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## Haunted?

My favorite movie as a kid often played on New York City TV stations: *The Time of Their Lives*, a 1946 Abbott and Costello starring Gale Sondergaard and Binnie Barnes, set during the Revolutionary War and the Forties. The pair of ghosts are mistakenly shot as traitors during the Revolution, and their bodies are tossed down a well and cursed. It sounds grim, but the ghosts were played for laughs and it never occurred to me that they could be anything more than fictional until I had two scary experiences of *real* ghosts.

The first was at my best friend's seven-room Upper West Side home in a fabulous Gilded Age apartment building with spectacular views of the Hudson River from the top floor. It's the kind of Manhattan aerie people dream about: elaborate, shiny chevron parquet floors; high ceilings and crown molding; a working fireplace with marble mantel and surround; pocket doors between the formal half-paneled dining room and the spacious living room; three bathrooms and a comfortable eat-in kitchen.

There was even a small maid's room. Well, tiny, really, with just enough space for a single bed, a desk set into a shallow alcove and a bookshelf above it. The high ceiling made it feel even more cramped and the bathroom was more like a closet. Moving around in there was dangerous: it was way too easy to injure an elbow or knee. There were original

wall and floor buzzers in various rooms to call the maid and I wondered what it would have been like to live in such a cramped space with a small, narrow window while her employers had so much elegant space to luxuriate in. I know it would have made me jealous and maybe worse.

My friend had tried making the room more pleasant with sky-blue paint on the walls and a large framed photograph of dazzling white cumulus clouds in what looked like a summer sky, plus a blue-and-gold Swedish flag poster in honor of her heritage, but the room was just serviceable despite those efforts. And kind of creepy. It faced north and there never seemed to be enough light, plus the ceiling fixture in a plaster rosette seemed more like a nod at illumination than the real thing.

I don't remember much from the day I was there, but the night was unforgettable. It was summer, but I woke in the middle of that night feeling chilled and realizing that it wasn't the room that was cold, there was some kind of hostile presence at the foot of my bed. I couldn't actually see it, but I could feel its fierce contempt and rage blasting me. It was a tsunami of hatred.

For a moment, I was stunned and unable to move, and then I yanked the covers over my head, my terror somehow making me pass out.

I didn't say anything at breakfast, but after a second cup of coffee, I asked my friend, "Has anyone ever told you they thought that guest room was haunted?"

My friend is petite and very Swedish-looking, with large blue eyes and bowl-cut blonde hair, and I can always tell when she's joking because she tries too hard not to smile and her lips twitch. This was not one of those times. "Oh, yeah, over the years I've lived here, five or six people have said they would never spend another night in that room for any reason at all."

"So it wasn't a nightmare?"

She shook her head, undisturbed by what lurked in that room.

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Years later, I spoke at a writer's conference in Ludington, MI, a quaint former logging town on Lake Michigan. Though the lake isn't as blue as the Atlantic off Cape Cod, the town feels very much like it could be in New England. There are even two lighthouses, one conical, and the other round, narrow, blue-and-white.

The writers and attendees were based in a 1903 hotel dubbed "historic" in conference literature, a hotel that had seen so many renovations over the years it had no discernible character. From the outside, it felt dispirited, as if whatever had been at its Gilded Age core was now buried and eclipsed. I had researched the hotel online and was sad to see that the brick cornice was gone, likewise the long porch with a stone balustrade and stone steps. Also gone was the center balcony at the center one floor up, designed, perhaps, for visiting dignitaries to wave at gawkers and well-wishers—or give patriotic speeches on July 4th. Siding of some kind covered the original dark brick, leaving the building crouched in shame, mourning if not its former glory, at least its dignity.

My writing workshop went well, dinner with the other presenters was fun, and I was enjoying myself until I got into bed in a bland off-the-rack hotel room that sadly had no view of Lake Michigan. I was woken up after just a few hours by the sound of growling somewhere near the foot of my bed. The clock said 2 a.m.

*How the hell did a dog get into my room?*

I warily sat up, expecting to be attacked until it hit me that there was no way a real dog was there because I had carefully locked the door. I heard the deep, throaty sound again, the growl of a very big dog, and it was clearly not coming from out in the corridor.

I waited for more, flushed with fear, my hands trembling--but that was all, and I somehow managed to fall back asleep.

Before getting an early breakfast the next morning, I hesitated to ask the gray-haired clerk at the reception desk if the hotel was haunted, because I didn't want to sound crazy. She was elderly, thin, pale, and radiated not wanting to be there. Her bulky red blazer with some kind of hotel logo on the breast pocket seemed like an ill-chosen Halloween costume the way it swallowed her up inside it like the hotel's original beauty had been devoured by time and change.

Not even looking up from her newspaper, she muttered, "Well, some people think so." She was so dismissive, I rushed off to a solo breakfast.

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On the two-and-a-half hour drive home to my bucolic mid-Michigan suburb, the weirdness of the night faded and I thought the story was over. My heavily-updated 1950s ranch was on a quiet, deeply-shaded street lined with oaks and maples and when I pulled into the driveway, life couldn't have seemed more normal, the previous night's events more distant.

Ditto the rituals of return: hugging my husband and greeting our two West Highland White Terriers, Yuri and Kobi, who barked with delight and demanded hugs and back scratching. Then I brewed a pot of my favorite Swedish coffee, and after sharing some more details of the conference with my spouse, I described the growling incident of the previous night. It sounded unreal and I think I turned a little red, re-living the fear.

We sat in our cozy orange and gold sunroom with its view of a backyard full of hemlocks. Their lacy branches rose and fell in the breeze, revealing the paler underside of the flat needles and then shifting to dark green, up and down, back and forth in the

sunlight. The shifting colors and light made for a scene worthy of an Impressionist's canvas.

My husband stopped sipping his coffee as I wound up my ghost story with the comment from the bored hotel receptionist. He set his coffee down on the glass-topped round whicker table as carefully as if the mug might break. And then he ran a hand through his thick salt-and-pepper curls as if clearing his thoughts. "What time did that happen?"

"Why?"

He repeated the question.

"Well, it was two o'clock."

He almost shuddered. "Okay. Last night, at two o'clock *exactly*, Yuri suddenly stood up on the bed and started growling. I thought it was because he heard something outside—a deer or an owl, or maybe a raccoon scabbling on the roof."

I felt the skin on my arms tingle. "How long did it last?"

He shrugged. "Not long."

We drank more coffee while trying to puzzle out what all of that could mean. He wondered if I had somehow been followed from New York by whatever malevolent presence had scared me years earlier. But then why was it such a different experience? I felt a silent presence the first time; this time, I only *heard* something.

One possibility seemed obvious because we had deep and loving bonds with both our dogs. Maybe our younger Westie somehow sensed that I was in danger, despite the miles between us, and was responding to the threat, wanting to protect me.

Possible, yes. But believable?

We eased the weirdness by watching an old comedy with Whoopi Goldberg, *Jumping Jack Flash*, but I was afraid to go to bed that night because I dreaded some new visitation. Though I slept well and didn't even have any nightmares, in the morning, I was re-living both incidents and was gut-sure that even if somehow Yuri and I were connected psychically, the growling in my hotel room was from another source, because his growls had never scared me before. Dogs live in a parallel universe to our own, able to hear and smell things that are invisible to us, so why couldn't he have sensed what was happening to me at the hotel?

But there was still one question: Was I being haunted somehow or was I just open to perceiving realities other people missed?

I shared the stories with Martha Lawrence, a friend who wrote mysteries featuring a psychic sleuth, and she laughed. "Old hotels are terrible! Something is always going on there. I was staying at one in San Diego and called down to the front desk at midnight, asking why the orchestra was still playing so late. The clerk told me they didn't have an orchestra on site. Hadn't had one since the 1920's." After a pause, she added, "You know, you might want to stay home for a while."

I took her advice.