

DANCING WITH THE UNINVITED GUEST

There is a type of fish that lives three miles down in the Western Atlantic. It spends its entire life in the pitch dark. It can neither see nor be seen by others of its kind. And that is its world. That is all it knows. If you were to ask it what lies above the surface of the water, not only would it have no conception of what the surface was, it could not possibly imagine the world of light and air that exists above it. And perhaps there is a comparison to be drawn between the existence of that fish and our own existence, for we are in the business of finding out whether there is a world, an existence, beyond that which we know, and whether certain of those who have passed over into that world are capable of diving three miles down to communicate with us, to tell us what it is like up there in the world of light and air.

Such was Audrah Sidow's introduction to the course in Parapsychology at the British Institute for Paranormal Research, and few of her students ever forgot the analogy.

She coined it at a time when she was still prepared to consider the possibility of unimaginable worlds just waiting to be discovered. But that was before she realised there was nothing on earth for which there was no rational explanation.

Having reached this conclusion, she questioned whether anyone could justify spending their entire professional life looking for something that didn't appear to *be* there. It was a question she occasionally put to her students, and it invariably produced the response she expected. *She* might have grown cynical, but *they* were prepared to keep an open mind. After all, there was always the chance of being the one to prove there was a spirit world, and that the concepts of a parallel universe, time travel, the ability to conceal or move objects at will or communicate with the dead were not merely the stuff of science fiction.

She supposed it might be her very cynicism that prevented genuine paranormal phenomena from manifesting in her presence. After all, it was well-known that a bias towards or against belief in the paranormal had the ability to taint the results of any research. Those who *wanted* to believe that a

psychic had just moved a rubber ball a fraction of an inch along a table were perfectly capable of neglecting to note that there was a slight slope to the table top. But equally, it would be impossible to convince someone such as herself that the ball had been moved by the power of telekinesis.

The problem was, she had yet to come across *anyone* who had managed to convince her they were psychic, and years of research had convinced her she never would. Therefore, she had let it be known that she intended to resign.

Leaving the Institute would mean leaving Edinburgh along with this elegant building, and the rooms that she had come to regard as home. They looked out onto a quad, and at certain times of year, tourists came to photograph it. Few people saw it like this, when daggers of ice formed on the walls that surrounded the Master's Garden.

She turned from the window to face a room in which two comfortable sofas were divided by a long low table. Space was at a premium at the Institute, and it was common for her to give tutorials here. Consequently, she currently had one of her students with her. Of all that years intake, he was the one who interested her most, because he was one of few parapsychology students who claimed to have seen a ghost, though what he meant by a ghost, and what other people meant were often two very different things.

During the interview that got him onto the course, he described the experience to her:

“Some months after my partner died, I was at the Chelsea Flower Show of all places. Natalie never missed it, and I went more for her than for myself, though don't ask me what I mean by that – I'm not sure. I was walking round the displays, wondering what I was hoping to achieve by being there. And suddenly...there she was, looking at some fabulous succulent – a protea.

At first, I didn't know what to think. I knew I had to be wrong, but the curve of her neck, the *way* her hair fell forward—I had to go up to this woman if only to get a proper look at her face. And as I walked towards her, she saw me, and smiled. And then she kind of...*evaporated*, I suppose.

“How did the experience make you feel?”

“Initially, I was frightened. I'd had a bad time since Natalie died. While she was ill, I was fine, I was kind of holding it all together somehow, but after I lost her...” He paused, and then went on:

“It was six months since she died, but I wasn't getting over it. I still couldn't ever see myself making a new life for myself – not one I wanted to live, put it that way. And I couldn't imagine ever meeting anyone who made me feel... I think what I'm trying to say is, when I saw her, well, to be honest, I thought I was losing it. But after the shock wore off, I found the experience comforting.”

“Had you and Natalie ever discussed how you felt about her dying?”

“We’d talked about it, sure. Not a lot, but enough. And we talked about whether or not we believed in an afterlife. I don’t think either of us did. Not really. We were what you’d probably call *fingers-crossed-Christians*. But Natalie said that if it turned out we were wrong, she’d try to make some kind of contact. So when I saw her...well...I felt that was what she’d done. And I felt...I felt I hadn’t lost her.”

“What you’re saying is, you believe you saw her ghost.”

“Yes—at the time.”

“And now?”

“And now I no longer believe it.”

“Then how do you explain it?”

After stating that he couldn’t, but that he hoped one day to be able to, he was offered a place to read for an MA.

The notes relating to his proposed dissertation rested on a long low table in front of him. He picked them up as Audrah turned from the window and asked him to talk her through them.

“Essentially,” he said, “I intend to propose that the manufacturing of what is *perceived* to be supernatural phenomena might be a psychological response to emotional trauma.”

“What kind of supernatural phenomena are we talking about?”

“Apparitions. Premonitions. And anything else that looks as though it might be relevant.”

It was part of her job to advise the students with regard to whether or not the idea they had in mind for their dissertation was suitable. Often, what they came up with had already been covered, in which case, they needed to find a fresh angle if the work was to be regarded their own. What this student was suggesting sounded like a subject that had been covered by the scientific community, in which case, she had to be sure he wasn’t just going to regurgitate information gleaned from medical journals, but was going to provide fresh material. Also, she wanted to know what he meant by the term, ‘manufacturing’. She asked him, and he replied that the ‘manufacturing’ of supernatural phenomena was something a person might do subconsciously:

“I don’t mean they start making ghosts out of cheesecloth without knowing they’re doing it. I’m talking about people experiencing something they can’t explain without realising it’s come from their own subconscious.”

“You mentioned emotional trauma,” said Audrah. “Are we talking about the trauma of bereavement?”

“Not exclusively. I intend, for instance, to include the transcript of an interview with the wife of a man who was taken hostage in Iraq. There were uncorroborated reports that he’d been executed, and she’d gone to church to pray. While she was there, she suddenly saw her husband kneeling beside her –

a momentary thing, but enough to convince her the reports were true. In fact, he was freed some months later, but the news that he'd been executed caused her to produce what I believe was a crisis apparition.”

It sounded as though this was going to be quite an interesting dissertation. “Have you thought about what purpose these experiences might serve?”

“Only in so far as the fact that they always seem to have one. They never just occur without there being an apparent benefit to the person experiencing them.”

“Such as?”

“Sometimes the apparition offers advice. Sometimes, as was the case when I thought I saw Natalie – it's a comfort in itself.”

“And what if the apparition or vision is demonic?”

“That usually only occurs when the individual concerned is suffering from some sort of recognised psychiatric illness.”

After thinking it through for a moment, Audrah said, “Assuming we go with that. Assuming we accept that the manufacturing of phenomena *might be* a psychological response to trauma – are comfort and advice the only purposes they might serve?”

“To be honest, I'm not sure at this stage, but I suspect that in extreme cases, it provides far more than that.”

“Can you expand?”

He replied, “What if, in cases where a person's life is at stake, but where the odds against survival are overwhelming, some mechanism kicks in to motivate them into doing something radical to survive?”

Audrah played devil's advocate. “What if logic dictates that the odds can't possibly be overcome?”

“Then maybe this ‘mechanism’ gives people the courage to face death calmly. Maybe it convinces them that death is not the end—”

Death, thought Audrah, most certainly *was* the end. If nothing else, years of researching alleged paranormal phenomena had convinced her of that.

* * *

For once Professor Mallory Wober had forsaken his tweed jacket in favour of a fleece-lined coat. “Walk?” he suggested.

It wasn't the kind of weather people chose to walk in, but Audrah felt she could guess what this was about. Her resignation had come as a blow to Wober, who was bound to try to persuade her to reconsider.

She grabbed a skiing jacket, tucked a mass of auburn hair into it, then zipped it tight as they stepped out into the corridor. Moments later, they crossed the quad to a gate that led to the park. In the distance, trees divided them from an ornamental lake. On the other side of it stood buildings similar to that in which the Institute was housed, the winter sun glancing off the windows.

It was a mere six years since she first saw those buildings, and a lot had changed since then. The days of sitting someone behind a screen and asking them to try to guess what shape was being drawn on a piece of paper were long gone. The Parapsychologists of today were more interested in identifying what parts of the brain were responsible for producing the hallucinations that people perceived as supernatural experiences. Wober, for instance, was an authority on religious visionaries, and there were enough people out there experiencing everything from visions of Christ to premonitions of the apocalypse to keep him in research funds from now `til the crack of doom. “Let me guess,” said Wober. “You’ve been head hunted—”

Audrah was now a Doctor of Parapsychology. It made her an attractive proposition. “If I’d been made an offer I couldn’t refuse, I’d have said so.”

“They why are you leaving?”

Like Wober, Audrah specialised in an area that had more to do with pure psychology than with the supernatural. It related to the nature of psychic fraud with specific reference to Pseudopsychics who courted media attention when a missing person or murder investigation became high-profile. Defrocking them had once seemed a worthwhile occupation. Not anymore. “Let’s just say I feel I’ve achieved everything I can.”

“Not quite everything,” said Wober. “What about John Cranmer?”

The comment didn’t register, because the trees had parted to reveal the ornamental lake. It was frozen, bewildered Mandarin ducks waddling over its surface like lacquered, clockwork toys. They tottered onto the snow-covered grass as a man in a buckskin jacket strolled towards them. He was too far away for Audrah to see him clearly, but something about him reminded her of someone she once knew. She had no desire to go down to the lake and have her fantasy shattered, for he looked so very like him that she wanted to savour the image for a moment.

He, and what had become of him, had cost her a very great deal, and it was time to let go. Time to stop the constant hunt for something that couldn’t be found, for a voice that would never be heard, a face that would never be seen, and a mystery that, in all probability, would never now be solved.

