The Haunted House

Vision

Back in the golden age of *Doctor Who* and *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, just before *Back to the Future* came out, I often visited the invisible house of Dr. Uranus. In an original illusion by the strange psychology professor, draped in ivy, shrouded by shrubs, the wooden façade blended so well with the bark of trees that the mail carrier sometimes missed the house. I even had to pause to find the door today. I had one more class before work and on my way was dropping off a *Genii* magic magazine that I had borrowed.

Dr. Uranus absently took the magazine and ushered me inside where his coffee table was strewn with papers, maps, and a few newspapers. He appeared to be planning one of his trips or projects with his red-haired graduate student Cathy, their Waffle House to-go cups sitting in front of their respective seats on the couch. Cathy was the unofficial girlfriend of Dr. Uranus, an “everyday girl” as my friend Craig Crawford dubbed her in the jargon of his theory of dating.

Cathy called herself a professional student, having worked on Master’s Degrees in anthropology, geography, and now psychology. Although much younger than Dr. Uranus, she was also far beyond the regular crop of students, not just in maturity, but in intelligence, research skills, and academic political prowess. Still, she wore jeans, carried a student backpack, and enjoyed the stress-free student life of campus movies, local taverns, yoga classes, and poetry readings. She read *National Lampoon* and kept Dr. Uranus up to speed on current pop culture, especially emerging Athens bands like Love Tractor, the B-52s, and R.E.M.

Sometimes Cathy was not merely unofficial as a girlfriend but strictly top secret. Once when a Ph.D. candidate, Grant Thrall, who had actually tried to ask Cathy out a few times, had lost his apartment, Dr. Uranus let him stay at the invisible house for a few weeks. During that time Cathy would visit both publicly and secretly, sometimes leaving only to return through a back stairway that up from the garage—or the reverse, sneaking out only to reappear minutes later, knocking at the front door. She was also an unofficial graduate assistant.

Today they were immersed in some plot or plan in which I could see that I would soon be involved, as I was thrust into a chair on the short edge of the table above the mess of maps and graphs.

“Express Pizza, where the Magic Guild met that time—it’s one of your watering holes, right?” he said, taking the pipe out of his mouth and leaning in. He urgently tapped a spot on the map of Athens with the pipe stem, the intersection of Milledge and Baxter Street, two blocks away from Express, as my drinking buddies and I called it. “A block away, do you know what’s located here?”

“Clarke Central? Some apartments?”

“The Wedding Cake House.” He unfolded a page from the college newspaper *The Red and Black* where I saw the headline “Sorority house haunted by heartbroken bride.” He continued, “It seems I have been hired like the…”

“Ghostbusters.” Cathy chimed in. She had probably had to fill him in since the movie had just come out last summer.

“Yes, like the Ghostbusters. As you can see in the article, the house was built in 1896 as an engagement present from William Winstead Thomas for his daughter Isabel. The fiancé left her standing at the altar, and she hung herself in an upstairs room. This much is history.” I looked over the article. I think I might have met the student author.

“And what about the ghost?” I asked.

“The spirit of poor Isabel seems to be haunting the house. There are some other traditions and permutations passed along as well. The urban legend is now into the media,” he said, rattling some of the other papers on the table. “As usual, the people interviewed—mostly sorority sisters living there—do not claim to have seen the ghost but to know people who have: the classic F.O.A.F pattern.” From previous discussions, I knew this acronym to stand for “friend of a friend,” the impossible-to-verify citation of urban legend. “Several sororities have attending folk tales like this,” he continued. “—writing etched in a window with a diamond ring by a legendary widow or tunnels running underground from the days of slavery.”

“Why are they hiring you?”

“That is the healing question!” said Doctor Uranus as if quoting an Edgar Allan Poe poem. “Am I to dispel a myth, cast out a spirit, or validate a folk tradition? At least I am sure that the sorority has booked me for a semi-formal affair to explore some recent manifestations. Nevertheless, I need some witnesses tonight, ideally a romantic couple. What about you and Jenny One?”

“She’s just a friend,” I reminded him. Jenny was a friend from class, a romance language major, who sometimes went bike riding with me. She had no romantic interest in me.

“Jenny Two?” Dr. Uranus looked at Cathy to see if she appreciated his numbering system.

“She’s like a sister,” I said. The second Jenny was in high school, too young for me. I knew her from my job at Gibson’s Discount Store where she worked in the various clothing departments. I had gone out with her along with other coworkers a few times and finally to a family barbecue when her father spent a while with me in small talk before giving me a meaningful southern stare, implying—I thought—that I had better watch myself. The day after I nipped the relationship in the bud, I found all the air had been let out of my car tires, obviously the work of high-school kids.

“Anyone else?”

“Unconfirmed,” I said, shaking my head. There was a girl I had met recently at Express and hoped to ask out. My true love was actually alcohol in those days, and I sadly swung between bouts of despair and party highs. Still, it was hard to escape the sound of distant tom-toms, as Dr. Uranus called the genetic jungle of human flesh. Most of my college friends didn’t so much have relationships as empty bottles cast aside, paths not taken, flat tires. We were not sentient to love like the college girls, did not know the universal Boy-Meets-Girl plot of the dramatist but rather flipped through the pages of love to be captured in turn by various lyrical poems: howling like werewolves, hungering like vampires, or struggling like escape artists chained under water.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “Maybe you can get some guys from work and meet me at Express Pizza when you get off. Keep your ties on as you will need to pass as my associates.” This plan was not a problem as we often went to Express after work.

I left Dr. Uranus and Cathy to their plot and caught the UGA Milledge bus in five points. Passing through the second light, I saw the Alpha Gamma Delta sorority house, all in white with fancy white trim work—porch, pillars, and portico in tiers, looking truly like a wedding cake. I saw a few girls in blue jeans and sweat shirts on the wide, wrap-around porch. Leafless fall trees surrounded the house. The bus made its long circuit turning down Broad Street, passing the UGA arches downtown, and cutting back into campus. I arrived at Park Hall, the English building, long before class so I sat down on a bench near the vending machines, lit a cigarette, and opened up my paperback copy of *The Odyssey*. Odysseus seemed like quite a hero: so far he had spurned the nymph Calypso, outsmarted the witch Circe, and escaped the song of the Sirens. In the end, the goddess Athena would get him back to faithful Penelope. I noted that Odysseus had a lot of powerful women in his life, not even counting Helen of Troy from the previous epic.

“Wheel!” called out Eric Zimmer, walking up to the bench. His button-down Oxford shirt was unbuttoned over a T-shirt as usual, his short hair thick and wild. Lowering his voice as though on a golf course but as ecstatic as on a football first down, he said, “Wheel, I met her again coming out of class. I think she was waiting for me. Third time!”

“Zim, you have got to ask her out. What’s her name?”

“I don’t know yet. I’m playing it cool.”

I nodded, glad to see him so exuberant. Eric Zimmer had broken up with his high-school sweetheart not long after he started college. They had been serious and he seemed a little lost until the past few days when, over beers, he would fill us in on all the minute details of his encounters with this girl here in Park Hall.

“Are you working tonight?” I asked. Eric worked in Hardware and Automotives at Gibson’s Discount Store.

“I’m going in now. I have to close. You?”

“Six to close,” I said. “Listen. Dr. Uranus needs some witnesses for some kind of séance or experiment tonight. Can you meet at Express after work?”

“Sure.” And he was off, maybe not skipping, but definitely stepping with bursts of energy.

When class time drew near, I walked down to the new section and took the stairs up to mythology class with Dr. Harris, only 50 minutes on the old quarter system. On Fridays only five or six students would show up, even though Dr. Harris brought some kind of lyre or zither and played as a treat. Apparently, he had a fear of fluorescent lights, which he turned off upon entering the room. I had also heard that he would not make left-hand turns, driving all the way around the long block to downtown and back to get to the parking lot behind Park Hall. He said that ideally we should read all the classics, not just *The* *Odyssey* which he had assigned, in order to learn the myths in context from the original epics, plays, and poems, not just the systematic lists and descriptions in our mythology survey textbook. He told the story of the golden apple, looking like a Greek philosopher with his gray hair fairly floating around his head. When the 50 minutes was over, I hopped on the Milledge bus for the much faster return ride to five points. I had time to eat a bologna and cheese sandwich and get ready for work, cranking up the stereo with *Double Fantasy* by John Lennon and Yoko Ono

I walked into Gibson’s Discount Store a few minutes before six, name tag and tie in place for my four-hour shift. In the days before the name change to Big G over trademark laws, the sales floor was huge with stock rooms all around, loading docks in back, a basement garden center with fenced outdoor area on the side. These were the days after store manager Mr. McCarthy had been arrested for shoplifting and taking merchandise to his wife’s shop in Bogart. Early one morning, Mr. Fitzpatrick, one of the department managers, and an Athens police officer had hidden in two of the many security windows—one-way mirrors encircling the sales floor. They watched as the burly McCarthy made two trips out to his pickup truck, first with a boxed television set and then with a rack of artificial flowers. All the employees were there and customers in the store by the time they marched him in handcuffs through the store to a waiting police car.

I ran up the stairs looking over the original expanse, the days before the sell out when a third of the floorplan was marked off, walled up, and taken over by ABC Pets. Going from national to local, then physically shrinking, the store eventually went out of business. I had worked in Toys, Garden Center, Housewares, Groceries, Snack Bar, Sporting Goods, and the front registers over my three years working here. I headed back into the hall to manager offices, layaway storage, and break room, clacking my time card into the slot and seeing 17:58 appear in purple ink in the appropriate slot. Craig Crawford was in the break room smoking a cigarette.

“Craig, can you meet us at Express after work?” I said leaning in the doorway.

Craig Crawford blew cigarette smoke out slowly, nodding with closed eyes: “Wheel, did you see Barbara? So fine!” Barbara was a beautiful law-school student who worked in Fabrics at the bottom of the stairs. Although Craig seemed to treat her as a goddess from afar, he found as many reasons as possible to pass by Fabrics—returning merchandise, fetching layaways, finding managers. Craig actually asked her out a few times, dressing up and driving her to The Last Resort or setting up formal study sessions. For Craig, though, Barbara was a dream girl, unsullied by everyday vagaries. In accordance with his theory of dating, Craig spent his ordinary time with Terri who worked in at the Pharmacy counter in the opposite corner of the store. He would actually talk with her during work, shop for music, and go out for beers. She probably had some other everyday boys, as well.

The shift passed quickly. I put up groceries, brought in shopping carts, got paged to help on the front registers, and helped customers find batteries or popcorn or Cabbage Patch Kids. I straightened the shelves and pushed the long dust mop through the back third of the store well before ten o’clock. Eric Zimmer and Craig Crawford were also finished with their areas and out the door within five minutes of closing time into the crisp fall air and freedom.

Shadow

I drove down Baxter Street and was the first to arrive at Express Pizza and Pub, parking across the street in the gravel lot, most of the parking spaces already taken. Under the emblem of a steaming locomotive, I could see the bar and video games through storefront windows on the left, and curtains were closed over the right side where a worker checked IDs. As I walked into the dining area of wooden booths and table, I wondered if the girl I liked had come up the hill from Creswell dormitory with friends for pizza and the video games.

There she was, sitting in a booth and talking to a guy I had seen her with last week. As I walked by, something clenched in my gut, her short curly hair springing like a Peanuts cartoon character, long feather earrings swinging. We had not gone out, but had spent time together here one night, sharing private, two-player games of Centipede and playing Pink Floyd on the juke box. We had talked for hours about music, movies, and the Tolkien books. She liked playing Q-bert and Qix. She captured my imagination, too, because she liked the Grateful Dead, drove a classic VW bug, liked smoking pot—an echo or scent of counter-culture like a cameo in these days of pastel and neon. Tonight in the cool fall weather, she looked so good in a grey knit fedora and a long, grey mohair coat.

I walked around to the front cash register to order a $2 pitcher of Stroh’s, the cheapest draft beer. Above the hum of the big pizza oven, the kitchen stereo was playing the Grateful Dead’s “Terrapin Station”:

Inspiration, move me brightly.

Light the song with sense and color;
Hold away despair.

More than this I will not ask.
Faced with mysteries dark and vast,

Statements just seem vain at last.
Some rise, some fall,

Some climb to get to Terrapin.

At the front of a short line of customers, with a mustache like Mario’s from Donkey Kong, Jay the owner was at the counter taking orders a pouring pitchers of beer. I waited as the song’s mystic instrumental segment played. As I reached the counter, Jay spoke seven words like a soothsayer, smiling like the Cheshire Cat, warping the narrative frame: “Some things are meant for other stories.” I didn’t know at that time that the girl in the grey fedora was just sitting with a friend from high school or that she was on a desperate spiritual search and within months would be looking into the Moonies and Wicca. I didn’t know that she had several pathways before her, including a suicide plan. Jay poured my pitcher and took my dollar bills. I drank a few cups of beer and played a game of Asteroids near the counter. One verse of lyrics haunted the long instrumental segment:

While you were gone
These spaces filled with darkness
The obvious was hidden
With nothing to believe in
The compass always points to Terrapin.

Craig Crawford and Eric Zimmer arrived and we had time for a pitcher or two. While they played a game of Centipede, I went to the liquor store next door for a pocket-sized bottle of peach Schnapps. I was feeling the Friday-night euphoria kick in as Dr. Uranus arrived in his khaki pants, white shirt, red tie, and blue blazer, carrying his leather briefcase and smoking his pipe. He briefed us, telling us that we were supposedly serving as research assistants. He wanted to meet with us at two o’clock tomorrow to debrief and to give us a percentage of his payment. He explained some of his preliminary work: earlier in the day, talking to the security guard and kitchen crew at the sorority house and informally interviewing a few of the sisters. Apparently, the sorority routinely had chapter meetings, project planning, and presentations; his formal guest appearance was not at all bizarre. We walked with him the two blocks to the Wedding Cake House, arriving a few minutes after eleven o’clock.

An older woman and two sorority sisters were on the big porch waiting for us, the woman in a matching plaid jacket and skirt, the sisters in dresses, cardigan sweaters, and gold add-a-bead necklaces. The big, wrap-around porch had quite a few rocking chairs and at least one porch swing in view. Windows lined the front on either side of the inset entryway.

“Hi. I’m Rebecca Bentley, the house mother” said the woman. “This is Ashley, our president and Jenny, our secretary.” Dr. Uranus nudged me, probably thinking that a third Jenny would make his joke complete, maybe not realizing this type of girl seemed as strange to me as the Tralfamadorian aliens from *Slaughterhouse-Five*. They led us through a lobby that had adjoining parlors on all sides and a stairway winding upstairs.

“We have acquired special permission for Dr. Uranus to inspect the “Engagement” room tonight, but otherwise men are never allowed upstairs, and you all will need to be escorted,” Rebecca Bentley said, looking at Eric, Craig, and me sternly. “We will be meeting in the Chapter Room now. Only 52 girls live here, but the event tonight is open to the whole sorority.”

They led us into a room full of more than 100 girls, some standing but most in folding chairs. As *The Red and Black* article had said with its alternative slant, the house was “overrun with sorority sisters.” The sorority culture had an eerie effect on me. Although some had darker hair and some lighter, some curly and some straight, almost everyone was brunette with a similar style: long hair cut just below the shoulder blades and bangs held back with a band or ribbon. Although dressed in various colors—blue, purple, brown, yellow, red and black, solids and prints—everyone had on a semi-formal, knee-length party dress. They were like dolls, many in big ruffles, most in cardigan sweaters or dressy jackets, all in necklaces—pearls, pendants, or the gold add-a-beads. The sisters were certainly not in uniforms, but there was an uncanny similarity among them, even in their smiles and mannerisms.

The house mother introduced Dr. Uranus as a UGA psychology professor and welcome guest to this event, never specifying whether the event was a lecture or investigation or exorcism. Dr. Uranus arranged us three boys on stage right. He very comfortably took charge as though this were his college classroom.

“Thank you for inviting me—hiring me—to attend your event tonight,” Dr. Uranus said. “These are my research assistants who will help me gather some necessary data needed for my analysis. I am sure you can understand meeting during these late hours which are a cultural archetype and a peak time for the phenomenon in which you are interested. I have completed my historical research and a few preliminary interviews and am ready now to look into the recent manifestations that have been reported. This is certainly the most interesting part of the research, but before we begin I must make a few things clear.

“First of all, I must give you my disclaimer. Although something of an authority on cases like these, I am not a paranormal investigator nor a parapsychologist. I merely do psycho-cultural studies, analyzing folklore and urban legends with various psychological approaches.

“You should also know that the typical ghost hunter uses machines like these,” here he paused and pulled three devices from his satchel-style briefcase and handed them out to us boys, who without ever seeing them before, tried to hold them like experts. “They measure electro-magnetic fluctuations or EMF, detect ambient temperature changes, and do radio sweeps for anomalous sounds. They also use sound and video recording to record evidence. It all seems very scientific for our scientific age.” The audience of sisters seemed more attentive now.

“The old school, however, relied more on the human element. Psychic mediums used dowsing rods, pendulums, writing slates, spirit bells and cabinets to capture spirit activity.” Here he took out some more props as more interest stirred in the crowd. “I will certainly demonstrate some of these tests for you tonight, but…my analysis does not ultimately depend on these questionable methods. I am actually gathering social and psychological data.” Dr. Uranus took a clipboard out of his briefcase and slid a pen from his shirt pocket.

“How many of you here tonight know of someone who has experienced the ghost associated with the room you call ‘Engagement,’ where Isabel hung herself?” More than half of the girls raised their hands.

“How many have heard a first-hand report of the ghost—not a friend of a friend?” About 50, which was half of the remaining girls—raised their hands. Dr. Uranus continued taking notes.

“Who here has personally encountered the ghost?” Three girls raised their hands, and at this point Dr. Uranus took action, handing each his business card, bringing them to the front of the room, placing them on stage left, a mirror of us boys, like a wedding rehearsal. Surely this was an impromptu joke. Surely there was no way he could have planned this arrangement. He asked for their names. Throughout the night, he called them all by their names, which I quickly forgot. “I’ll need to get your contact information later, but now let’s clarify your experiences and try a few initial experiments.” The girls all seemed agreeable. Two of them said they lived in the room called “Engagement” and the third in “Hideaway.” This last sorority sister seemed to me to have a different manner, somehow soft or humble, although she had the same general style of hair and dress as the others.

“Have you three witnessed anything audible that you attribute to the ghost?” The girl from the “Hideaway” room reported sounds of weeping or wailing—which she thought was the ghost of Isabel crying—and footsteps in the night when no one was awake in the house. The other girls agreed, nodding, chiming in.

“Have you witnessed kinetic activity—objects moving?” The girls said that doors would creak open in the night. A few other sorority sisters, as if recalling suddenly, confirmed this paranormal activity from their seats. A few sisters reported faucets running on their own, lights turning on and off. He made some notes like a psychiatrist recognizing a pattern in a patient.

Now addressing the larger audience, Dr. Uranus, asked, “Has anyone experienced trances, visions, nightmares, or sleep paralysis?” No one responded to this question.

“What about hot or cold spots?” Dr. Uranus continued as though making a police report. “Any radio interference, strange smells, or unusual substances?” The sorority sisters seemed slightly startled at these paranormal possibilities, and the three on display shook their heads.

“And finally, who has had visual confirmation of the ghost?” he asked. One sister sitting in the back reported seeing a veiled face in a window. At this point the girl from “Hideaway” told what seemed like a condensed version of an often-told ghost story. She seemed a little shy, but spoke loudly enough. One weekend when many of the sisters had gone home, she had heard a sound like crying. Getting up, she saw that the door had been opened to the room “Engagement.” As she walked toward the room, she had seen a glow, but when she reached the room, the strange light was gone.

Dr. Uranus put away his clipboard, and clasped his hands almost prayerfully: “With the permission of your house mother, tonight we will have both a low-light experiment and a fully-dark experiment. Please note that these are not test conditions, but simply an environment conducive to folk phenomenon. I have requested that the upstairs be isolated in darkness for at least one hour. As discussed, for the next few minutes, we will need the lights lowered and complete silence in this room.” Standing at the back, Rebecca Bentley shut the door as Ashley and Jenny turned off some of the lights.

Dr. Uranus placed a short piece of chalk between to blank slates that children might have used one in a one-room school house. He tied them with a red ribbon and let the girl from “Hideaway” hold them. She seemed both scared and eager. He quietly told her to relax her arms. He gave pendulums to the girls from “Engagement,” letting the crystals hang motionlessly on black threads, similarly asking them to relax. He said something quietly and soothingly to the three girls but I couldn’t quite make it out. The room had been quiet during the proceedings, but now Dr. Uranus motioned for complete silence. There was a long pause that ordinarily would have been uncomfortable. Although the girl’s arms were motionless, within a few minutes, the pendulums were swinging in circles. We could hear the chalk roll or scrape inside the tied slates.

“I can say with certainty that the manifestations here in this house are equal to or greater than any I have ever encountered,” Dr. Uranus said, speaking a few decibels lower than previously. He gathered up the pendulums and took back the slates, untying them. Removing the chalk, he lifted the slates to show markings perhaps accidently rubbed by the side of the chalk: on one I could just make out a shaky letter I and on the other I could imagine—crudely drawn as by a child—a heart crossed with a broken zig-zag line. The display drew some audible gasps from the sorority sisters.

“For the fully-dark experiment, I am going to ask that everyone remain quietly seated except for our volunteers, my research assistants, and—of course—our escorts to the upstairs.” Ashley and Jenny turned out the rest of the lights as Dr. Uranus took out a pair of dowsing sticks—actually thin metal rods bent into an L-shape. He demonstrated how they should be held loosely by the short ends, how the long ends, protruding like pistol barrels, would move toward the center and cross to signify paranormal influence. The “Hideaway” sister held the rods like flower stems as he checked her grip. Our eyes adjusted to the darkness.

Taking out his clipboard once again, Dr. Uranus asked me to turn on my little machine to track electronic voice phenomenon or EVP. I pushed a power button next to an antennae, AM/FM switch, LEDs, and a little speaker. The sound of gentle radio static came from the box. Eric Zimmer clicked on a little meter with a dial showing calibrated levels of EMF. Craig Crawford turned on an infra-red scope of some kind. Dr. Uranus instructed us to sweep the house, especially the ceiling, corners, and areas away from human bodies.

The house mother Rebecca Bentley escorted us up the winding stairs, Dr. Uranus leading the “Hideaway” girl with the dowsing sticks. Ashley, followed by the four other sorority sisters and we three boys, with our machines still making their muffled sounds of static, clicks, and hums. It was easy to imagine a voice arising from the static and whines coming from my little box.

We walked the halls, trying to expertly scan the house, but the devices seemed to go on unchanging, the dowsing sticks unmoving. At the doorway to the “Engagement” room, Dr. Uranus asked Craig Crawford to use the scope, but he still saw nothing to report. Dr. Uranus then asked the “Hideaway” sister if she were willing to go in and wait alone with the dowsing sticks. She agreed, stepping into the darkness, slowly, and upon reaching the center of the room, the rods moved, crossing as if of their own volition. She looked back, genuinely startled, and Dr. Uranus told her to face the window as he closed the door.

“Darkness, silence, and isolation are really for the receptivity of the participants,” said Dr. Uranus, mainly addressing the house mother. “If we could wait quietly here for just a few minutes, the dark part of our experiment should be complete.” The minutes were wearing on me. I really wanted to get on with my Friday night now. I strongly craved a cigarette and another drink.

Suddenly, we heard the “Hideaway” sister scream. She flung open the door, looking terrified. “I saw her. I saw Isabel,” she kept repeating. Through the open door I could see nothing at all.

Going back down, it was Dr. Uranus leading as the house mother Rebecca Bentley comforted the girl. Back in the chapter room, he asked the “Hideaway” sister, if she would be comfortable to report what she had experienced. Short of breath, she said that she had seen the form of Isabel in the window, in her wedding dress, hanging in a noose. Dr. Uranus noted that the time was midnight, writing in his clipboard.

“Tonight we have experienced a folk phenomenon or cultural archetype. It is something we share as human beings, but also a shared tradition of your community. Thank you for inviting me to share this experience with you, along with the attending beliefs, values, and emotions.

 “I do not want to disturb you all any longer. I know you all will want to attend to your sister as she has had an intense experience tonight. I will let my research assistants go and I will stay just long enough to get releases and contact information from our other participants. I will include my full analysis in the final report, which will be available to everyone.” Dr. Uranus and the house mother Rebecca Bentley saw us to the door.

I lit a cigarette as soon as we were off the porch. Eric Zimmer and Craig Crawford restrained their laughter until we were back across Milledge. I drained my bottle of peach Schnapps and tossed it in a dumpster on the way back to Express.

I always drank a lot, and even more on weekends, but tonight I went beyond even my extreme benchmark. By last call at one o’clock when I ordered one more pitcher, I had already finished several pitchers and a second half pint of Schnapps.

It was time to leave. They had shut down the bar, turned out the lights, and given two warnings. I was still finishing my beer, so somehow I hid in the bathroom with the light off as the workers cleared the last customers out of the bar area. When there was silence, I crawled out, quietly, sneaking across the floor, going behind the bar. Drunkenness rolled in like fog, with a dark rain. What was her name? Unrequited love was like a smashed jar at the spring, a broken wheel at the cistern, leaking cisterns that cannot hold water. Sisterns!

I blacked out.

Harvest

Then I awoke in darkness, feeling wood above, beside, below, like a coffin! Rubber tubes with cold metal tips hung down and danced around me as I flapped my arms around, kicking, yelling out, when finally the cabinet door creaked open. I was under the bar with the kegs and had to climb out into the dark pub. I looked out the glass store front at the vacant parking spaces, walked around into the dining area where the chairs were turned over on top of the tables, and went into the area by the front cash register that sat open and empty. There was a telephone. I dug through my wallet and could only find a few odd business cards and the scrawled phone number of Don Carver, one of my college buddies who had taken manager jobs at Kentucky Fried Chicken stores in Galveston, Texas. I made the long-distance call, and Don’s familiar voice answered after about six rings.

“Don. I’m locked up in Express.”

“Wheel, what have you done now.” It was a statement, not a question, and Don seemed mildly amused, even at this hour, three o’clock in the morning.

“I crashed under the bar and no one found me. What should I do?” Somehow Don seemed like an authority. He had always been the Dungeon Master for our role-playing games, and he was a restaurant manager.

“You’ve got two choices.” Don spoke like the laughing Buddha. “You can go out the back emergency exit by the pinball machines, but you’ll have to make a run for it. There’s an alarm.”

“Or?”

“Or you can spend the night. Have a beer, play some games. There’s probably some quarters in the register.”

I looked, and he was right. “OK. I’ll think about it.”

“You can get out in the morning. Jay comes in early.” Don said. “Good night, Wheel.”

I finally just lay down by the big window by the bar. The next thing I knew, Jay—with his moustache and hair still wet from showering—was crouching over me, shaking me, saying, “They’re supposed to clear the dead bodies out at night.” Morning light was flooding the bar area.

My yellow 1976 Pinto hatchback was alone in the gravel parking area across the street. I drove home, turning in front of the Wedding Cake House, seeing Saturday morning runners up and down Milledge as I cruised back to my studio apartment in five points. I drank down half a carton of orange juice before collapsing on the bed for a few more hours.

We all met at Steverino’s at two o’clock to debrief as planned. The five minute walk through five points felt exhilarating in the cool fall air, my energy rising like the Phoenix, the hangover scattering like ashes in the wind, and sentience returning. I was the first one there. I ordered a pitcher of beer and sat on the deck smoking at one of the picnic tables, a level above the cars and bikers and runners going in every direction. The Eagles song “Hotel California” was playing, “On a dark desert highway cool wind in my hair/ Warm smell of colitas rising up through the air.” I felt as relaxed and free as I ever did in my B.C. days, looking out over the five corners of five points: the Waffle House, the Shell station, Stiles Properties where I lived, and the Downtowner Motor Inn. The UGA bus stop on the corner across from me was vacant on Saturday, but this was the stop where the townies and neighborhood folks got on and off. Whenever the bus stopped here, as people exited and before those waiting got on, for that moment, the bus would contain only fraternity and sorority members.

Dr. Uranus and red-haired Cathy arrived next, and he went to get them some wine as Cathy sat across from me. She opened her orange backpack and showed me the contents, watching me closely. Inside I could see a white sheet, a veil, and a long rope tied in a noose.

“You are not kidding me.” I said, shaking my head. These seats were going to be like jury benches, I thought to myself.

When Craig Crawford and Eric Zimmer arrived, I filled plastic cups with beer for them. Eric sat next to me and Craig brought a chair from inside to sit on the end—the judgement seat, I thought, knowing Craig. Dr. Uranus lit his pipe, stroked his beard, sipped his wine, and cleared his throat.

“I cashed the check from Alpha Gamma Delta,” he said giving each of us a 20 dollar bill, including Cathy. If I need cite you all in my research, I may ask you to sign a release.” Cathy, Eric, and I pocketed our bills, but Craig left his sitting on the table noncommittally, though when wind began to blow it, he set his cup on it.

“So what was with all the mumbo jumbo about cultural studies?” asked Craig.

“Psycho-cultural studies,” I corrected. “He’s dead serious.”

“Folklorists pretty much cover the elements of urban legends,” Dr. Uranus explained. “For example, it’s probably well established that there are material components—like the “Engagement” room plus stories that attach themselves to various locales plus universal themes or emotion plus communities or folk groups to perpetuate the myths. However, I am interested in the individual and social psychology involved. I’m interested in the actual phenomenon.”

“Not sure that justifies hoaxes or mad scientists,” said Craig.

“Let me try to explain what I study and why it’s different from both the charlatans and the debunkers. Then maybe I can justify my methods.”

Craig just raised his eyebrows. The son of a lawyer, he, too, would make a good lawyer if he could get accepted and make it through law school. Eric, the son of a poet, looked amused and intrigued. Cathy and I sipped our wine and beer, having heard this spiel before.

“Consider the witch riding phenomenon still fairly common in the Southeast. From here to Houston, we still have many accounts of people who claim to have been accosted by spirits in their sleep. Western science will reduce the experience to sleep paralysis, but the individuals and communities see spirits at work. More than that, they are prompted to say their prayers or go to confession, tap into their deepest truths. A psychological approach can go beyond the cold science on the one hand and beyond the superstitious fairy tales on the other. Consider your own response to a quick magic trick.”

Dr. Uranus laid out a black handkerchief spread the cards face down on top. He asked Eric to slide out one card, show us, and put it back in the spread. Eric picked out the seven of hearts. With the card replaced, Dr. Uranus squared the cards and folded the corners of the cloth over the deck. He demonstrated how he wanted each of us to put our hands along the edges.

“Card,” he commanded, “reveal yourself!” The wind was still. Something under the cloth fluttered briefly. He unfolder the cloth and spread the cards face up. One card was now face down. Craig looked stern but Eric was smiling widely, taking out the reversed card. We all had the golden thought before Eric turned the card over, but seeing the seven of hearts revealed still gave a slight shock.

“That was great,” Eric said. It was a damn good trick, and I hoped he would teach it to me.

“What makes it a good trick?” asked Dr. Uranus.

“Maybe the skill involved,” said Craig. “The hand is quicker than the eye.”

“It’s the clarity of effect,” I said, familiar with the principles of magic. “It’s simple and direct, clearly impossible.”

“But think about the hidden cause of the effect and the false cause that replaces it. In this case, I provided a magic moment to engage the imagination, magically commanding the card to turn over. But it could be played as advanced technology, science fiction. Craig attributed the effect to sleight of hand. In the context of superstition, it could be interpreted as psychic power or a spirit. Now, in movies and magic shows the story is provided, but in folk phenomenon, the audience essentially writes the script. Ambiguous cues are given significance. Why do we need emotion and fancy touched in these ways? What changes if there is no magic moment in my magic trick, no imagined cause?”

“This is just smoke and mirrors with words,” said Craig, clearly agitated. “There is no excuse for deceiving those sorority girls!”

“Uri Gellar promotes himself as a psychic who can remotely view and duplicate drawings. He claims to bend metal and start watches with his mind. He taps into folk beliefs. In contrast, the Amazing Randi, a former magician, lectures and appears on television debunking Gellar, tapping into our more rational mind set. I am interested in the psychology and culture of both approaches—what they both counterfeit, what they both represent, how they feed each other.

“But why did you encourage the girls to believe the urban legend last night?” I asked, tracking fairly well since I had heard these ideas before from Dr. Uranus.

“You all are asking fair questions,” said Dr. Uranus. “I could say just trust me and that I did my research first. However, I will try to explain. For the sorority as a community, I gave them what they wanted. They hired me to celebrate their legend more than anything else. It’s part of their identity. Some believe and pass on the story; some disbelieve and still re-enact the legend, even faking it themselves. For the one special girl, I helped her with her greatest hope and fear. For her, not only was my little show harmless, it was also helpful.”

Now this information was something new to me.

He continued: “The girl who had already seen the ghost was either lying, neurotic, or trying to process a fear. The therapeutic value of facing fears is more than just pop psychology. During the follow up, she was relaxed and happy. If I wanted to spread a reputation as a prophet, I would predict she will be engaged within a year.”

“How could you know that?” Eric Zimmer asked.

“Three reasons. First, she’s a senior and the probability is already very high. Secondly, she attached herself to the urban legend which led to the folk phenomenon, her experience with the ghost. You see, the sorority has a tradition that whoever lives in that room gets engaged within a year after leaving. Engagement is the promise of the marriage covenant, a dream that is perfect fodder for confirmation bias for that population.”

“Number three?” I asked.

“Thirdly, she told me she had a very serious relationship with a local guy, which is the reason she stays in town when a lot of the other sisters go home. It’s the reason she was home alone to experience the ghost in the first place.”

A city bus roared by on Lumpkin Street. A Rolling Stones song played over the speakers.

Had this been a real hearing, we would have probably been a hung jury. Craig Crawford was adamant and would give no ground, not convinced the deception was legitimate, regardless of disclaimers by Dr. Uranus and consent of the participants. Cathy was completely accepting and, of course, complicit. Eric and I seemed to have mixed feelings. In the end, probably no harm was done to the sorority sisters.

The Uri Gellar tries to sell the dust of Eden while The Amazing Randi sells proofs that everything’s dirt, testing soil samples. The new magicians are split into scientists and artists: the scientists debunking the earth as center, debunking the sun as center, and the artists now crying that the center cannot hold or painting two suns or a thousand suns on the horizon. Yet science still searches for the truth and the artists still bring beautiful pictures from the heart, even when prophesying a heartless universe.

Craig Crawford confessed to me about a year later that Barbara had helped him get through school. He had revered her there in the fabric department and taken her on special dates with a sacred purpose. She had been an idol, an imaginary prize at the finish line. Even though he had never really known her or even truly pursued her, she had given him a reason to press on. In this strange way he had just used her.

Eric Zimmer did pursue the girl in Park Hall. He learned her name was Margaret, and he asked her to lunch. They soon became a happy college couple. He spent increasingly more time with her and less and less time partying with the boys.

Is true love like a magic potion, an arrow shot from Cupid, a divine beam of light shining on a couple or is true love is like a chemical reaction with emergent flame, a ghost in the machine? Since frail humanity can be so easily fooled, perhaps only a machine can make a Turing test for true thought and only an angel can find true love.

Of course, years later I would meet my true love, the girl in the grey fedora. Though we both lived in Athens, Georgia and both studied in Park Hall, we would not connect until we met in a foreign country, in another story. After seven more years in the mire of drinking followed by ten years free and sober, I would meet Kristin in China by divine appointment. We would come home to marry in a white chapel, with the light of friendship and warmth of family, love burning with flashes of fire as strong as death.