

THE PALMER HOUSE HOTEL

DARKNESS ON THE EDGE OF TOWN RADIO
PARANORMAL CONFERENCE
JANUARY 18 – 20, 2008

BY JACOB KEMPFERT

*Let me not burst in ignorance; but tell
Why thy canonized bones, hearsed in death,
Have burst their cerements; why the sepulcher,
Wherein we saw thee quietly inurn'd,
Hath oped his ponderous and marble jaws,
To cast thee up again. What may this mean,
That thou, dead corse, again in complete steel
Revisit'st thus the glimpses of the moon,
Making night hideous; and we fools of nature
So horridly to shake our disposition
With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls?
Say, why is this? wherefore? what should we do?*

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* I.iv

The town is a strange place, made all the stranger because, for some reason, everything feels vaguely familiar, like walking through your childhood home after someone else has moved in. Driving north on Interstate 94, one quickly grows accustomed to the surroundings. The land is repetitive – small clumps of trees spread like Morse code across rolling farmland – and the towns, or rather, what is visible of the towns from the highway, showcase the same stops, the same stations, the same commodes. The same river is also crossed on multiple occasions, the Sauk River, as its course winds alternatively wide then narrow through the earth. On the long road north, it would be easy to pass Sauk Centre without noticing the earth-toned billboard proclaiming this particular town the birthplace and boyhood home of author Sinclair Lewis.

And so the town is strange: while it is easy to pass by, to forget, or to ignore entirely, it would be difficult to find another Midwestern small-town that has been made so boisterously visible on the American literary map. Sinclair Lewis skewered the residents of Sauk Centre as the fictional Gopher Prairie in his controversial novel *Main Street*, a novel that would earn the previously-obscure author immediate fame and fortune, and would almost earn him a Pulitzer Prize. To a certain extent, Lewis has slipped into a general obscurity in the modern world of literature; many still know his name, but few are absolutely certain of his contribution to American letters, and even fewer have actually read his work for scholarly purposes, much less for personal enjoyment and edification.

Yet along the thin microcosm that composes Original Main Street, Lewis's name resounds. Off the Interstate, the Sinclair Lewis Interpretive Center still draws curious tourists and literary pilgrims. Just over a mile north on Main Street and a few blocks to the west on Sinclair Lewis Avenue, Lewis's boyhood home still stands, now a national historic landmark. Greenwood Cemetery, one mile east of Main Street, displays a plaque guiding visitors to the location of the Lewis family plot, where Sinclair requested his ashes be buried.

However, the most popular of the Sauk Centre Sinclair Lewis landmarks – and the most infamous – lies in the geographic and metaphoric heart of the town, on the intersection of Original Main Street and Sinclair Lewis Avenue. Represented in *Main Street* as the Minniemashie House, the red-brick building looms silently above its surroundings, casting long shadows through the streets at any hour of the day. Lewis worked here as a night clerk in his youth.

To pass by the Palmer House Hotel is to be taken aback; first, by the proud, quiet majesty it still displays despite decades of erosion and weathering, and second by its innate manner of *being*: the building exists, but it does not impose its existence upon its passers-by; instead, it exists as an observer, soundlessly watching with dozens of sightless window-glass eyes. To observe the Palmer House Hotel, one invariably also feels observed. In the windows, you expect someone to be watching you. It feels perhaps even stranger when nobody is.

When one first hears that a particular location is haunted, it is quite impossible to enter or return to that location in one's typical manner. One is spurred by one's own imagination. A desire mounts slowly, a desire to prove or disprove any subtle noise, any trick of the eye, any gentle change in temperature. When alone, this desire multiplies tenfold. In the solitude of such locations, your own thoughts cannot be tested or tempered against any logic but their own. Eventually, just the pure *imagining* wears one down.

In the lobby, however, it is easy to settle in. Aside from providing overnight accommodations for visitors, the Palmer House also makes an earnest profit from its pub and restaurant, both of which are located in the lobby, where the mood is always congenial and earnest and the staff is friendly and warm. Spending time only in the lobby would make one reconsider their notions of haunted places. And yet, even though one quickly grows comfortable in these surroundings, there still lingers a certain quiet in the corners of the room that is similar to the subdued calm that is often found in funeral parlors. Not that the Palmer House is a dreary, morbid place. Quite the opposite. The Palmer House is most often so filled with life that it must, by necessity, be subdued into murmurs of polite conversation and echoes of distant music. So once again, one feels observed; an energy presents itself to visitors. This energy makes one appreciate the warm silence of the building's forgotten history.

Most often the lobby is filled with stories. Visitors aware of the Palmer House's paranormal activity talk to staff members and locals. It is difficult to sit in the pub for any amount of time and not eventually hear about strange noises, objects moving of their own accord, or mysterious and bodiless voices heard in the needles of the night. Kelley Freese, the owner, is more than ready to share stories with the curious. She tells one story of a little boy who sits on the third step on the staircase to the second floor. This boy has a blue ball that he plays with, and on many occasions guests have complained there were children running down the halls at two in the morning. More often than not, there were no children staying in the hotel that night. The little boy is famous for bouncing his ball down the hallways. When the ball bounces too far and gets away from him, he chases after it. Kelley tells such stories with a curious smile on the corners of her mouth, and never appears to grow tired of telling the same stories to new people.

As one ascends the staircase out of the lobby, it is difficult not to pause on the third step, or at least give a cursory glance downward, expecting to see a curious face staring back up. On the landing between floors, the silence is intensified. Clinks and clatters from the pub are still audible, but they are distant and swallowed. Up one more flight of stairs, the illusion of isolation is complete. The long second-floor hallways extend to the left and the right; most often these hallways are empty, even when the hotel is filled to capacity. There is a certain solitude present in these hallways, a combination of muffled safety and omniscient warmth. The doors to unlet rooms are propped open, as Kelley encourages visitors to wander through the hotel and explore its various chambers. Every so often, the windows of the open rooms rattle with the passing rush of speeding trucks from the street below.

The persistent silence permeates the upper floors, yet, as it is an old building, the walls and floorboards betray every movement from the surrounding area, above and on all sides; it is easy to convince yourself you are hearing the footsteps of the dead instead of the living. The imagination runs away with itself. One must ask, by necessity: who has walked these halls in previous ages, and who still resides between these walls? And once the necessary question has been asked, one must also – again, by necessity – attempt to answer it.

The Conference

Thursday, January 17

Because rooms aren't being let for the weekend, a number of conference patrons have come a night early for the full Palmer House experience. By early evening, the telling of stories already begins in the pub, where two distinct groups have formed. In the south corner, sitting at the bar, are the local Sauk Centre residents stopping by for their typical drinks. Scattered throughout the rest of the pub are the newcomers, the excited and curious visitors who converse with staff and among each other, eager to hear of any mysterious happenings. There is an anticipation in their demeanor, a hope that these previous happenings will manifest again within the next few days, and that they will be witness. From the corner, the many eyes of Sauk Centre's own occasionally glance over and take in these newcomers.

"There are plenty of paranormal conversations going on tonight," says Brett Freese, Kelley's husband, while sitting at the opposite end of the bar and sipping his drink. "Or should I say, conversations about the paranormal."

"Or paranormal conversations about the paranormal," Kelley chimes in.

"That's interesting," Brett says. "Would they cancel each other out? Should we say they are having *normal* conversations about the paranormal?" He stands up, ducks behind the bar, and opens two drawers in the counter. "Regardless, I think there will be some paranormal dice and card tricks this weekend..."

And Kelley smiles and rolls her eyes.

"Shall I see how many of these psychics are really psychic?" Brett asks, pulling a deck of cards from one of the drawers.

"Go ahead and try," says Kelley, and timely steps outside for a cigarette.

"I'll bet *you're* psychic," Brett says to me, pulling the rubber band from off the cards and rifling them between his fingers. "There'll be two piles of cards. I'll show you one card at a time, face down, and you'll tell me if it's red or black. I bet you'll get them all right."

I give each card its due as he lays them before me. After going through a dozen cards and saying "red" or "black" for each, Brett stops me. He turns over all of the cards in the red pile first, and then the black pile. To my full expectation, and yet somehow still to my surprise, they are all correct.

"So how'd you do it?" Brett asks me.

"I just went with my instincts," I tell him, knowing I had nothing to do with it.

"That's the psychic way. Or at least, that's what I hear is the psychic way."

By 9:30 a large group of paranormal conference-goers has taken over the couches and chairs by the pub's fireplace. As the now half-drunk locals discuss golf and the effectiveness of a particular three-wood, the paranormal group shares bottles of wine and pictures of a previous investigation to the Queen Mary, the famous Long Beach luxury cruise liner. A red-faced young patron, one of the locals, makes his way over to Kelley and strikes up a conversation.

"Are these paranormal people here all week?" he asks, his eyes glinting across the crowd.

"Just for a few days," Kelley tells him.

“Do you think they’ll find anything?” There is a hint of skepticism. He shifts from foot to foot.

“Absolutely,” says Kelley. No skepticism.

“So you believe in all that?”

“Yes, I do.”

There is a sharp burst of laughter from the couches by the fireplace, and both Kelley and the man glance over.

“Did you believe in it before you owned this place?” the young man questions, raising his voice to match the growing noise of the pub.

“I thought about it, but I didn’t seriously consider it.”

“So when a dish falls in the pub...” the man asks with raised eyebrows.

“When a dish *falls*, I think it could be a truck passing, or vibrations through the walls, or any number of things,” Kelley says. She takes a drink from her mug. “But when it shoots ten feet across the room...”

“When you see a guy sitting here and there’s smoke rings around him but he’s not smoking...” the young man suggests.

“Yeah, exactly.”

“But that stuff doesn’t happen, does it?” The skepticism returns to his voice.

“Ask Jim Hadley, he’ll tell you. Just the other night-...” Kelley begins, the curious storytelling smile beginning to form.

“Well, Jim Hadley is always drunk,” says the young man, knowing this much to be true.

Chris Fleming, psychic host of Court TV’s *Dead Famous*, excuses himself to the basement with a camcorder to get what he calls an initial reading. Kelley trails after him, eager to see what, if anything, his initial reading will reveal. Meanwhile, someone from the paranormal group connects a Playstation to the television in the pub, and a “Guitar Hero” challenge breaks out between the paranormal group and selected locals. The red-faced young man faces off against a paranormal investigator. Two differing worlds are brought together, if only momentarily; the conflict between tangible and mystical fades in comparison to the essential conflict of supreme rock and roll godhood. It is not important now to prove or disprove, to believe or disbelieve, for here there has been discovered a common ground.

“That was intense,” says Kelley, returning from the basement. “It’s like there are people everywhere down there, peeking around corners, standing right behind you. It just feels crowded. The psychics say that there’s one guy in the basement who has control over other spirits. It’s like he’s gathered them all down there, in the basement...It’s probably all of these strange people showing up, curious to see something...Just standing by the stairs, Chris was overwhelmed.”

Kelley closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, and shakes her head. She lets the breath out in a long sigh. Then, getting ready to go home for the night, she says, “I can’t even imagine what this place will be like in twenty-four hours.”

Friday, January 18

Within twenty-four hours, the lobby builds into a hurricane of activity. Vendors arrive throughout the afternoon, hauling large cases of wares in from the cold. Booths are set up one by one, offering books, magazines, psychic readings, tarot consultations, and gemstones. The lobby doors are constantly in motion as all of the conference's participants arrive. Many take time to explore the hotel for the first time, going from floor to floor and peeking into room after room.

Registration begins in the early evening. A line forms in front of the registration table and snakes its way through the lobby and into the pub. Those waiting at the end of the line palaver with locals eating dinner in the pub, which is the only room of the Palmer House open for non-conference business. Most of the talk is about how paranormally cold it is this weekend, even for Minnesota. There are visitors from all over the country present, and those from more temperate locales such as California and Nevada must suffer through the coldest temperatures of the winter.

By 8:00 everyone is crammed into the restaurant for an opening question and answer session with the weekend's speakers. The tables have been removed and replaced with rows of chairs, all of which have been filled, leaving standing room only. The speakers introduce themselves one by one. Included on the panel are Patrick Burns, paranormal investigator and host of television's *Haunting Evidence*; Chris Fleming, sensitive and host of television's *Dead Famous*; and Dave Schrader and Tim Dennis, hosts of the Darkness Radio program and the organizers of the conference.

One of the subjects addressed is the contemporary heightened excitement by the public in the paranormal field. The increasing popularity of television shows, movies, and books about the paranormal have helped build a field into a thriving industry. The main question now facing this industry is whether its own popularity is helpful or hindering. On the one hand, an increased public knowledge of the paranormal encourages the average person to look deeper into the surrounding world, and to raise his or her awareness of the possibility that there is something beyond. Conversely, expectations arise that paranormal activity will always occur on investigations, which then results in disappointment when investigators find and experience nothing.

This discussion then leads into the more immediate topic of this evening's imminent investigation (also dubbed a "ghost hunt" by the more playful of investigators). Dave Schrader stands up, takes the microphone, and asks the audience, "How many of you are on your first paranormal investigation?"

Approximately half of the people raise their hands.

"Well, the first thing I can tell you, especially for those of you who have never used paranormal equipment or instruments before, is that common sense is your best instrument... Oftentimes paranormal investigations have a high exhilaration factor, and it's easy to let your imagination carry you away. It's important to first look for non-paranormal explanations. Go out of your way to disprove before even considering that something is paranormal."

While Dave explains the basics of ghost hunting, patrons from the pub every so often glance at the packed dining room, observing the unusual activities, the intriguing equipment, the dozens and dozens of new faces. Perhaps they are merely curious, or perhaps they are trying to understand something deeper, to explain to themselves why such a portion of humanity – and the human mind – desires so strongly to cultivate the haunted places of the earth.

“Don’t be afraid,” Dave continues. “Fear can shut off your senses. Try to be aware of the subtle changes from room to room...If you experience something you think is paranormal, try not to be afraid of it. It’s no different than someone trying to get your attention in normal life, because that’s all it is: someone trying to get your attention. But the physical aspect is removed, and a boundary is in place.”

The more experienced participants are already preparing and testing their equipment: camcorders, digital voice recorders, electromagnetic field detectors, temperature gages all switch on and fill the room with an anxious and unsettled energy.

“Sometimes anomalies happen right away,” says Dave. “Spirits check investigators out. At the very beginning of an investigation it’s fairly common to get poked, prodded, or to get some interesting EVPs (Electronic Voice Phenomena, hearing unexplainable voices on audio recordings). In these cases, the spirits tend to calm down after the initial burst of activity, unless you try to reach out to them. So don’t be afraid to interact. That having been said, are there any questions before we begin?”

A man in the middle of the room raises his hand.

“Go ahead,” says Dave.

“I’ve heard you can go to a place that’s haunted and have a spirit follow you home. Is that possible?”

This causes a slight murmur throughout the dining room, and more than a few people to shift in their seats.

“Yes,” says Dave, “but that’s an extra \$29.95. It comes with a shirt that says ‘I went on a paranormal investigation and all I got was this lousy ghost.’”

A relief of laughter peals through the room. Dave waits for it to subside before he leans toward the microphone.

“But in all honesty, it can happen. It’s extremely rare, but it can happen.”

The lights are extinguished and the halls are silenced. There is an air verging on somberness as people split into groups and go about their business, the business of what they came here to do, hoping to see what they came here to see. Perhaps this is why the moment seems almost holy – because it is filled with a sacred sort of hope, a sacred sort of faith in a terrifyingly unknown otherworld. The moment is somber because within any upcoming minute, that hope may be validated, that faith proven true, to a number of people who want nothing more than to believe.

Investigation #1 – Friday, January 18, 10pm – 2am

When the investigation begins, groups of about twenty head to each floor. On each floor, one of the conference speakers acts as a guide, informing investigators of hotspots of activity and aiding in the implementation of technology. On the third floor, most of the activity reported centers around the north end of the building in rooms 17 and 22, across from each other at the end of the hallway. Patrick Burns leads an investigation in room 17. Orange streetlights glow through the windows, and every few minutes the sound of passing traffic is heard; apart from these, the room is dark and deathly quiet. There is a heaviness in the room, a negative feeling that gives one the impression that nobody should be here. It is difficult to determine if it is the room itself, or just nerves coupled with imagination.

Patrick sits on the edge of the bed and places a handheld device in the center. He explains that the device is known as a K2 meter, a specific type of electromagnetic field (EMF) detector. Instead of employing a needle or a digital readout, it uses a series of lights to determine electromagnetic activity. Any electronic device sends out electromagnetic fields, so the fields themselves are extremely common. It is for this reason that lights are turned off on many paranormal investigations. The K2 is specifically meant to detect abnormal spikes in electromagnetic fields. It is theorized that such spikes occur when a spirit or entity uses energy to make itself known.

Patrick explains that the K2 meter is often employed to interact with spirits in real time, through a question and answer process. By stating out loud ground rules, such as one flash of the lights for a “yes” response and two flashes for a “no” response, investigators can ask questions of any entities present. Oftentimes, in order to solidify the results, more than one K2 meter is employed when questions are asked. Patrick begins asking questions, asking if anyone is in the room with us that would like to make themselves known. The K2 meter remains dark for all of his questions. A number of investigators in the room hold digital voice recorders out into open space, hoping to listen to the sound file later and discover unexplainable voices, voices believed to be from beyond the grave. Yet still, through all the questions, the K2 is unresponsive.

Patrick decides to try another device to get a response. He introduces it as the “Frank’s Box,” or the “Ghost Box.” This particular device is rapidly growing in popularity—and controversy—among paranormal researchers and investigators. Originally invented by a man named Frank Sumption, the Frank’s Box was based off of a concept originally explored by Thomas Edison. For the last ten years of his life, Edison worked sporadically on a device that he claimed would be so receptive that entities (or “personalities in another existence” as he called them) could use it as a means of communication, if such personalities do exist.

The modern concept of the Frank’s Box centers on radio waves, and the belief that spirits can manipulate such existing frequencies and amplitudes in order to communicate. The Frank’s Box cycles through airwaves much in the same way as a police scanner, but instead of locking onto specific frequency activity, it keeps scanning in a cycle. The result is a chopped mix of snippets from live radio broadcasts, mostly unintelligible. It is believed that this mixture can then serve as a means of communication. Relevant, full sentence responses to asked questions have been reported and recorded.

One of the main criticisms of the Frank’s Box is the natural phenomenon known in the paranormal field as “matrixing.” This is the brain’s inclination to form patterns out of randomness, much like seeing objects in clouds. The problem is that when questions are asked,

responses may be anticipated by a person, and the human mind will make a false positive out of the jumbled mess of word fragments from the radio waves.

“Is there anybody here with us tonight?” Patrick asks, and the room is filled with the skipping fuzz of the Frank’s Box. Room 17 is a large room, complete with a whirlpool bathtub and a separate bathroom. As all of the investigators in the room were gathered closely around the bed, I decide to walk into the whirlpool room. It is dark and empty. Across the room, I can see my own black silhouette reflected and staring back at me from the bathroom mirror.

“Is there anybody here with us tonight?” Patrick asks again.

The Frank’s Box replies with a raspy whisper. There is a pause.

“Did anybody else hear ‘Patrick’?” Patrick asks. Everyone says yes. I nod in agreement, because I too heard Patrick’s own name on the Frank’s Box, but I wasn’t certain that I could believe what I heard.

It is then, as I am standing motionless and staring at the mirror across the room, orange streetlight patterned dimly on the wall behind me, that a black shadow—a shadow darker than any other shadow in the room—appears in the mirror over my shoulder, and slides away to disappear behind my back. When I turn to look, there is nothing behind me.

Chris Fleming leads the investigation in the basement. There are reports from the previous group that Chris was able to get a spirit to raise and lower the temperature. Our group spreads throughout the expansive basement, wandering in the darkness from room to room. Stone and brick surround us and our instruments. We spend an hour in the tomblike darkness, seeing only shadows, hearing only our own nervous footsteps, and finding nothing in the basement but the cold.

Lisa Hottinger, Twin Cities Paranormal Society (TCPS) co-founder and lead investigator for the television program *Dead Reckoning*, conducts the investigations on the second floor. The little boy who runs down the halls and sits on the stairs is rumored to have died in room 11 on this floor. But Lisa also tells of the spirit of a pregnant woman in room 11, jilted by the father of her child, and left alone kneeling every day at the window to hopelessly look for his return. Room 11 is always cold, even in the summer and even with the heat on, and tonight is no exception. Maybe it is only the tragic nature of the stories, but the room also seems always filled with a bitter melancholy and a hollow, vague loneliness. When people walk into room 11, it always takes them a long moment before they feel they can speak.

With the hotel in complete darkness, and the simple notion in one’s brain that the hotel is haunted, the imagination is possibly one’s worst enemy. When there is no activity and the night is getting on, one can almost will activity to happen through the combination of heightened expectation with inaction. But yet, sitting on the edge of the bed and staring out the window from the cold of room 11, when someone asks the woman to give us a sign of her presence—and perhaps it is my imagination, but also perhaps not—I feel a tugging on my ear by an invisible hand, that lasts for twenty seconds and then vanishes.

After the official investigation ends at two in the morning, and once everyone has left for their hotels by three, members of the TCPS decide to go back into the basement for one more sweep in smaller numbers. It has been a long day, but we are all kept awake by the darkness and the cold of the basement, and the shadows that dodge into rooms just beyond the darkness, and the feeling that we are all being watched by dozens of unseen eyes.

It isn't until five in the morning that I leave the Palmer House to travel across town to my own hotel room. The air outside is frigid and bitter, and the glowing bank sign down the street displays a temperature of -20 degrees, without wind chill. There is a thick layer of frost on my windshield that takes me ten minutes to scrape off. I am alone on the dark, empty street. I keep looking over my shoulder because I can't help but think that something has come with me.

Saturday, January 19

By mid morning, the temperature has warmed to eleven degrees below zero. I stop by a local coffee shop to prepare me for the day, and a white sheen of frost has formed around the doorframe on the inside. All over town, vehicles are having trouble starting. The air is cold enough to burn at one's lungs upon inhalation.

Workshops and presentations are lined up all day at the Palmer House, and in between them everyone discusses the previous night's events. Evidence is brought out, presented, and considered. It seems everyone has a story to share with everyone else. A number of EVPs were caught, and are listened to and analyzed throughout the day. One of the more striking pieces of evidence is a video clip from room 22, where the coat hangers began swinging back and forth by themselves. In the video, a dark shadow can be vaguely seen pushing one end of a swinging coat hanger and then disappearing.

The day quickly passes in a flurry of activity. Darkness Radio holds an auction of items and memorabilia, including the opportunity to stay in rooms 17 or 22 for the night. Excitement for the next investigation continues to build. Trepidation also builds for some of the members of TCPS, as well as a number of psychics and sensitives, who all concur that the energy in the Palmer House is overwhelming.

"The energy here is off the charts," says Lisa of TCPS, "this is over the top."

"It's like nothing I've ever experienced before," concedes Chris Fleming.

"This is haunting to the extreme," says TCPS investigator and sensitive Theresa.

The hotel does feel filled with a nervous energy, a dark restlessness. The sun sets and the members of TCPS sit around a table in the conference room, preparing themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally for the long night ahead.

Investigation #2 – Saturday, January 19, 10pm – 2am

Chris Fleming leads the investigation in room 17. He starts experimenting with a temperature gauge, taking a base reading of 72 degrees in the room. Chris asks any spirits present can lower the temperature. Slowly, the temperature drops to 71, then 69 degrees.

“Can you bring the temperature down to 65 degrees?” Chris asks. He watches the gauge intently. “It’s down to 67, 66.9, 66.8.” He suddenly lets out a quiet exclamation. “Eerie,” he says, “it stopped on 66.6 degrees.”

The temperature continues to slowly drop, but Chris wants to experiment a little more.

“Can you make the temperature 66.6 degrees again?” he asks.

The temperature holds at 66.5 degrees, then jumps to 66.7, then falls back to 66.5. It continues this pattern a number of times.

“It’s trying. Look at it trying, but it can’t quite do it,” he says.

Later, still in 17, Chris works with a Frank’s Box. There is no definitive response until, after five minutes of gibberish, a little boy’s voice is heard breaking through the static. The voice sounds helpless and terrified. Everyone in the room clearly hears a long, drawn out cry of, “Help.”

After investigating 17 I took a break sitting on the stairs in the third floor hallway. A young man starts walking up the stairs towards me. He looks up, over my shoulder. He flinches, surprised, and stops walking.

“What is it?” I ask him.

“I saw someone in that room,” he says, pointing over my shoulder to room 15.

I figure it to be an investigator exploring the room, but as the hallway is mostly empty, and I didn’t hear footsteps behind me, I decide to make certain. I stand up and walk into the room. When I get through the door, it is obvious there is no one in the main area of the room. But I can’t see into the bathroom, so perhaps whoever it was walked in there.

“Is there somebody in here?” I ask.

“There’s somebody in *here*,” a female voice whispers from the bathroom.

I turn around the corner and walk into the bathroom. It is empty.

I sit in the hallway of the first floor with TCPS investigators Lisa and Raini, testing out the Frank’s Box. Lisa is asking questions, and in order to prevent matrixing, Raini has headphones plugged into the Frank’s Box. Raini can’t hear Lisa’s questions, and says out loud the phrases she hears.

“I keep hearing the name Thomas,” she says.

“Where is Thomas?” Lisa asks.

After a number of seconds, Raini says, “Thomas is stuck.”

“Where is Thomas stuck?”

“I keep hearing ‘Thomas is stuck,’ over and over. Thomas is stuck, Thomas is stuck,” Raini says.

“Where is Thomas stuck?” Lisa repeats.

Raini listens for a minute or so. She seems like she is about to say something, but she hesitates. Finally, she looks at me.

“Jacob,” she says to me, “I just heard ‘Thomas is stuck in Jacob’s room.’”

We keep asking where Jacob’s room is, but Raini says all she keeps hearing is “Jacob’s room, Jacob’s room” repeated over and over. Suddenly I think of the feeling I got early the previous morning as I was leaving the Palmer House, that thing, that shadow on my back that I had accounted to fatigue and an overcharged imagination, that presence pressing against my shoulders as I walked the empty dark road to my van, as I scraped my windshield, the presence watching over what I was doing, watching me carefully as I drove down Main Street to my hotel across town, following me as I entered room 111 and slept a restless sleep despite my fatigue, that presence I even felt in the morning as I woke and prepared for the day.

I leave the Palmer House at a quarter after three in the morning. I keep thinking of Thomas, convincing myself that the feeling of being watched was all in my head. My car is frozen inside and out. I spend ten minutes scraping the ice off the windshield. Inside my car, there is frost covering the steering wheel. The bank display down the street reports a temperature of –18 degrees. The moon hangs nearly full in the sky. A single light shines from a window on the northwest corner of the third floor of the Palmer House. The window is from room 22, which is let out for the night to a lucky auction winner, who paid upwards of \$200 for a single night, and the chance to say, “I spent a night in the haunted Palmer House hotel.”

In my room, nothing seems to be amiss. I fall asleep easily and stay that way until mid-morning. I do not feel watched. I finally decide it was all in my head.

Sunday, January 20

The Twin Cities Paranormal Society sits exhausted and dreary-eyed around the conference room table. It has been a tiring weekend for everyone involved, fueled by the constant unknown and little sleep. After the weekend is over, the TCPS still has hours upon hours of video and audio evidence to review and examine. The young woman who caught the footage of the swinging coat hangers in room 22 stops in with her brother and their father to show the video. They talk with the TCPS about the experience, as well as a number of other experiences they had over the weekend.

“I came here a firm nonbeliever,” their father says. “I come 900 miles from southern Ohio, and I thought the entire 15 hour ride home I could just tell them, ‘I told you so.’ I thought we were going to just spend a weekend together. I just had myself convinced that I didn’t believe any of it. But after this weekend, I just don’t know.”

Kelley stops in and collapses in a chair. As well as participating in the conference and investigations this weekend, she also had a hotel, pub, and restaurant to manage. She has heard every story from every participant, and seen every piece of evidence shown to her. Kelley and everyone from TCPS had a number of personal experiences that are hard to make sense of.

“This weekend was completely crazy,” Kelley says. “I don’t even know how to describe it. It was just...I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

There is a certain passion I have noticed in all people I talk to about the happenings at the Palmer House. Some are eager to be mystified, in the same way we love having magic tricks pulled on us; others are eager to disprove any activity with passion equal to those who believe. But no one has sat idly by, not caring. It causes people to think, to question, to believe or disbelieve – but to venture outside of what they already know.

This, overall, is a meeting of *stories*. Ever since the first of us arrived the relating experiences never ebbed its flow. Photographs, audio files, and video footage become visual and auditory facets of the grand scheme of communication; and below these – the pictures, sounds, smells, ghostly touches, and the words – there is another world, the world of a lost humanity, the stories of tragedy, love, loss. In death and stories of death we see all aspects of mankind's existence precisely reflected. But when we draw nearer, when we examine closer, when we turn around to see who has been following us – there is nothing. It has dissolved away into the very mystery that attracted us in the first place.

And we find, underneath the experiences and the evidence and the jokes and the trepidation, a basic human need, and the desire to participate in the most ancient and sacred of human arts: the art of storytelling. We are attracted to the mystery, and afraid of it, and through relating to each other we find our common ground of understanding.

A few months later, I am at the Palmer House hotel again. A few members of the Twin Cities Paranormal Society have stopped in for a weekend visit. The paranormal conference is but a memory; granted, a particularly exciting and surreal memory. They recall stories, occurrences, and evidence from the event. At one point Raini pulls me aside.

“You remember in January when the Frank’s Box said ‘Thomas is stuck in Jacob’s room,’ and it kept saying ‘Jacob’s room’ over and over?” she asks.

“Yes, I do,” I say. “We asked where Jacob’s room was and it just kept repeating it.”

“Well, I didn’t want to tell you this during the conference because I didn’t want to freak you out, but I also heard ‘One eleven.’”

“That was the number my room in the hotel across town,” I say.

“I know,” she says.