

Laying a Ghost

Investigator Bob Nixon applies a Skeptical perspective to a haunting experience.



Bob Nixon is the Chief National Investigator for the Skeptic. In real life he is a business analyst, which is much more scary than ghost hunting.

A dark night. Moonless. The fact that garish fluorescent lights do not illuminate the unpaved road that runs past the house is one of the attractions of living in a rural setting. It is 20 minutes after midnight. Darren¹ is smoking a cigarette on the balcony outside the bedroom on the first floor. Tanya is in bed, but the couple are chatting quietly through the open door.

It is a still March night, crisp but not cold. Darren is wearing only shorts as he enjoys the night and answers Tanya quietly so as to not disturb the two children sleeping downstairs. He smells something odd, like gas but not exactly the same. He mentions it to Tanya and at almost the same moment the lights go out. It is the beginning. What follows in the next few minutes will drive the family from the house.

The house is powered exclusively by solar cells, with a large bank of batteries to maintain power during the night, even so the family must be careful with the use of the power and darkness is not unusual for them. Darren puts out his smoke and is about to go downstairs to check the power when Tanya calls him over to the bed. She is watching a light and she wants him to see it.

To the right of the bed is a wall made entirely of panelled glass. A curtain that can cover the glass is

pulled aside tonight and Tanya sees a white light in just a single pane of the glass wall. As she watches the light grows in size and becomes a dancing female form; she will describe it later as something like a ballerina. The figure is dancing by the time Darren reaches the bed. He cannot see it, and places his face against hers in an effort to see what she can see, without success. He tells Tanya that he will go to check on the power, but she is engrossed by the dancer and does not respond. He tells her again, then shakes her and tells her a third time. The dancer disappears in a flurry of lights and Darren leaves the room, descends the stairs and quietly finds the control panel for the power. He finds two warning lights are displayed, both the under-voltage and the over-voltage lights are glowing, something he has not seen before. Before he can investigate further he hears Tanya calling from upstairs, asking where he is. He tells her he is still checking the power and she calls him to come upstairs. There is, she says, a man outside the bedroom.

In the very few seconds it takes Darren to reach the bedroom Tanya watches a figure, just the head and shoulders really, of what she perceives to be a male, move from the top of the stairs. As it passes a doorway beside the bedroom door a bolt of

lightning shoots up the doorframe. The figure passes through the bedroom door, crosses a wall and melts into a mirror that hangs on the wall directly opposite the bed. The room is black, the figure is black, yet she can tell the difference and when she sees the figure merge with the mirror she pulls the blankets over her head and she sees nothing more.

Darren reaches the top of the stairs and asks Tanya to tell him what he's supposed to be looking for. She describes the head and shoulders that she saw and Darren begins searching. He is at the top of the stairwell. Opposite him is a window and he peers at it for what seems like a long time but was probably only seconds. There, in the window and apparently looking directly at him, is the same figure that Tanya had described.

Darren is a powerfully built man. His head is shaved and he displays an array of tattoos. He is clearly not easily intimidated, but this figure frightens him. It is not something he can easily explain. He determines that the best course of action is to get his family clear of whatever danger this figure might represent. He half turns and calls to Tanya, telling her to get out of bed and get dressed. Tanya refuses point blank to move from under the covers. Darren turns back to the window. The figure has disappeared, making him even more determined to get his family out of the house. He turns toward the bedroom door and takes the first step when, from the wall opposite the bed a figure, again black against the black night, emerges from the wall, the upper body. Head and both arms reach out of the wall, blocking his entry to the room and seemingly reaching for Tanya. Darren stops. He shouts at the figure, ordering it to go away, swearing at it, threatening. It recedes into the wall and Darren passes through the door and into the bedroom, watching the wall with every step. He reaches the bed and physically drags Tanya from under the covers. They both dress and leave

the room. Downstairs the children are wakened and bundled into their clothes before being taken to the car. Tanya now smells what she describes as a dead animal and, as she makes for the car she looks back at the house. One end of the house - the end away from the bedroom - is entirely black and shapeless in the night. The family leaves and drives to the safety of another house shared by two older children. By the time they get there it is after 1am. Darren begins looking for help to explain the experience and two hours later he calls the Australian Skeptics.



The part of the house that Tanya saw in total darkness

I spoke with Darren at some length over the telephone. He was clearly shaken and it seemed apparent from the outset that he was not making this story up. He gave me only a brief outline of the story. He and Tanya had already decided that they would ask a local Anglican priest to come to the house and try to work out just what it was that had happened to them. Darren was due in Frankston on business the following week and he was anxious that Tanya should be reassured before he left. After the priest had visited I had a chance to speak with Tanya about both the visit and the experiences of the night they left the house. Again it was clear that something had frightened them. We arranged that a team would visit the house to examine the event in detail.

Ray Crossley is the President of the Dowsing Society of Victoria. Ray and I worked together previously on the test of the "Golden Rods", invented by John Stamos. Ray, apart

from being a good friend, is a level headed and caring person and I felt he would be a useful member of the team. I also asked for volunteers from the Australian Ghost Hunting Society. Rowena Gilbert joined us. I had not met Rowena previously, having contacted with her by e-mail and telephone only and I confess I wasn't sure what to expect. I found her to be a very pleasant woman who, although she believes in ghosts, took the view that each individual case must be viewed with scepticism. Rowena, Ray and I listened to the story as Darren and Tanya told it.

The couple were very open in their responses to our questions and my impression was that Darren wanted there to be a rational explanation to the experience. Tanya was less sure that there could be any possible explanation other than the one she feared the most - a ghost had visited them. The interview over, Darren and Tanya left us in the house to conduct the investigation. The couple had spent only a single night in the house since the incident - the next night, after the priest had visited. More of the priest later.

There were a great many aspects to the story, each of them requiring examination.

The smell Darren detected immediately before the lights went out.

The possible sources of an unusual smell were too numerous to count. An emu farm exists right next door to the house; the bush around the house is relatively untouched. During the night we saw and heard many animals making their living in the darkness. Darren described the smell as like gas (we presume he means like "mains gas"), and Ray discovered an interesting possibility that might lead us to the answer of another question, why the lights went out. The solar cells that sit in the yard are connected to a bank of heavy-duty automobile batteries that are placed under cover beside the house but reasonably close to the

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bedroom. If there was a problem with the battery bank it may be that they began to bubble and emit gas. Gas or spray from lead acid batteries could be described as gas-like.



*The wall as seen from the bed.
Note the mirror.*

The dancer

Tanya was not happy with our explanation of what is probably the basis of the whole experience, because she believed that throughout the experience she was wide-awake. Our belief is that she was asleep. There is evidence for this in a couple of the otherwise minor aspects of the story. Darren could not see the dancing female form, even though he placed his head close to Tanya's in an effort to do so. Even more significant, in our view, is the fact that when Darren told Tanya that he was going downstairs he had to do it three times, the last time after shaking her to get her attention. It seems likely that Tanya was having a dream, perhaps a waking dream, but a dream nonetheless. By shaking her gently Darren woke Tanya briefly, though how wide awake she became is a matter of some doubt. Our feeling was that Tanya woke only enough to register that Darren was going somewhere. It was enough, however for Tanya to lose sight of the dancer.

It was also possible to identify the

source of the original light that may have been the trigger to the appearance of the dancer. Over the staircase is a single light bulb, covered by a simple conical shade. Any light in the stairwell, no matter how weak, is reflected by this shade. From the position in which Tanya's head was on the pillow this light is visible directly through the pane of glass in which the dancer appeared. It seems likely that a light, or the memory of one, reflecting on the conical shade, was the source of the dream.

The male figure seen by Tanya

When Tanya called to Darren she asked where he was, despite the fact that he had told her where he was going and he had been gone for no more than a minute or two. She had, we believe, fallen asleep once again and the male figure was a result of another dream, perhaps even a continuation of the previous dream that was beginning, in Tanya's mind, to take on supernatural overtones.

The lightning bolt

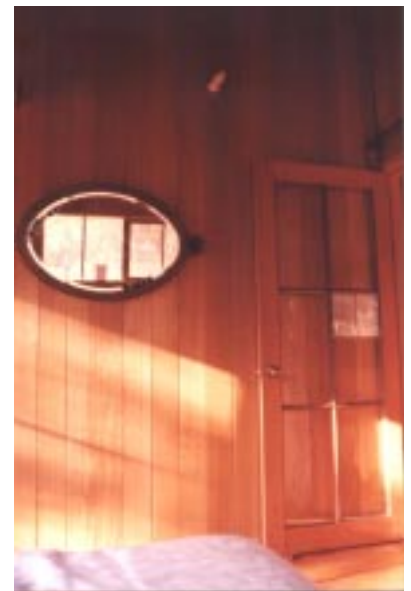
Since this occurred while she believed herself to be watching the male figure move across her view, it is simply a continuation of the dream. The figure disappeared from view by merging with the mirror. At this point in the story, Darren was hurrying from downstairs, almost certainly loudly enough to wake Tanya again. She pulled up the covers and hid.

The male figure seen by Darren

The figure was described for him. He knew what he was looking for, but not entirely where to look. It is interesting that Darren began his search at the top of the stairs, the same position where Tanya had first seen the figure. Although neither of them could accurately recall the content of their conversation it seems likely that Tanya described not only what she had seen but also *where* she had seen it, and this was why Darren began looking there. Tanya's description was not sufficient to prevent Darren finding the figure in an entirely new place – in the window it-

self. The window is not actually visible from the bed and Tanya was very clear that the figure appeared at the top of the stairs, very much inside the house.

What Darren saw, we believe, was a simple pattern in the window, perhaps caused by the tree outside. It was very dark now, but even starlight will provide sufficient illumination to enable the pattern recognition abilities of us humans to work. It is significant that when Darren turned away from the window briefly, then turned back, the figure was gone. It seems likely that he simply "lost" the pattern he had previously established.



*The view of the wall as seen by Darren
from the top of the stairs.*

The lunging figure

This was by far the most problematic of the events of the night, and one that genuinely frightened Darren. By now he had decided that he was going to get his family out of the house, that there was some danger present. Adrenalin was pumping through his body, his senses were heightened and his brain was looking for any threat. A pattern now appeared in front of him and his mind turned it into a threat, something to be dealt with. It was sufficiently real for him to shout at it and it went away as he moved forward, losing the perspective he had previously.

Given what he had seen, and what he believed was only centimetres to his right as he passed through the door into the bedroom, I can only admire Darren's courage.

The smell detected by Tanya

Smell and taste are our least acute senses. We get our picture of the world around us largely through our eyes, ears and skin. By the time Tanya smelled whatever it was she smelled things had calmed down a great deal from the trauma of a few minutes earlier. Both she and Darren had been occupied with dressing the children and preparing to leave. With the atmosphere less frenetic, Tanya's sense of smell had an opportunity to register. It may even be that Darren told her about the smell he had encountered and she actively sniffed the air. As previously mentioned in this bush setting there is any number of possible sources for the smell. It is significant, we felt, that she smelled something different from the odour that Darren reported.

The darkened house

Tanya felt this was an important point when she told her part of the story, but we could see no real reason to be surprised by it. There was no source of light anywhere until the car headlights were turned on. The entire house had been dark for many minutes by now and Tanya's night vision would have been approaching its optimum performance. Where the headlights were turned on they shone on the part of the house to the right of where she was standing. It was the left hand side of the house that she reported as being in total darkness.

That strange things happen is a fact of life. Darren's decision to call the Australian Skeptics indicated from the outset that he wanted an answer other than "It's a ghost". It would be fair to say that Darren took

our explanation well, if for no other reason that it fitted with his view of the world. He accepted it even though it brought into question his own judgement, but one must recall that he was under a great deal of pressure. Tanya had told him that there was a man upstairs and he rushed to protect his family. He had no reason to disbelieve her, and he found what she had warned him was there. His desire was always to protect his family and he was single



The window pane where the dancing female appeared. Although not visible in this picture, there is a light directly behind it.

minded in this. Tanya was less ready to accept that it had all been an illusion, started by her own dream. This is to be expected because, while it is not true, the feeling is that she had somehow been foolish. Tanya experienced what many people have experienced all over the world, a dream so real that it felt as if it was really happening.

The priest

In an effort to bring some comfort to Tanya, Darren travelled to Ballarat, the nearest major town, and asked an Anglican priest for help – neither Darren or Tanya are religious and Darren simply chose the first church he came to. The priest visited their home that same evening. While it is not my intention to bash the clergy in this article it has to be said that this man did not offer the sort of comfort and reassurance I would have expected from a man of his profession. He asked Tanya if she practiced witchcraft, for

example. He announced unreservedly that a spirit had visited them – probably an evil one - that wanted to contact Tanya and was threatened by Darren. He warned that it might return. Neither Darren nor Tanya felt the priest had given them any cause for optimism.

I had my own lesson in just what tricks can be played by the mind the very night after the investigation. We had stayed awake until 4am, at which time the moon set and we had the opportunity to see the location in much the same lighting conditions that prevailed on the night of the events described above. After a couple of hours sleep we were woken by Darren and Tanya. After going through our findings with them we set off on our various ways. Rowena and Ray headed home, while I made my way towards Mitta Mitta, where we were to hold a divining competition. I got as far as Wodonga

before fatigue got the better of me and I took refuge in a motel. I was sufficiently tired that, after going over my notes of the investigation I lay back on the bed and began watching a film on the TV. I was aware that I would very likely nod off at some point, and was in that twilight zone that exists between trying to maintain focus on what was turning out to be a good movie and not caring in the least if sleep came.

My dog's tail crossed from the left to right at the foot of the bed, wagging in its usual happy way. I called him to jump up on the bed for a pat. Then I recalled that he was 300 kilometres away. Despite this I had very definitely seen his tail and the image is clear even now, months later.

Oh, and yes, I did ring home to make sure the dog was okay. He was.

¹ For reasons of privacy I have not used the real names of the people involved, nor have I named the tiny country town in which they live. 🌍