
Paranormalman

by Alexander L. Muñoz

The woman shuffled back and forth behind him, causing the material of her jeans to make a faint squeaking noise as her inner-thighs rubbed together. She had her left arm draped over her chest as she rested her right elbow against her left hand, with her right forearm raised up so her hand was cupped over her mouth, causing the sleeve of her thin white sweater to slide halfway down to her elbow, exposing her light brown skin. Her eyes darted back and forth anxiously as she tapped her foot, clothed in white canvas shoes with rubber soles, against the light-green carpeted floor. “You say you've seen this sort of thing before,” she asked meekly, her voice muffled by her hand which only exacerbated the communication barrier caused by her thick Hispanic accent. She waited only a second for a response, then coughed, prodding the man.

The man had been examining her camcorder; what he considered to be an embarrassingly older generation device that used VHS tapes rather than the modern digital kind. He was turning it over in his hands, peering at it from different angles while uttering assorted noises of interest such as “hmm” and “ah.” He replaced the camcorder on a tall, floor standing speaker, taking a second to make sure it was stable and wouldn't fall down to the floor. “Yes,” he hesitated. Then turned around to face her. He smiled at her uneasily, embarrassed. “I mean, not personally,” he held his hands out by his sides. “I've seen a documentary or two about this kind of phenomenon. Well, stories, really, on ... ah ... news programs of this kind.”

“News programs,” the woman's mouth was still covered. Her dark brown eyes widened slightly in surprise. “There are news programs about this kind of stuff? Like the nightly news?”

“No,” the man ran his hand along his head, which was covered in short, bristly stubble—he kept his blond hair cut to a military-like buzz because it was the easiest and cheapest way for him to maintain his own grooming. “There used to be. They're usually pretty short-lived ... bad ratings, you know. You've got *Sightings*, *In Search Of*, and even *Unsolved Mysteries* covered this kind of material on occasion. You can catch repeats on channels like *Sci-Fi*.”

“So, it's not real,” the woman responded to the “fi” of “Sci-Fi.” Her voice trailed off, partially relieved.

The man looked at her quizzically. He hated these kinds of skeptics. “Well, you're the one who called me claiming to have a video that shows otherwise,” his eyes narrowed accusingly.

The fingers that were curled over the woman's lips twitched slightly as she tensed in response to his brusqueness.

The man suffered a moment of panic. He tried to recall his words from a second ago, attempting to determine if his tone had been more confrontational than he intended. Fighting with someone in their home, when they haven't even decided whether they trust him yet, was not bright. He'd gotten thrown out of houses—and lost access to potentially valuable evidence—by doing this in the past. He looked down at the duffel bag he'd brought with him and set down at his feet when he started examining the woman's camera. He wondered how quickly he would have to pick up the bag and dart out of her apartment.

The woman lowered her hand and stepped toward him, shaking her head gently as if to dispel some queer notion. “Yes, the video tape,” the woman said as she stood shoulder-to-shoulder with him and leaned forward, running her right hand along the bookshelf which was behind the speaker that the man was standing beside. The man angled his head to look at her. He realized he felt uncomfortable being this close to the woman. He became acutely aware of her understated attractiveness. Her black hair was not well-kept, appearing slightly coarse and reliant on the clips that held it in a short ponytail to keep it from being in complete disarray. There were slight bags under her eyes and a slight belly to her under her perhaps too-tight sweater. But these were minor flaws on a woman that, with only a little maintenance, was rather attractive. He excused her frazzled looks as being due to this being the weekend and her probably not wanting the strange man she had invited over to get the wrong idea.

He was a very lonely young man.

She turned around, facing him, and holding up a video cassette in its thin cardboard box. Written in marker along the spine of the box were the words "Juanito's 7th." The man perked up, jarred by her sudden movement and afraid his face or any aspect of his demeanor had betrayed how he had been considering her. "This is the one. I don't know, looking back I think there might have been others, but this is the one that I called you about," she shook it back and forth.

He plucked it from her hands and quickly turned around, yanking the tape from its case and sliding it into the VCR which was on a bookshelf to his left, just behind the speaker. "Man, it's been a while since I've used one of these," he said with a slight laugh. From the corner of his eyes, he could tell that the woman was slightly annoyed by the exclamation. Maybe the lack of an updated entertainment center was a sore spot with her. "Good speakers you've got here," he nudged the one by his side with his left foot. "This brand isn't around anymore, which is a shame because they were good. They'll last you just shy of forever and always sound sweet," his attempt at smoothing over his prior perceived criticism didn't seem to be help the situation.

The video tape began to play. He shuffled backwards from the speaker so he could get a better view of the twenty-seven inch television which was perched on a wheeled stand. The woman stood next to him, this time not as close as she had been before. She went back to cupping her mouth as she watched the screen pensively. The man held on to the case.

On the screen were a bunch of children gathered around a rickety looking table in one of the common courtyards of the apartment complex where she lived. It was sunny out, and in the background a police siren was blaring as a portly woman, the mother of one of the noisy kids at the party, was trying to calm them down in preparation of the presentation of the cake and the singing of "Felíz Cumpleaños."

"This is just from the birthday," the woman said. "There's nothing interesting here. Fast forward a little bit. When you see him on the swing set."

The man sighed. From the brief discussion they had prior to his arrival at the apartment, he knew something odd had appeared on this woman's recordings of her son. He would have liked to have spoken with the child, even briefly, to see if he was aware of anything abnormal happening around him. He was disappointed when he arrived and was told the son was away for the day with friends. He understood why, though; he appreciated that she was a good enough mother to at least have her boy away when a stranger came to visit.

He stepped closer to the VCR, positioning himself to keep an eye on the screen, and laid his left hand down on top of it, extending his thumb down to press the forward button on the control panel. He held it down for a few seconds when the woman suddenly blurted: "Play!"

He released the forward button. The VCR ground to a halt momentarily and then resumed playing the tape.

"Okay, it looks normal right now," the woman said absently.

The child was sitting on a seat in a swing set. In the background was the light beige brick wall of one of the building in the complex. The boy's hands were curled around the chains that attached it to the bar above. He was going back and forth only a small bit as he talked to his mother, who was behind the camera. They were conversing in Spanish, so the man couldn't understand what they were talking about. The child was smiling at his mother broadly, a tooth missing from his mouth. He responded to her questions in short, almost shouted, bursts.

The man looked back over his shoulder and noticed the woman's eyes had teared up, she was pained by what was coming on this tape. "So there was nothing unusual while you were filming this," he asked her, just after realizing that a remark like "you have a cute boy" would be open to potentially disastrous misinterpretation.

"No, of course not," there was an edge to her voice. He realized he'd ended up insulting her parenting skills. "Look, now," her right hand still close to her mouth, she turned it and pointed her index finger at the screen. "There, in the corner."

A thick, black dot appeared on the screen. It zipped from one side of the screen to the other, passing in front of the child as he chatted. He didn't seem to be phased by its presence. "It's a fly," the

man said, unimpressed. He continued to watch, not sure why the woman was so impressed by something so mundane. Then he saw a second fly circling the boy's head. This one didn't seem to swoop in from off frame. "When did that show up," the man hit the rewind button and then quickly set it back to playing. He dashed over to the screen and crouched in front of it as he traced the path of the single insect as it flitted about, and then gasped as he noticed the second insect appeared to split off from the first and then follow its own path. The two continued circling the boy's head. After a few moments the two flies were four, then eight. They all continued doubling until a minute and a half later the boy's face appeared to be enveloped in a bustling black mass of bugs. Some of them strayed and moved closer to the camera. At one point one of them pressed against the lens. The man rewound and paused it at just the frame when that happened.

"Amazing! It's not a fly," he mumbled, examining the screen. "Look, it's v-shaped, and it only has four legs," he looked back at the woman, who had averted her eyes. "Sorry," he said as he continued to play the video, which only lasted a short while longer, cutting off abruptly. The mother must have stopped recording once their conversation was over, unaware of what was happening unseen. The screen switched to static for a short while and then resumed with footage of the same boy and some friends of his playing at the communal swimming pool.

The woman looked back at the screen. "There's nothing during this clip," she said. "Wait a moment for the second thing."

"Those things made a lot of noise when they all got together," the man said aloud. "This could be some variation of electronic voice phenomenon."

"This second clip, it happened only about a week ago. I hadn't watched the video until two days ago. My son's been with his father for a while now. I missed him and wanted to," she stopped, stifling a weak smile. "If I had watched this before, I wouldn't have kept recording."

"Of course not, I understand," the man shrugged helplessly and then turned his attention back to the television set.

"I went to the library and used the Internet to look up someone who could help. I found your name after I searched for information about hauntings in the city."

"Yes, well I deal with those, too. But," he leaned back from the screen, looking at the woman over his shoulder. "This isn't anything related to ghosts."

"It was the only thing I could think of."

The man cleared his throat. "Electronic devices have been known to record evidence of things that exist outside of human perception for a long time now. Some of it has intentional applications such as infrared cameras or electromagnetic telescopes. However, there's also a long history of people seeing things in photographs or hearing things in recordings that simply were not noticed when the recording was made. And I'm not just talking about crap like orbs, either."

The woman cocked her head. "Orbs?"

The man furrowed his brow. "Small, white circular blobs that appear in photographs. People like to think they're ghosts when in fact it's just light from the flash reflecting off dust or condensation in the air."

"This is nothing like that," the woman sounded somewhat confused.

"No, this is nothing like that. This is a much rarer phenomenon," his voice betrayed his excitement. He licked his lips, keeping his attention on the screen so as not to miss the next snippet of video after the footage from the pool played out. "This has nothing to do with a haunting or ghosts. People have reported that kind of thing before. Heck, there was this old woman out in New England who always seemed to capture bizarre images in everything she shot. They were ...," he hesitated, unsure how bizarre his next words would be to her. "glimpses into another world, some say."

There was a noise from the woman akin to a laugh.

The man stood up and faced her. "You seemed more accepting of ghosts," he said dryly.

"Well, I think I've seen one before. When my grandmother died."

The man rubbed his chin. "Is that so," he shook his head. "Well, I may want to look into the possibility that paranormal phenomenon of different types are drawn to you. There have been people

who were magnets for all kinds of things. It can be very interesting. I'd want to start by looking into your family tree ...”

Again the woman's eyes widened in surprise. Her mouth opened slightly.

“If you wanted to explore this further, I mean. As it is, we have this matter at hand,” he turned back to the screen. The video had transitioned from the pool scene to footage of her son playing on a jungle gym, back in the playground in the apartment complex. It was late evening, judging by the elongated shadows and reddish tint.

“What is that,” he jabbed his finger on the glass of the television screen, pressing it against an unexpected shadow in the frame. “This is you,” he traced his fingertip along the outline of a tall, slender silhouette. “Holding the camera and recording him.” He stopped toward the base of the shadow, where it spread out to the sides and continued down. “But unless you were wearing foot-high platform boots,” his voice trailed off, deep in thought.

“There wasn't anything there,” the woman said to him.

“What's that noise,” crouched, the man shuffled over to one of the speakers and he pressed his ear to the black cloth grill. Somewhere underneath to continued discussion between the woman and her young son, again in Spanish, he could make out some faint squealing. “It almost sounds like a pig,” he gasped.

The woman sniffed in surprise. “There definitely aren't any around here,” she watched the screen intently.

The man kept his eyes on the screen. The boy dangled down from the monkey bars, attempting to progress along their short distance but hanged helplessly. He didn't appear afraid of heights or particularly taxed; just frustrated. He looked at his mother, her face obscured behind the viewfinder, as if asking for the strength or coordination to continue or the permission to give up. He said something to his mother, and she responded to it with a laugh. Neither of them appeared to notice the intermittent calls of some far off swine. He looked back toward the bottom of the screen and noticed that the creature had moved slightly so that its bulk was no longer bisected by the woman's shadow and was now more toward the left.

The boy apparently got an answer from his mother and proceeded to dismount from the jungle gym. He let go, but added some flair so that he swung himself forward slightly, dismounting with a broad smile—that missing tooth now replaced. His mother backed up slightly to keep him in frame or for fear of him stumbling forward and hitting her. It was then that the image quavered and the camerawoman uttered a gasp of surprise. The movement was accompanied by another squeal, much louder this time, and somewhat pained. The shadow that hovered near where her feet should be darted off frame, apparently startled.

“What the hell was that? You bumped into it,” the man said with a slight crack in his voice as he snapped his head toward the woman. She had her hand cupped over her mouth again and she nodded at him slowly. “So you noticed this when it happened? There was nothing there? A dog or something?”

She thought a moment. “I just thought I had tripped on something. Maybe some uneven pavement or a rock.”

“I'm going to have to take some pictures of that area to see if maybe there is some uneven pavement you might have stumbled on,” he rose to his feet and faced her. “So this is everything?”

She nodded.

“If you wouldn't mind, I would like to take the tape and examine it further,” he cut his sentence short. In his mind he wanted to add: “especially the parts where you haven't noticed anything,” because he found it odd that such dramatic occurrences caught on tape would be so rare. In his experience, spectacular phenomena were consistently so—if only for a short while. However, as before, he was afraid the statement would be misinterpreted without proper explanation; which, post misinterpretation, would seem more like deflection. “The camera, too,” he finally added. Her eyes widened. For a moment, he felt afraid, then he remembered his bag on the floor. He ducked down and zipped it open, quickly producing his own camcorder. “This is mine, it should be a perfectly suitable replacement for your old one while I look at it,” holding it in one hand he offered it to the woman. “And if anything new

comes up on your videos while using this one, well,” he paused, not sure of how to end the sentence without frightening her. “That would be interesting.”

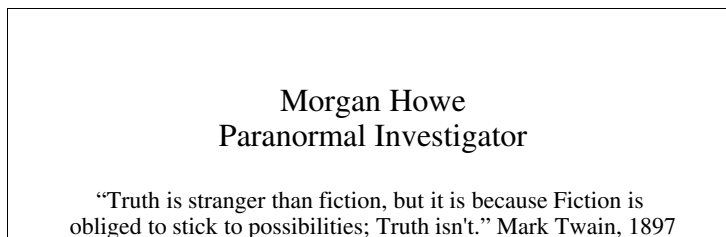
She brushed some hair from her face and then hesitantly took the camera from him, holding it delicately in both hands which dipped down from the weight. She hefted it and smiled at him cautiously. “It’s a bit heavier, no?”

The man shrugged at her and gave an affable smile. “Well, it’s a little older than yours, probably. But, still, I wanted to give you something you were familiar with,” he said, verbally tip-toeing around words like: cheap, outdated, and digital. The equipment he used for his surveillance of haunted locations and UFO sightings had long-since been replaced by modern media. Giving up an antique he held on to for no reason more than his pack-rat nature was of little consequence to him. He also didn’t want to mention that, as aged as it may be, it was somewhat heavier than her own camcorder because it was a more professional-grade piece of hardware.

After collecting the video tape from the woman’s VCR and putting it, along with her camcorder, into his bag he let the woman show him to the door with a brief guided tour of her home along the way. They continued talking. He felt that his taking her video so seriously had really built rapport with her. As she opened the front door of her apartment and presented him with the hallway he turned suddenly.

“Ah, right,” he reached into the breast pocket of his denim jacket. After a couple of seconds of digging around he presented the woman with his business card, printed on a flimsy card stock which allowed the ink to bleed, causing a fuzziness in the text. Everyone he’d given the card to had been too polite to comment on the quality of his card and he had long since stopped being self-conscious of it, figuring he could explain it away as being a graphical representation of his elusive work. “If anything else comes up, please let me know. In the meantime, I’ll have a look at this stuff, make a copy of the video, and get it back to you within a couple of weeks.”

The woman held the card up to her eye-level in her right hand, pinched between the tips of her thumb and index finger. She looked at the man from behind the card, his face bisected by the left side of it. It was her way of lining him up with how he presented himself:



“Thank you, Mr. Howe. I hope you understand when I say I hope nothing comes up in the meantime,” she gave him one more smile and softly closed the door after retreating back to her apartment.

Morgan began walking toward the elevator. His mind was racing through the footage he had just seen. He pressed the button to call the elevator to his floor. As he waited, he cocked his head to the side. “Things only appeared when *just* the son was being recorded ...”

END