

THE GHOST HUNT

The story you are about to read is true, only the names have been changed to protect the innocent...ahhhhh, *screw* the innocent, their names are real, too. The idea for a Ghost Hunt began in the spring of 2001, shortly after my daughter Rachel turned 13. She would be moving to Las Vegas at the end of the year with her mother and it would be our last summer vacation in Florida together, so she wanted it to be a memorable one. The previous summer we had visited the Grand Canyon but money was a little tight this year. Rachel had several stipulations: she did not want to do the theme parks in Orlando or spend any great length of time at the beach, or see the Everglades, *again*. So I was stumped. What to do in the state of Florida, and on a tight budget?

As a mailman I am privy to a ton of magazines and periodicals (yes, we read them on our lunch break), and I came across an interesting article in a Florida travel magazine. It was written by a married couple that had embarked on a ghost tour of the state. Apparently, they'd researched some of the supposedly haunted historical sites of Florida and spent an entire week visiting each location. They started in Jacksonville and made their way down to the Keys. This immediately aroused my inner Scooby-Doo and I ran the idea past Rachel, who was also delighted by the prospect of hunting down ghosts. We decided to retrace the couple's footsteps and visit all of the areas they had mentioned in their article. In all honesty, neither one of us took this very seriously. We viewed this trip as nothing more than a fun diversion to an otherwise routine Florida summer outing. It was like Halloween in August, and I was a kid again.

Rachel prepared for our trip by going online and researching all aspects of 'ghost hunting'. We filled the back of my new Hyundai Elantra with all sorts of paranormal equipment: flashlights, a Ouiji board, an ElectroMagneticField (EMF) scanner used to detect the electrical current of ghosts, a new light-sensitive digital camera, etc...I even stopped by a local Catholic church and siphoned some holy water, and Rachel brought along an oversized crucifix (just in case!). We began our Ghost Hunt on the first weekend of August. Little did we know what we were getting ourselves into.

Our first stop was the spiritual camp and hotel in Cassadaga, a town in northern Florida inhabited by approximately one hundred or so people, one third of them certified mediums, psychics and faith healers. We drove north on I-95 for more than four hours before reaching the intersection of Interstate 4 and the Daytona Beach Exit. The weather, which had been picture perfect up until then, took an ominous turn. Heavy rain clouds darkened the skies over Daytona, accompanied by increasingly louder booms of thunder. As we made our way westbound on Interstate 4 a deluge of biblical proportions brought traffic to crawl. At one point, lightning strikes singed the trees on both sides of the highway and Rachel and I both began to panic. We finally reached Exit 114 – the exit for Cassadaga – but the rain had not let up. I made exactly three right turns (as instructed on

my map) and we found ourselves on a desolate two-lane road surrounded by woodlands and not much else. Thus began our Ghost Hunt.

We drove for several minutes in the pouring rain on this isolated road, rising over several small hills, some secluded homes and farms barely visible in the woods. But we could not make out a town of any kind. In fact, there was no one else on the road except us. The rain was pelting the windshield so hard the wipers could hardly clean the water away and my visibility was reduced now to almost nothing. Fearful of getting into an accident I slowed the car down and then heard Rachel yell, “DAD, WATCH OUT...!” Right in back of us, seemingly out of midair, a white hearse (I kid you not) appeared almost on our bumper. I could see it clearly because the back window was not getting the brunt of the rain. I couldn’t make out the driver, just this dark figure waving his arm wildly from side to side. The hearse kept accelerating as if trying to force us off the road. Let me tell you, that was one spooky sight, like a scene out of the movie *Phantasm*. I abruptly swerved to the right and onto the grass so the death mobile could pass us by. We came to a complete stop, and I swore I could hear both our hearts beating.

It took us a while before we felt composed enough to continue the journey. When the rain let up I made the decision to drive down this lonely, wooded roadway for a few more miles. If we didn’t come across the town soon I was going to head back to the highway. But we finally reached what we assumed was the *township* of Cassadaga, its center consisted of several buildings: a 7-11 store, a small café, an even smaller post office (of all things), a spiritual bookstore, and the long two-story edifice of the Hotel Cassadaga.

I parked in the gravel parking lot in front of the hotel and we went inside. The first thing we noticed was the blood-red canopy draping the veranda; white letters advertised psychic readings, healings and a host of other spiritual services. The hotel itself was built in the 1890’s and imbued a post-antebellum ambience: polished hardwood floors, long narrow hallways, wide open staircases, period furniture. We wondered aloud why anyone would have built such a structure in the middle of the woods. It seemed odd. But then again, the whole town seemed odd. We had yet to see a single person other than the crazed hearse driver.

The lobby, like the rest of the town, was deserted, but we finally located a clerk inside the small gift shop who sold us tickets to the ‘Spirit Tour’, a one-hour tour of the hotel and grounds that began at 7:00 pm sharp. The politically correct term for ghosts in Cassadaga, as we soon discovered, was *spirits*. So our Ghost Hunt was now officially a Spirit Hunt. And since we had an hour to kill before the tour began I opted to have a psychic reading (cost: \$50). Normally, there are several psychic mediums on call for personal readings, their names and specialties listed on a wall in the main lobby. But because of the lateness of the hour only one psychic was available, a Reverend Peter. According to his posted bio profile he had several certifications and training in otherworldly matters, including a research stint in England. Actually, I was relieved I didn’t have to choose a psychic because I wouldn’t have known what discerning factors to look for. How can you tell them apart, really?

The gift store clerk informed me that Rachel could not accompany me to the reading because she was underage and would have to wait in the lobby by herself. This prompted my daughter, not the bravest of sorts, to lean into me and whisper, "*Dad, don't you dare leave me alone with these strange people!*" I then pleaded with the clerk to reconsider; I told her I was trying to contact my mother who had died before Rachel was born. This seemed to soften her up and when the Reverend Peter arrived, she asked him if it was okay for Rachel to join us. Surprisingly, he didn't appear in the least perturbed, for he shrugged his shoulders and quickly agreed.

Reverend Peter escorted us to a small, gray-painted room on the second floor. It was furnished sparsely: a table with two chairs facing each other, and two worn-looking armchairs near a solitary curtained window. On the walls were posters and paintings of a spiritual nature, albeit their meaning lost on a lay person such as me. For the reading, I sat at the table facing Reverend Peter. My daughter sat behind me in one of the armchairs. Actually, I was glad I could not see her because I felt I would develop a major case of the giggles if we made eye contact. The reverend, though, was all business as soon as he sat down. He immediately cupped my hands in his and said a quick prayer; this was followed by a very long period of silence in which he apparently went into a trance, trying to channel the spirits on the 'other side'.

As the minutes passed, I became more and more uncomfortable, but perhaps this was because I was still holding hands with this bizarre man. *And what nice hands he had!* They were smooth and manicured. I began to imagine what kind of life could lead to such dainty hands. Obviously, not a blue-collar one like mine. And then I stared at his face, his eyes were closed intently and he seemed to be dreaming. I was momentarily overcome with the childish notion of yelling "BOO!" But he finally opened his eyes, slow and deliberate, announcing that he'd seen a woman with white, curly hair. My Mom was 58 when she died, and her hair, from what I can remember, was still dark and wavy. Perhaps he was seeing my grandmother who had recently passed away (I actually had a vision of her in my bedroom on the night she died). Then, Reverend Peter threw me for a loop, he said he saw a syrupy substance, a type of liquid, and asked me if this was significant. At this point I may have gone into a trance myself trying to conjure up an image with syrup in it. The only thing that kept coming to mind was that my mother used to put syrup on my pancakes...and then I thought: *syrup on my pancakes?* What the hell does that have to do with anything? I snapped out of it and told him I drew a blank. And then, believe it or not, *he drew a blank!* His solemn spiritual demeanor was now replaced by a jovial light-hearted manner as he announced he wasn't getting any signals from the 'other side'.

Before I knew it, the session, which lasted nearly an hour, became the Reverend Peter Story. I mean, I learned everything about this guy: how he grew up with his caring grandmother, how he first knew he was psychic, his philosophy on love and death, his relationship with his wife...Holy Shit, I should have been charging HIM for the session! And at that moment I even became a psychic myself, or maybe clairvoyant, for I could tell what my daughter was thinking: *Daddy, this reading sucks!* Thankfully, the session ended when I informed the reverend we had tickets for the Spirit Tour that was scheduled to begin momentarily. He actually gave me a cassette recording of the reading (he tapes

them all) and then escorted us back downstairs where a small party had gathered for the tour.

We said our awkward ‘goodbyes’ to the reverend and joined the tour group. Personally, I was relieved to finally see other ‘civilians’ in this odd place; I was beginning to think we had somehow stumbled upon a real-life *Salem’s Lot*. Our guide for the tour was an affable young man whose name escapes me, but who impressed me with his ability to sweat on cue. Every time he took us to some purportedly haunted section of the hotel, beads of perspiration would begin forming above his eyebrows. If we wanted to know if something scary was coming up, all we had to do was look for moisture on his forehead. He was quite knowledgeable about the history of Cassadaga and its spirits, and I assumed he was a psychic or one in training at the camp.

The tour began in the restaurant/bar/ballroom on the first floor where a spirit named Henry is often seen trying to dance with the ladies. Many of the spirits have names and are talked about with a reverence usually reserved for long lost friends. Since the hotel appeared devoid of guests (and, come to think of it, employees), every area we saw seemed unusually isolated, further churning up the *creepy* factor. We were led into a corridor, also on the first floor, which was narrow and long and had many doors leading to what I imagined were hotel rooms. There was an illusory effect the further you walked down the hallway, it somehow seemed to get longer, like staring into a carnival funhouse mirror. It reminded me of the hallways in the horror classic *The Shining*. We took some excellent photos of it, and for the life of me, I couldn’t imagine who would book a night’s lodging in this spooky place.

Next, we climbed the main stairway to the second floor, inadvertently stepping over the spirit of a 9-year old girl who likes to play on the steps (or so we were told). The corridors upstairs were every bit as frightening as the ones below and these were frequented by a spirit named Anne whose drawing was framed on an antique table next to the staircase. A former guest encountered Anne one evening and drew her likeness. The hotel staff was so taken by his drawing they had it framed. Anne resembled a crazed Lizzy Borden wearing a high-collared Victorian dress. One glimpse of that portrait and I half-expected an ax to go sailing through the air at any moment. We were also shown one of the upstairs rooms where a spirit named John has apparently taken up residence. Hotel guests in this room often claim their window curtains are mysteriously rearranged during the night.

Our last stop in the hotel was on the open veranda, an area that ran the entire length of the building. Here, an unnamed, cigar-smoking spirit – people have reported the cigar stench – apparently passes his time away pinching unsuspecting young women’s cheeks. Um, the guide did not elaborate *which* cheeks. He pointed out a row of rocking chairs that are often seen swaying back and forth by themselves!

Our guide then took us on a brief walking tour along the wooded streets adjacent to the hotel. Many of the houses in the area are very old, dating back to the beginning of the last century, and are in dire need of paint and repair. The residents are mostly psychic

mediums who display wooden signs near their front doors advertising their particular specialties: faith healing, readings, tarot card, etc. It was like a scene out of Harry Potter. The mediums and the camp students live rent-free in these dilapidated houses. We also passed an eerily silent pond where the cremated ashes of Cassadaga's dearly departed are often scattered. I'm not sure what frightened us most about this area: the fact that this tiny lake could be a hotbed of spiritual activity...or the humongous cobwebs adorning the nearby bushes. The more the guide talked about the pond, the more our tour group took to wondering out loud what kind of spiders could produce such giant webs. At one point, the guide was standing next to the bushes alone since nobody wanted to get any closer. I'm certain the thought of a large, hungry arachnid pouncing down on top of him crossed many of our minds. Believe me, we were so jittery that if a squirrel had popped out of the bushes we would have ran screaming for our lives.

Finally, we were taken to the temple, where the spiritualists conduct their services. Both Rachel and I were curious as to what kind of bizarre worship these people practiced, and we even considered staying the night just to experience it. But then reason got the better of us. Or perhaps it was nightfall, which was rapidly descending over us like... well, *like syrup covering a pancake!* We realized the last place we wanted to be was in Cassadaga at night. According to local ordinance, every business (all five of them) had to close their doors by 6:00 pm and the place became – (pardon the pun) – a ghost town. Even the hotel locked its doors at night; guests had to use their room keys to gain entrance. *I mean, where the heck did everybody go?* Were these people vampires? Did they sacrifice virgins? This was one creepy place, and to be honest, I couldn't drive out of there fast enough. And would you believe, no sooner than we hit the two-lane road out of Cassadaga, it started raining and thundering again!

We spent the night at a Best Western off Interstate 4 and Exit 108. Sleep did not come easy, either. And you can bet we left the lights on! So much for Day One of our Ghost Hunt. But as spooked as we felt in Cassadaga, nothing prepared us for what we would encounter at our next stop.

On the second morning of our Ghost Hunt, Rachel and I compensated for our *unfitful* night's sleep by having a big, wonderful breakfast of – you guessed it – *pancakes and syrup*. Afterwards, we traveled further north on I-95 towards St. Augustine, getting off on Exit 94 and making a right turn on SR207. We followed that until we reached US1. A left turn took us all the way to King Street where we made another right and drove into the Historic District (Old St. Augustine). It was a Saturday, and the traffic along King Street rivaled anything in Miami during rush hour. It was a summer weekend, when throngs of tourists clog the intersections and make the going even slower. We finally reached St. George Street, where the beautiful St. Trinity Church stands, and made another right turn onto a narrow brick road, arriving at the St. Francis Inn two blocks later.

Several months earlier I had watched a Travel Channel show about America's most haunted hotels, and one of those mentioned in the episode was the St. Francis Inn. This was also the place where the couple that wrote the travel article had stayed. The St. Francis Inn was originally built around 1791 by a Spaniard named Gaspar Garcia, who served as a sergeant in Spain's Third Battalion of the Infantry Regiment of Cuba. According to a brief historical digest provided by the hotel, the building was constructed as a trapezoid with no right angles anywhere in the original house. Over the ensuing decades, most of the subsequent owners would also be military men, even after American rule was established in Florida. Anna Dummet, the unmarried daughter of one of these military officers, converted the house into a lodging establishment in 1845. In the past 150 years the Inn has undergone various architectural changes: a third floor was added, along with a mansard roof, and then a swimming pool. The hotel has changed names numerous times but has been called the St. Francis Inn since 1948.

All of the rooms at the Inn are named: Elizabeth's Room, Lily's Room, the Courtyard Room, etc. But of these, Lily's Room is by far the most notorious. It sits on the corner of the third floor, one window overlooking the courtyard, the other facing St. George Street. Lily was a black servant, or former slave, who worked at the Inn more than 120 years ago. The story of what exactly happened to her is not clear, but the legend goes that Lily apparently had an affair with a white military man, possibly the inn keeper's son, and became pregnant. At this point she mysteriously disappeared. Supposedly, her white lover became so distraught he committed suicide by hanging himself in one of the rooms. Ever since, the inn has been famous for its ghostly apparitions, and Lily's Room is the source of much of these sightings and occurrences. In fact, the Travel Channel episode called Lily's Room one of the most haunted in all of southeastern America. *This was the room I had booked for our next two night's lodging!*

We were surprised to discover how *small* Lily's Room was; almost a third of the space was occupied by a four-poster double bed. Bookshelves had been built into sections of the wall and were filled with musty literary volumes. In one corner there was a nook with a small window, next to it a stand-alone washbasin. The bathroom, by far, was the really scary part of the room. It was cramped and contained only two things: a small toilet wedged into a corner, and the spookiest bathtub I'd ever seen. The tub rested on four legs that resembled out-stretched talons; a billowing white shower curtain, suspended from a ring attached to the ceiling, enveloped the whole thing. When I took my first shower in it I couldn't help but imagine the infamous stabbing scene in the horror movie *Psycho*.

Check-in wasn't until 3:00 pm, so we spent much of the late morning and early afternoon sightseeing. If there is something lacking in St. Augustine, it certainly isn't museums! In just a few short hours we visited *The Oldest Store Museum*, *The Potter's Wax Museum*, *The Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse Museum*, and the *Colonial Spanish Quarter Museum*. We also strolled down St. George Street, a four-block long pedestrian walking mall. We browsed the many shops and specialty stores lining both sides of the street until we came upon a white umbrella stand advertising the *Ghostly Experience*

Walking Tour, billed as ‘Florida’s best voted tour’. I had earmarked this particular tour for our Ghost Hunt.

Because of the success and enormous popularity of the *Ghostly Experience Walking Tour*, an entire industry has developed around the scary history of St. Augustine, America’s oldest city. This place, we concluded, had to be the single most haunted parcel of land on the planet! You could take in any number of ‘ghostly’ tours and sites and do it in any number of ways: there were several ghostly walking tours, a ghostly trolley tour, a ghostly bus tour, and if that didn’t satisfy your craving to be spooked shitless, than climb aboard the ghostly sailing vessel and cruise the haunted waterways of Matanzas Bay. In fact, the city’s motto should be: *If you can’t find a ghost here, than you ain’t really looking!*

But as fate would have it, we were sidetracked by a sign in a tiny shop called the Ghost Augustine Store and Ticket Outlet. The shop sold souvenirs and discounted tickets for all the ghost tours in town. What caught our attention was the advertised *Haunted St. Augustine Expedition* in the storefront window, which described itself as an actual paranormal investigation of the Old City. The shop owner, a rather reputable-looking older gentleman, told us that for a fee of \$25 each, Rachel and I could join a small group of paranormal investigators led by a college professor who attempted to locate and document *real ghosts*. We could barely contain our excitement and signed up on the spot.

At 8:30pm we headed over to the Ghost Augustine Tavern and Coffee Shop situated directly across from Castillo de San Marco (the old Spanish fort) on Castillo Drive. The tavern/coffee shop served as the staging area for all the paranormal investigations, and boy, did this place live up to its billing. I wouldn’t have been surprised to see Van Helsing himself sitting at the bar. *It had a lot of atmosphere*. There, we met the other members of our ‘team’: four twenty-something year old grad students, a middle-aged couple, and the director of our expedition, Harry C. Stafford, a professor of Quantum Physics at Flagler College. We were each given a flashlight and a hand-held safe range EMF meter, these are scanners used by electricians to gauge Electromagnetic Fields emissions that are measured in units called milliGauss (mG) and are present in and around electrical lines and devices. Ghostly apparitions are believed to give off an electrical charge that these meters can sometimes pick up. All of us carried digital cameras, and one guy had a video contraption with infrared capabilities. A few also had digital thermal scanners to detect varying degrees of temperatures since ghosts can sometimes give off a cold sensation (like in the movie *The Sixth Sense*).

Professor Harry (as everybody called him) resembled something out of an Indiana Jones movie, sporting a goatee, a leather cowboy hat and boots, and carrying additional equipment strapped to his belt and vest like some kind of Mexican bandolier. He cut quite an imposing figure in that get-up. And, personally, I was glad he was around; if anybody knew how to tackle a nasty poltergeist it would be this fellow. Rachel and I never left his side.

Before we set off into the night, Professor Harry gave us a brief lecture on the paranormal (and we felt this was primarily for our benefit, not the rest of the group's). I don't recall everything he said, but basically he touched upon three subjects of immediate interests: *apparitions*, *poltergeists*, and *hauntings*. He talked about *crisis apparitions* which he described as out-of-body experiences, or seeing a recently deceased loved one, and *group apparitions* which occur when an entire group of people experience the same paranormal activity (something that happens quite frequently on these expeditions, we were told). He also mentioned apparitions can take on different shapes and forms – electrical charges, temperature changes, strange odors, actual visual sightings, orbs, mists, etc – and warned us to be on the lookout for anything 'unusual'. Then he classified the different types of poltergeists into violent and non-violent forms, and finally, he discussed a *haunting* in general, which was a rehash of everything he had already gone over. When he was done, Professor Harry looked directly at Rachel and me and asked if we had any questions. We responded like a couple of deaf mutes, shaking our heads vigorously in the negative. "All right, then" he said softly, "let's go find us some ghosts...."

We began the paranormal investigation by simply crossing Castillo Drive and taking up a semi-circle position in front of the Old Spanish Fort (el Castillo de San Marco) and then slowly fanning out in a loose straight line. The idea was to cover the entire space around the perimeter wall of the fort, hoping to get 'spikes' (a red LED reading on our EMF scanners, indicating an electrical presence). If someone yelled out, "I got a spike!", then we would all turn in that person's general direction and click away with our cameras hoping to capture something unusual on film. Professor Harry instructed us not to point our cameras at any one spot, since ghosts seldom stay put, but rather to photograph an area in a sweeping motion. Rarely, he told us, would we see a ghostly apparition with the naked eye.

Darkness had already enveloped Old St. Augustine when our group started the slow journey around the fort. The Castillo de San Marco dates back to 1672, it was built by the Spaniards and subsequently taken over by the British, then later the Americans. One length of the fort protected the Matanzas Bay, the main waterway into the Old City. Supposedly, 200 or so French soldiers surrendered to the Spaniards here and were slaughtered to a man, their bodies dumped into the bay. Hence the name Matanzas Bay, which literally means 'slaughter' in Spanish. During its more than two hundred years as an active military post, the Castillo de San Marco experienced a multitude of assaults, sieges and fierce battles, and all by a litany of varying combatants: French, British, Spanish, and American troops, Native Indians, cutthroat pirates and rogue bandits. But the fort was never conquered in battle, which meant that unknown numbers had been killed on the open fields surrounding it. The very same fields we were now walking over. Throughout the centuries, there have been numerous sightings of ghosts in and around the fort.

Professor Harry led us in a complete circle around the outer walls of the fortress, enlightening us with ghostly tales and pointing out specific points of interest, such as a section of the wall believed to have been used to execute prisoners and criminals. Several members of our team picked up ‘spikes’ in that area. Back at the tavern we had perused several photographs taken on previous expeditions and, if seeing is believing, these fields were full of ghostly apparitions...orbs, mists, actual hazy images of people, very creepy stuff.

During our trek around the fort, the professor explained his own theory on the paranormal. He told us he was writing a book on the subject that would use quantum physics to explain ghostly apparitions. Most of what he said sailed clearly over my bald head, but this is what I did make out: Professor Harry believes that ghosts are nothing more than images in time, space and dimension, just like looking up and seeing a star situated millions of light years away...ghosts are, according to him, long ago images of once-living people that are somehow being rebroadcast to earth via an interstellar time warp.

The exploration outside the fort ended in the empty moat directly in front of the drawbridge. Everyone in the group had picked up multiple ‘spikes’ throughout the walk, and Professor Harry also registered some interesting temperature variations with his equipment. Our next stop was the Huguenot Cemetery a short walking distance away. Huguenot is a French term meaning *Protestant*. Since only Catholics were allowed to be buried within the Old City limits the Huguenot Cemetery was raised just outside St. Augustine’s original wooden gates. In 1821, an epidemic of Yellow Fever swept through the city, killing approximately one third of all its inhabitants...regardless of their religious affiliations. Fearing more contamination from the dead bodies piling up, a mass grave was hastily dug in the Huguenot Cemetery and as many as three thousand corpses were interned there. What is odd about the cemetery is that there are only 92 visible tombs or gravestones within a small, rectangular area; it’s almost unfathomable to imagine there are thousands buried beneath it, which makes this spot a hotbed for paranormal activity. Back at the tavern, Rachel and I saw a photograph purportedly showing a ghostly funeral procession entering the cemetery. And let me tell you, if those were doctored pictures, then my hat goes off to the photographer.

A wrought iron fence enclosed the Huguenot Cemetery; visitors can only enter it on one specific day of the month, and only for a few hours. Professor Harry took us around the fence pointing out various tombs and entertaining us about the unusual circumstances of each occupant. All the while we kept getting ‘spikes’ and taking photos. The most interesting of the tombs was one that rose noticeably higher than the others; it belonged to a woman named Nellie. Professor Harry had us illuminate it with our flashlights and then asked us what we saw. There appeared to be a carving of a woman’s face, presumably Nellie’s, clearly visible to all of us. Well, he told us the image of Nellie was an illusion, that in fact there was nothing on the tombstone. I recall turning to Rachel and we both rolled our eyes in disbelief. But the following afternoon we visited the cemetery

and, sure enough, there wasn't any carving or reflection on the stone. Very bizarre, indeed.

Next, we followed the professor down Cordova Street, to an area he referred to as the Courtyard, which, upon closer inspection, appeared to be nothing more than a vacant lot behind some otherwise indiscernible buildings in the darkness. The only thing of note was a creepy-looking oak tree off to one side, many of its branches trimmed for the hurricane season. I remember we stood there for several minutes not sure what it was we were supposed to be looking for, but the professor warned us to be vigilant because this lot had an unusually high occurrence of violent paranormal activity.

Suddenly, Rachel and I exchanged nervous glances, and I immediately sensed there was something wrong with her. My daughter is sometimes prone to anxiety attacks. I noticed her breathing was becoming more labored and she had wrapped her arms around herself and was beginning to shiver. It was August, but strangely there was an unexpected chilliness in the air, almost like a freak nor'easter was sweeping over the state. I spoke softly hoping to calm her down before she began hyperventilating. "Honey, are you alright? Just relax and breathe slowly." She responded by spinning abruptly around and facing the oak tree. I followed her gaze and I knew what she was thinking, but before either one of us could say it, the professor announced: "*If you're wondering why this place feels so weird, it's because it was the sight of public hangings.*" Strangely, his words seem to break the spell; the air felt humid and sticky again, and Rachel was breathing normally. This was the first time we actually became frightened on our Ghost Hunt. I think Professor Harry noticed our discomfort, for he wasted little time moving the group out of there, a knowing smirk on his face.

Our last stop on the expedition was the Tolomato Cemetery, the famed Catholic burial grounds of Old St. Augustine. It is named after the legendary Indian Chief Tolomato, who befriended the Spaniards. Unlike the Huguenot Cemetery, this one was completely off-limits to everyone except the Catholic order that kept the grounds. To drive home this point, it is entirely enclosed by a chain-link fence topped with concertina wire. Many of the tombs were hundreds of years old and faded beyond recognition, it made you wonder just what the hell they were hiding in there. We made our way along the front of the cemetery and Professor Harry showed us a tiny gravestone of a child named James, a five-year-old boy whose ghost is often seen trying to hand out flowers to passing females. Thanks to all those scary Japanese horror flicks that love to depict dead children, I have this aversion to 'child ghosts'. And when one of the female members of the group kept getting 'spikes' (no one else, just her) it almost felt like the little tyke was following us around. Meanwhile, Rachel and I were still pretty jittery over the Courtyard incident and we just wanted to keep moving.

The scariest part of the Tolomato Cemetery was when we reached the back area through a lonely side street. Inside the fence we observed a small white chapel. Several yards from this chapel was the funeral monument of a long-deceased and popular Catholic Bishop. Legend has it that improper embalming techniques and/or the stifling effects of the Florida heat conspired to allow gases to accumulate inside the poor bishop's

body, and during his actual funeral mass the coffin exploded, flaying body parts all over the now-hysterical congregation, causing a major stampede for the exits. Ever since, the ghost of what is believed to be the bishop has been routinely witnessed pacing back and forth in front of the chapel. Professor Harry admitted to us that he had only seen one ghost in his nearly 25 years of ghost hunting; the previous summer, on another expedition, all of the members in the group experienced a *group apparition*, seeing a man dressed in black walking in front of the chapel. The unmistakable reverence in the professor's voice made me want to shit my pants.

It was now almost midnight, and the paranormal investigation had concluded. The professor invited all of us back to the tavern to review what our cameras had captured, and to show us some more interesting photos taken on other expeditions. Disappointingly, though, none of our photos revealed any evidence of ghosts despite all those 'spikes' and frayed nerves. Shortly afterwards, Rachel and I thanked the professor and bid goodbye to the rest of the team and began our long walk back to the St. Francis Inn. I wish I were man enough to say the walk back was pleasant, but the truth of the matter was that St. Augustine seemed deserted at that hour, and we were both fairly spooked. Every darkened object on every darkened corner made us jump. And even the few stragglers we did encounter along the way looked incredibly like zombies to us, lurching through the night. Whatever comfort we took in reaching the St. Francis Inn was short-lived. The place was locked up solid, and we had to use our room key to gain entrance. There wasn't a soul to be found once we were inside, either. Most of the lights had been dimmed, casting eerie yellow hues against the lobby walls that made our imaginations race. We ascended the two flights of stairs to the third floor quickly, realizing for the first time how crooked the stairway was, and how *loudly* it creaked the further up we went.

Lily's Room offered no solace. God only knew what was waiting for us in there. As soon as we entered the room Rachel turned on the small television set atop the mirrored dresser; I suspect it was to provide a technological distraction from the unease we were both feeling. But as fate would have it, there was a cable show on the air called John Edward's *Crossing Over* about a psychic who channels spirits for guests on his program. *It now appeared as if the ghosts were hunting us.*

I awoke at dawn on the morning following our paranormal expedition. The St. Francis Inn offered a very unique and delicious breakfast which they began serving at six in the morning, and the smells wafting up from the kitchen permeated the entire hotel, arousing the sleepest of appetites. Waking my daughter has never been a pleasant task, but all I had to do was touch her blanket and she hopped out of bed as if jolted by a cattle prod, leading me to believe she had slept little throughout the night. She bounded into the bathroom for her obligatory morning shower without the slightest hesitation. And then,

about five minutes later, as I watched the morning news on television, she came screaming out of the bathroom wrapped in an over-sized towel, noticeably shaken and rambling on about ‘hearing voices’ inside the bathtub. I became quite concerned, and not because I believed her, mind you, but because this trip had been my idea and now I’d managed to scare the bejesus out of my little girl. Apparently, all this ghostly business was taking its toll on her.

I calmed her down in that assuredly *father-is-here* manner, and then went into the bathroom to investigate the ‘source’ of the voices, pretty certain I wasn’t going to hear anything, but trying to appease her, nonetheless. *And then I heard them, too!* It sounded like a man and a woman having a conversation, cordial and low key. Freaky, I thought, but neither did it sound ghostly in origin. I followed the noise along the back wall of the bathroom until I reached the toilet, and there, directly above it, was an air-conditioning vent. I plopped down the toilet seat and gingerly stood on top of it, my ear inches from the vent. I smiled. This was the source of the voices. Still standing on the toilet seat I called for Rachel, who reluctantly entered the bathroom. “You see, honey, the voices you heard are coming from this air duct, it’s probably the people in the next room.” At first, she didn’t want to believe me, and stood silent, listening to the sounds emanating from the vent. Slowly, she smiled and then we both broke out into a laughing jag. The mounting anxiety of the last two days seemed to ooze out of our bodies as we guffawed insanely inside Lily’s Room. This incident quickly put us back into a festive mood.

After breakfast, we decided to reconnoiter the Castillo de San Marco from the inside, since the fort is open to the public during the day. We had brought along our own EMF scanner for the trip and we were hoping to get ‘spikes’ and take photos of the fortress’ interior. There must have been a gazillion tourists visiting St. Augustine that Sunday morning, and I reckon half of them ended up at the Castillo de San Marco. The place was packed solid, and every time I whipped out the EMF scanner some *wahoo* from Cornstalk, Nebraska stopped to ask us what we were doing. This caused an unexpected chain reaction, as more *wahoos* gathered around thinking I was some kind of tour guide with interesting information to impart. Rachel, whose face had turned the color of magenta from embarrassment, somehow managed to extricate herself from the growing crowds and left me all alone to explain how ghosts give off electrical charges. It became increasingly clear to me that I must have sounded like an imbecile, and even the police patrol started to take an interest in me. We decided to leave the fort before we got arrested for ‘public stupidity’.

To make up for the fortress fiasco, we went over to the Huguenot Cemetery to check out Nellie’s tomb, and sure enough, as Professor Harry had proclaimed, the tombstone was blanker than the expressions on our faces. The cemetery looked even smaller in the daytime and I still couldn’t imagine all those bodies buried beneath it. Strangely, we seldom got any ‘spikes’ and I wondered if ghosts slept during the day. Not a bad idea, we thought, as we opted to return to the St. Francis Inn in the afternoon and take a much-deserved nap prior to our evening *Ghostly Experience Walking Tour*. Once we reached our room, though, we had a difficult time napping. The voices that so spooked Rachel earlier that morning had intensified. In fact, as we entered Lily’s Room we could hear the

couple next door in the hallway. I closed the bathroom door to muffle the sound, but to no avail. Noise apparently travels well in two hundred year old houses. Eventually they tired of their conversation and we were able to get some sleep.

We had dinner at a 1950's style diner, later joining a small group of people on St. George Street for the *Ghostly Experience Walking Tour*. Our guide was a young woman garbed in some kind of witch's gown and cape, and she carried a gas-lit lantern instead of a flashlight, which I thought was a nice touch. Basically, we walked the entire length of Old St. Augustine (what is referred to as the Historic District), revisiting many of the same places we had seen the previous evening, listening to every conceivable ghost tale associated with America's oldest city. The most interesting story for me was the one about the former Gate Keeper's 12 year old daughter who died in the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1821. Her ghost has been reported so many times (in the form of a lost girl wandering the streets) that it has become a matter of public record. Police officers routinely fill out reports of such sightings and have even seen her ghost themselves, according to our guide.

By the time the walking tour ended, we were both bonafide experts on the paranormal history of St. Augustine. And we were also bone-weary tired. I would like to write that something spooky happened, but compared to the previous two evenings it was rather lame, and all we really wanted to do was get some sleep. Not even the thought of Lily bothered us anymore; we welcomed the sight of the St. Francis Inn, deserted or not. And sleep we did, until about two in the morning when the couple next door resumed their conversation, only now it seemed to be somewhat heated. The man's voice was louder, and the woman spoke evenly, as if trying to appease him. This audible back-and-forth was frustratingly annoying. Rachel was the first to bolt to her feet. "Dad, do something, I can't sleep with those people talking!"

No one picked up when I called the front desk. I decided to go downstairs and hopefully find someone there to lodge a complaint. I told Rachel to wait for me, but she would have none of that; this room was scary enough with me in it, and there was no way she would stay up here by herself. So she accompanied me downstairs where, once again, we found the place empty. Foolishly, we trudged back up the dimly lit creaking staircase and stopped in front of the couple's door, wondering why no one else (but us) was lining the hallway searching out the source of this infernal yakking!

"Dad, what are you going to do?"

Those were the words that shook me into action. I raised my hand to knock on their door when suddenly Rachel had a change of heart; she pulled my arm away and whispered: "*No, Dad, wait! Maybe they'll get pissed off.*" And there it was...fear. Oh, not my daughter's fear. My *fear*. The fear every dad has of getting his ass royally kicked in front of his own precious daughter. I mean, I didn't know who was behind that door. Maybe it was a husband-and-wife judo team arguing over the tactics of their next championship bout? I let out a sigh, hoping it sounded convincingly nonchalant, and replied, "Yeah, honey, these idiots aren't worth it." And we sheepishly returned to Lily's

Room only to discover the weirdest thing: the couple had become quiet, as if they knew we were standing outside their door. Well, we didn't waste any more time thinking about it and quickly got back to sleep. For the first time in three days we slumbered like babies.

The following morning we awoke later than usual, refreshed and ravenously hungry for the inn's delicious breakfast. After our showers we packed our bags and left them piled up on the bed and headed downstairs to the dining room. Our next stop on the Ghost Hunt was a lighthouse along the central coast of Florida and we were anxious to get an early start. As we crossed the front desk, Rachel suggested we complain to the young lady clerk about the couple upstairs. Normally, I'm not one of those 'picky' travelers who go out of their way to cause trouble, but my daughter had a point. Perhaps we could even get a discount on our bill if we sounded indignant enough. *Who knows?* So we unburdened ourselves on this poor unsuspecting woman, telling her how disruptive the couple had been and blah, blah, blah. She took it all in without blinking, and then asked us if we could wait one minute. She disappeared into a small office and reappeared with a much older woman whom she introduced as the inn's manager. This rather dour-looking lady apologized profusely for any inconvenience we may have experienced during our stay, and then asked us to retell what had happened.

I recall Rachel sighing; we then took turns describing how noisy our neighbors had been. How we came downstairs and found nobody at the front desk to complain. How we stood outside their door and almost confronted them. And we wondered aloud why nobody else had complained because they had made quite a racket and surely must have disturbed the other guests on our floor. When we were done, the manager cleared her throat and gave her assistant a nervous sideways glance before saying, "Mr. Rodriguez, I don't know quite how to tell you this...but...since you've arrived, *you and your daughter have been the only guests staying on the third floor.*"

I thought Rachel was going to faint. We stood there, nobody speaking, for almost a minute. For the life of me, I thought these people were playing a gag on us. I expected at any moment the manager would start laughing and say, "Just kidding!" but she seemed as serious as a heart attack. And then I didn't know *what* to think. Had we imagined those voices? Could they have emanated from another part of the hotel, traveling through the walls? But we stood right outside their door, their voices *definitely* sounded like they were coming from inside the room. I didn't know what to say after that; in fact, I felt somewhat ridiculous, that maybe these people thought we were making this up. Rachel broke the silence by announcing she wanted to leave, and NOW. She refused to go upstairs with me to retrieve our bags and I had to do it myself, and believe me, I was in and out of Lily's Room faster than you can say *Casper*.

We didn't stop for breakfast until we were well on I-95 heading south. The idea of continuing the Ghost Hunt didn't seem like a fun idea anymore, so we returned to Miami with our tails between our legs. Years later, I still ponder what happened on our trip. How was it possible we heard those voices? Rachel got pretty spooked and until this day is frightened whenever she sees horror movies with ghosts in them. The following year, once we had put this trip behind us, we briefly toyed with the notion of doing a UFO

Hunt. You know, Area 51 and Roswell, New Mexico? But Rachel wasn't too convinced, she said that with our luck we'd end up being kidnapped by aliens and have probes stuck up our butts. *And who needs that.*

Richard C. Rodriguez

(The Ghost Hunt took place during the first weekend of August, 2001)