or she had done, he or she would go to great lengths to, oh-so-casually, shift the drink in front of a living patron.

Then, a few minutes after each space opened up, whatever wasn't there slipped away. Patrons on both sides of the gap would simultaneously exhale and regroup. It happened at least four times before our table was ready.

"It's cold," Teri complained.

"Pretend it's the air conditioning. The food's really good."

"It better be," Teri muttered.

The hostess led us into the main downstairs dining room and seated us at a table across from the big fireplace, which Teri avoided looking at. She was almost as good at averting her eyes as the patrons at the bar. Naturally I had to check it out. Two curves of rippling air about eighteen inches high flanked the firescreen. It occurred to me they were just about the size of a large spaniel, and I couldn't help laughing. If that was the worst the inn had to offer, we were in for a good night.

The arrival of the bread and salad did a lot to calm Teri down. It's hard to keep a scare going when people insist on feeding you. The waiter brought the entrees. Mine was duck. I remember wondering if spaniels liked eating the ducks they were bred to hunt.

Suddenly I felt a cold, wet nose press against my thigh just below the hem of my skirt. I took a long time swallowing my first bite of duck. Teri beamed an evil grin. I sliced another bite of duck. The nose lifted and a cool wedge of silky hair, like the underside of a Springer Spaniel's muzzle slid over my leg. My napkin shifted to the other side of my lap. I'm not sure whether I grabbed it at that point or it was pushed.

I glanced to the side of the table. A shimmer about the size of a cigar or cropped spaniel tail thumped the carpet.

"I'd offer you some duck but I don't think it would do you much good," I told the dog that wasn't there. Something snorted softly—though that could've been Teri—and the light pressure on my thigh dissipated. My hand shook as I reached for my water. I spilled a little on the table. Nothing major, certainly not enough to call the waiter. I pulled my linen napkin from my lap. There was a wet spot, the size of a quarter or a spaniel's nose, along the hem which had been facing the fireplace.

We didn't stay for dessert. We took it to go, along with the order we placed for my parents. Having been rattled by the dog, I found it a lot easier to see the air moving in the empty spaces at the bar, but I was willing to ascribe the phenomenon to suggestion. I was surprised, however, to find the sun hadn't quite set by the time we emerged from the inn.

Teri rushed to the center of the parking lot to catch the last rays of light angling down Germantown Pike. She held her arms out to her side and shuddered from head to toe. As soon as she finished shaking off the lingering effects of whatever she'd seen inside the inn, she started shaking her finger at me. "How can you act so calm?" she demanded. "The ghosts were practically lining up at the bar. You had one stick his nose in your lap, for Christ's sake."

"It was just a dog."

Teri shot me the "You can't be serious" look. "Oh wait! I forgot. You're the one who lives with a ghost cat. Dead dogs drooling in your lap are just more of the same."

"It was just one, and it seemed friendly. Maybe it didn't know it was dead. Maybe the rest of them don't either."

Teri closed her eyes and shook her head.

"All right, maybe they do. How would I know what a ghost thinks? But did you get the feeling any of them were trying to scare you? Not goose you because you know they're there, but really scare you? Did anybody at the bar look frightened or angry?"

"No," she conceded.

"Maybe whatever's in there is just there for a drink, or because it holds good memories. It's Saturday night. People have been coming here for a drink and a good time on Saturday night for more than two hundred years. Why should they stop now?"

"That's the craziest—" Teri stopped. She cocked her head and considered the old building. Sunset gold edged the roofline and glinted off the upstairs windows, but the entrance was cast in shadow. The patrons easing their cars into the empty spots in front of the porch didn't seem to notice. Cheerful conversation and the clink of glassware escaped the bar every time someone opened the door.

"You know," Teri said thoughtfully, "you just might be right."

Teri died in October 2006—two weeks before the electronic release of the novel we wrote together, but not before she saw to it I acquired a cat. Her granddaughter and I found him crying in the hallway outside Teri's apartment. We spent ten days nagging the staff and plastering the building with fliers, but no one claimed him.

Teri thought he belonged to an elderly gentleman who had recently died. The cat's a talker and social, with remarkably good manners, like someone had spent a lot of time training him. Aside from a black hood and saddle, he's mostly white, which prevents our guests from being disconcerted by the occasional streak of white they see out of the corner of their eyes. The fact the living cat is usually sitting across the room staring at them when this happens seldom ruffles their composure. Our guests usually aren't around long enough to watch him play tag with the feline version of an imaginary friend.

I didn't see the ghost cat the week after Teri died, which was probably just as well. Friends flew in from all parts of the country for her funeral. One of the dearest, Jen, stayed with stayed at our house. She occupied the back bedroom where Teri had once heard the hill spirit

pace.

Jen didn't hear the hill spirit, but the first night after she arrived was rough. Every time she closed her eyes, she heard whispering. A couple times she got up, eased into the hallway and put her ear against the closed door to the master bedroom. But Greg and I were asleep, and if either of us were snoring she couldn't hear it through the door, much less through the wall.

The voice was insistent, but too soft for her to make out any words. Like most of the experiences associated with our house, it didn't strike Jen as threatening. It was uncanny, though, and it kept her awake when she desperately needed sleep. Worse, as the night wore on, she realized she recognized it. It sounded like Teri. And Jen still couldn't understand what she was saying.

Finally, a little before dawn, Jen gave up trying to pretend she was alone. She sat up in bed and said, "All right, Teri, that's enough. Why don't you go talk to Jean Marie?"

"She's too stubborn," the voice whispered. Then it fell silent. It never returned.

About the Author

Jean Marie Ward is the author of *With Nine You Get Vanyr* (written with the late Teri Smith), two nonfiction books and numerous short stories. The editor of *Crescent Blues* electronic magazine for eight years, she has contributed to numerous print and electronic magazines, including *Science Fiction Weekly*, *Buzzy Multimedia* and *Romance Writers Report*. Her web site, which includes news, links to reviews and free fiction, is JeanMarieWard.com. Her Samhain Publishing address is <http://samhainpublishing.com/authors/jean-marie-ward>.