

Author's Note: I have written many more articles than appear on my website. In sifting through old files I came across another one that addresses some of the things I did when I first moved to the State of Virginia. You already know about the ghost story that involved releasing the spirit of a Civil War soldier trapped at Selma Mansion in Staunton, Virginia. (By the way, the soldier's spirit never came back; the Mansion remains ghost free.) Here's another type of ghost release - it happened at the Mount Bethel Evangelical United Brethren Church near Crimora, Virginia. An eerie light phenomenon had occurred in the Church cemetery so many times, Church members had installed a large yard light to guarantee that the light, whatever it was, would not bother anyone again. I was asked to investigate this phenomenon by students from Blue Ridge Community College. The year was 1979.

THE MYSTERY LIGHT

by P. M. H. Atwater, L.H.D.

I had just finished giving two talks on the subject of death at Blue Ridge Community College in Weyers Cave, Virginia. It was nearly 10:00 pm that Monday evening, but I wasn't really tired.

Several young men who were students at the College came over to me. One of them, Robbie Cale, spoke. "Ma'am, would you consider going to a cemetery tonight with us? There's a strange light that's been seen there and we'd like to know what it is."

I couldn't hold back the laughter. Here I had just concluded speaking nearly four hours straight on the subject of death and life after death, and now a group of students wanted me to finish up my night running around a cemetery looking for spooks! It was an utterly ridiculous idea. Still, it sounded like fun so I said yes. Besides, I couldn't think of any reason to say no.

Before I had time to think, I was scooted into a car and whisked away, following in a small caravan of cars banking and curving up dark country roads between the villages of Dooms and Grottoes in western Virginia. This part of the State skirts the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains and is affectionately known as "The Valley" in honor of the Shenandoah River. Back in Idaho where I came from, these mountains would be called hills. Yet I had to admit there was an elegance and mystery to their time-worn gentleness and violet hue.

Our destination was the Mount Bethel Evangelical United Brethren Church. It was a small country church with adjoining cemetery for members. Robbie Cale was in charge of our foray, assisted by his friend, Sparky Simmons. I'm not certain how many people joined us. Heads are hard to count in the dark, but I could see three other students besides Robbie and Sparky. They were Tim Hartley, Robie Hatfield, and Charles Clark. Allen Walz had also agreed to come along. Allen was from Denver, Colorado, recently married and a newcomer to The Valley. She was an accomplished metaphysical minister, practitioner of positive prayer, and a gifted sensitive. I was glad to have her along.

After all cars were parked, Robbie led us to the rear of the cemetery and pointed in the opposite direction. "That's where the light was. Over there by the pole." The pole trained a large floodlight over the main part of the cemetery, lighting up surrounding headstones, a tall wire fence completely enclosing the area, an abundance of trees, a chapel-like building near us, and back by the pole a white church complete with steeple. Only about a third of the cemetery had graves. The rest was lawn waiting for future use. Spreading farm fields crowded the trees on all sides, bulging black and uninviting. While we all stood around orienting ourselves, Robbie continued his story. He had several newspaper clippings dated in June of 1967 to back up his tale.

Half remembering and half reading, Robbie spoke of a strange glowing light which usually appeared after 10:00 pm each night. Sometimes it would be on the ground next to a headstone and sometimes it would hover over a grave. Yet, it always stayed in the same general area of the cemetery that area illumined now by the yard light. So many people saw the light and talked about it that a local newspaper ran banner headlines announcing the mystery. Five days later, The Washington Post in Washington, D.C. carried a feature article about the eerie phenomenon, which inspired hundreds of people to trek to Mount Bethel to see for themselves.

Obviously from the newspaper clippings this was no fantasy. Too many people had seen it. Some thought it to be reflections from the moon or perhaps from passing car lights. Others thought it to be swamp gas or maybe a "Sign from God." Tired of the sightseers and burgeoning publicity, the Church people erected the tall floodlight directly over the haunted area. Since then, either no one saw the light anymore or they weren't about to mention it.

Robbie had once seen the light as a youngster, and spoke of a Saturday night when he had tagged along with his parents to attend a neighborhood card party. When card games were over, conversation turned to a discussion of the mysterious light and they all agreed to investigate. It was a night in the late sixties but the memory of it was still clear to Robbie. "The light really wasn't all that steady. It more or less flickered. It seemed to be just to the right of one headstone in particular and barely inside the fence. It hovered about two feet above ground.

"What really fascinated me," he continued, "was that you could only see the light from one certain spot, a spot about 15 or 20 feet in front of the light pole. If you moved one way or another you couldn't see it anymore."

He felt various explanations given by visiting engineers and curious townspeople were not valid.

People were so busy trying to figure out what caused the thing that no one really tackled the question of what it was. One person threw a sheet over it, but the falling sheet simply fell through the light to the ground, making no difference of any kind. The falling sheet proved many theories wrong.

He was never able to return as a youngster, but now as a grown man he was back complete with reinforcements. He wanted some kind of explanation. The light represented an unresolved issue for him and he was especially glad to have Allen and me along. He was certain one of us would come up with something.

We all agreed to walk around the cemetery to its opposite end where Robbie could point out where he stood as a child. I walked slower than the others scanning the cemetery. It looked like most others I've seen except it was a little smaller. I saw what I had come to regard as "usual" activity in a graveyard, things like wavy forms and energy vibrations. "Nothing unusual here," I mused.

While the group gathered around Robbie, I found myself pulled by a strong feeling to one side near the fence. I felt no need to be with the group, so I just stood there staring out into the cemetery, looking at nothing in particular. A small, pen-light flash caught my eye. Then another. And another. Suddenly there were lots of little lights and they formed what seemed like a line from a point near where I was standing forward about 30 to 40 feet inside the cemetery, to a tiny sign near a large headstone. The small marker looked just like a comic version of a "Keep Off The Grass" sign. I kept watching the lights flicker and wink as they moved ever upward along an invisible line. They reminded me of a miniature series of directional strobes for aircraft.

"Do you have fireflies in this country?" I asked. Fireflies were something new to me. I had seen my first only the year before while visiting relatives in Chicago. "Yes," came the reply, "but they're not likely out this time of year. It's too early for them." By then the others began to realize I was seeing something, so one by one they came over near where I stood. Before I could say anything, several of them saw the flickers. Everyone got excited. Again and again, in full view of us all, the small lights continued bouncing along their invisible line, leading faithfully to that tiny sign. It was as if something or someone was beckoning us.

Robbie was anxious to enter the cemetery and investigate personally. "I'll go with you on two conditions," I told him. "First, the gate must be unlocked. I won't have any of us accused of breaking and entering. Second, everyone else must wait behind the fence until we return. I want a chance to look things over without distractions." He agreed. The large metal gate swung open wide as if on cue and we boldly walked in, though I silently offered a prayer for protection and guidance.

We had to walk past a row of headstones before we could reach the area in question. I spread open my hands, palms down, and motioned for Robbie to do the same. It's easier to sense changes in temperature, movement, and vibrations if one's hands are wide-open and unprotected.

A relaxed body and receptive mind are also helpful. We paused by one grave and waited. Robbie became quite excited, describing a physical turbulence he could feel in the air but could not see. In addition to physical sensations, he was registering much pain and sorrow. I confirmed his descriptions. "In my opinion," I told him, "there's a man buried below us, a man who has recently died of cancer and is still locked in battle against the disease. His fight is so intense, he probably doesn't know his body died."

A student waiting behind the fence eagerly chimed in claiming it was a man and he knew him, and, yes, the man had recently died of cancer. The man had suffered several years and absolutely refused to admit he could ever possibly die of the disease.

Robbie was so surprised his mouth dropped open. I went on to conjecture that some day in the future, the man would finally realize the battle was over and he was free to go. Until then, I doubted he would listen to anyone who may try to reach him.

Further down another row of stones, I glanced four filmy-white, ectoplasmic or ghost-like forms floating by. Without hesitation, I automatically greeted them and continued on about my business. This so confused Robbie, I had to catch myself and apologize to him. I had come to regard things classified as "paranormal" to be in reality quite normal. It was a challenge for me, sometimes, to remember other people did not necessarily share my view.

By now it was quite late and I was beginning to tire. It had been a long day and I was far from convinced we would find anything but fireflies. Suddenly, I stopped. As we neared the small "Keep Off The Grass" sign, I noticed the ground trembling and so were my feet and legs. I asked Robbie if he felt anything, and he whispered back in a frightened voice, "Yes, the ground is shaking. What's going on here?"

Something was different about this place after all. That tiny sign. The lights always led straight toward it. I walked over to the sign and softly, within my mind, asked if anyone was down there. "I'm down here," thundered the reply as it pounded through my skull.

Instantly I fully relaxed by body and nervous system, removing any hint of tension. I wanted to establish a good connection with whoever it was, so nothing would be missed. "Who are you? What do you want?" I asked mentally.

My answer came in a woman's voice, half screaming, half yelling, her words echoing through my brain. "Thought you'd overlook me, didn't ya. No one pays me no heed. No one ever notices me. They never did much. I worked real hard and still they wouldn't pay me much mind. How do ya like my little pranks? Them pretty light don't hurt nobody, but they sure do confuse folks." Her words changed into fits of laughter. I bent down to read the tiny marker.

"Oh, my God! It's my name! Huffman!" I was stunned. (Huffman was my last name before I married Terry Atwater.)

This fun foray wasn't fun anymore. The sign wasn't any kind of notice. It marked a primitive grave and it read: "MRS. MINNIE HUFFMAN, 1875 1960. The last word was not legible.

The large stone overshadowing it bore the name of Bernard R. Huffman. My former husband was John Bernard Huffman, son of Bernard Clyde Huffman. John had a cousin named Minnie. I couldn't see how these people could possibly be relatives, but their names that struck deep chords within me and brought back emotional memories. Finally I turned around and noticed how terrified Robbie was. Quick action was necessary for Robbie's sake and for Minnie's. I shouted for him to run and get Allene and two other men. I didn't care which two. Robbie remained on the other side of the fence while two other students and Allene scurried forward.

The four of us encircled the tiny marker and joined hands. I prayed outloud for Minnie's soul to be released from earthly ties and return to God. Each who wanted to say a prayer, voiced their own. Allene stood opposite me, supporting my words with her own, adding power, energy, and compassion to what had already been said.

There was an upward swoosh of movement like a wind. I heard a faint scream, like "Oh, no-o-o-o-o-o-o," and then it faded. Three of us experienced physical pain in our hearts, the other a sensation of pain in his head. All of us felt the rush of wind. Sparky was one of the men. Later, he commented, "I really felt something. It just kind of hit my chest and then passed upward."

Silence reigned.

The ground was steady now. The other three who helped walked over to the fence and began softly speaking to the others. All the rest then entered the cemetery and began their own explorations, gathering first with palms outstretched over the man's grave who had recently died of cancer. They were abuzz about the air turbulence, acting awe-struck at this new dimension of experience they had just discovered.

I remained at the marker. Unable to move. Just me and that marker. Even in dying, nobody paid attention to Minnie Huffman. She didn't even rate a decent headstone like everyone else.

She was angry and hurt, and I didn't blame her. Those lights were her way of getting back. She wasn't trying to hurt anyone. She was just trying to make them all look the fools they were.

Of course, I could never prove what I heard Minnie say. It was just my word against everyone else's idea. Church people, curious farmers, townsfolk whether they admitted it or not, loved that mystery light and the fame and attention it brought them. The story gave them something to talk about, tell their grandchildren about. Mount Bethel was special because of it. There was a joyful fear attached to the whole story, and I saw no need to spoil it for them. It was enough for me to know different. Each member of our group would come to their own conclusion themselves, as they should.

This moment belonged to me. Of all the countless hauntings I had ever participated in before, investigation after investigation, this one shook me. I couldn't help but ponder that since Minnie's death two decades ago, I had had to travel 5,000 miles, literally from coast to coast, before a Huffman could come to release a Huffman. THE MYSTERY LIGHT, Atwater, 10

“God bless you, Minnie,” I whispered.

When I left, Robbie got up enough nerve to return to the marker by himself. He sat down on the ground beside it and just shook his head. Later, he explained: “There was something there before. It was moving. Now there’s nothing there. the ground is like a rock.” Conversations droned on around me like a soft buzz on the return trip. I remained to myself thinking about Minnie, and the incredible irony to this very strange light.

###

This story is true, documented with newspaper clippings and photographs. It happened on May 21, 1979.