

As a child I had always been interested in Astronomy. Stars, galaxies, black holes, all of it. I had never thought of it as a career (I knew that there was a lot of math involved), so I drifted from subject to subject and from dream career to dream career. I'm not quite sure when this changed, but by the time I had taken and passed AP Physics in my senior year of high school I was hooked on Astronomy as a career. After high school, I went to a smaller in-state university that had a research telescope and spent many long nights out at the observatory. Despite many nights being not much more than "watch Netflix and play games on your phone until the automated software finished the imaging" it was always a great time. I got to know my friends and professors on these nights. I lived for these nights, despite the long drive out to the observatory and longer hours spent waiting for images. That all changed very quickly one night in November of my senior year.

My professors had made a point of telling all of the students that we should not be at the observatory alone. This made sense: it was close to an hour drive from the university, meaning if you got yourself locked out, you were up a creek. And if we were locked out in one of Minnesota's famously cold nights, it was either freeze to death in the cold or break a window and incur a hefty fine. We were told to incur the fine.

This was the sort of rule that was really taken as more of a suggestion; most of the astronomy students had been out to take images by themselves at least once and all of the professors did it fairly frequently. I'm not saying that we should have done this; there was a non-zero amount of risk involved in going out alone, but sometimes you have to do what you have to do. For me, that time was November 19th, 2014. It was just before school let out for Thanksgiving (my favorite holiday, for the record), and I was getting really close to having enough data to finish my senior project. I had decided to go out that night whether I could find someone to go with me or not. No one was crazy about going: Jack had family in town, Lauren wanted to finish a take home exam, Dave just plain didn't want to go, you get the picture. While I was not in love with the idea of making the trek out alone, I had no choice if I wanted that data right that night.

I arrived at the Regional Science Center at a quarter past six that evening, thoroughly enjoying hearing the crunch of gravel under my tires as I pulled up. The sun had set at a quarter to five that evening, so it was already plenty dark by the time I got out. I made my way into the main building to set up the computers, noticing that there was another car in the parking lot. It's not unusual for a biologist or ecologist to be out working in the surrounding prairies earlier in the day, but this late in the year they pack up early. Chalking it up to someone being really dedicated, I scanned my ID card, hearing a little beep as the system recognized me and I entered the building and made my way to the control room. The observatory shares its plot of land with a building called the Regional Science Center or RSC. This building houses not only the observatory control room, which is where the telescope and camera are controlled from, but several biological and ecological displays. It's used for public outreach events, and it isn't unusual for classes to be taken out there during the day. Tonight it seemed, I had the place to myself.

Unlocking the control room, I let myself in and got to work starting up the necessary equipment, and the room went from silent to louder than you would expect, with computer fans whirring and little boxes beeping. I had become used to this noise during my time at my school, and had grown to enjoy hearing it, every beep signaling in its own way that work was being done. After setting up the appropriate software, I headed out to the main dome to set up the camera, and this is when the night started to turn from normal to weird.

In the dome, as I was installing the camera I would be using for the night, I heard a familiar noise: the sound of gravel crunching underfoot followed by a beep. The same beep the ID scanners emitted when someone scanned their ID and was admitted into the room. Initially, this made me happy; I would have someone to talk to, at least for a little bit. But when I left the dome to return to the control room, I noticed that the car I had seen earlier was gone. Who would come this far away from civilization without a way of getting home? I stood planted in place for a moment, trying not to think too much about the situation. It was easy to psych yourself out in a place like this, and after some deep breaths, I headed back inside.

Back in the building, I found nothing new. This was both reassuring and slightly disturbing. Had I imagined the footsteps and the beep? It's not impossible; I hear that beep all day (the school uses those scanners for pretty much every door), and it's not like an animal couldn't have been walking around outside to make the gravel crunch. Maybe I heard the noises because I wanted someone to be out there with me to take away the unsettling edge that the building has late at night. Or maybe I was legitimately crazy and admitting myself to the nearest mental hospital is the logical next step. This thought made a chuckle slightly, breaking me out of the psyched out state I was in, making me realize I was being ridiculous. Laughing again, I got back to work, thinking the rest of the night would be business as usual.

Three hours later (just shy of 10:00), I had more or less forgotten my brief moment of concern and I was letting the computer do its thing while I watched some bad movie on Netflix, surrounded by the sound of computer fans and electronic beeps and squawks as the various machines in the room did their jobs. And then, I heard it again: the beep of a door opening. This time, I could be even less sure that I had actually heard the sound, I was surrounded by fairly constant beeps from the equipment in the room. I could swear that the beep I had heard was a door beep, but there was really no way to be sure. I could be a person arriving, but there was no reason for a non-astronomer to be here this late, and all of the astronomers on campus had passed on the offer to join me tonight. Frowning, I paused my movie and listened to the world around me. A clock ticked on in the next room and the control was filled with its usual level of sound but beyond that, I heard nothing. I listened for a solid five minutes and after that time had passed, I pressed play on the movie and became lost in the bad acting and questionable effects.

Shortly after midnight, I noticed that my images were becoming slightly blurry. Cursing under my breath, I grabbed my jacket and headed out to the telescope. Blurry images meant that the telescope was being blocked slightly by the dome. From time to time, the telescope and dome get out of sync with each other. It wasn't hard to fix, but going out in the cold was not exactly on the top of my list of favorite things to do. I paused the imaging software and headed out into the cold. Entering the dome, my suspicions were confirmed: the dome and telescope had started

moving at different rates. It's not unheard of, and by no means hard to fix. I grabbed the hand control for the telescope and got it pointed in the right direction (like I said, it's an easy fix), and headed back inside. Not fifteen minutes later, I was back outside for the exact same issue. By this time, I was starting to get a little freaked out. Between the phantom sounds and the repetition of a fairly uncommon glitch, I would be lying if I said my heart rate hadn't picked up. I'm usually not this nervous, but the fact that I was alone, in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the night was putting me on edge. I pulled out my phone, thinking that if I heard a friendly voice I would feel better. I thought for a moment about who would be okay with getting a call at half past twelve before settling on Lauren. She'd likely welcome the break from her exam. I punched the green button next to her name and prayed that she would answer. Thankfully, she did.

"Ben? What do you need? It's the middle of the night." Lauren sounded irritated. Maybe I was wrong about her being okay with a break.

"Sorry for bothering you. I'm just kinda freaked out here at the observatory. I'm hearing things, and I'm just not completely comfortable being out here alone. I could stand to hear a friendly voice...." I trailed off, realizing how crazy I sounded. Lauren, to her credit, didn't call me an idiot and hang up. She did however laugh at me.

"Ben, you've seen every horror movie made from 1930 to today, your podcast library is filled with horror themed shows, and your bookcase has every one of Stephen King's novels, which you've read at least twice over. You are predisposed to thinking something bad is going to go down. You're just over thinking this"

She was right, I was creating a fiction in my head and letting it drive me crazy. I checked my computer. I had an estimated two hours left in the imaging process. I would let it finish, clean up, and get to a warm bed.

"Thanks Lauren. I'm just being silly. See you in a few hours." I hung up and decided to sleep away my remaining time. I closed Netflix (it was a terrible movie anyway), closed the door, turned off the lights, and tried to get comfortable. I set an alarm for two hours later and as is my habit, selected an audiobook to fall asleep to. My finger hovered over the newest Stephen King offering before I remembered Lauren's words, and I selected something with a more humorous bent. David Sedaris is as good a choice as any. Before I knew it, my thoughts were becoming less and less coherent, the book's narrator sounding further and further away, and I was asleep.

I woke with a start some time later. My alarm hadn't gone off; it wasn't set to ring for another 10 minutes or so. And then I heard it. Soft tapping at the door to the control room. There didn't seem to be any sort of pattern. Sometimes it would be four or five taps quickly, other times the taps would be spread out over a period of about 15 seconds. Something was out there, something wanted to get in. I was pretty sure I didn't want to let whatever it was in the control room. I decided to wait until the sun started to rise in a few hours and get the hell out, hoping that whatever was out there wouldn't escalate its actions. I huddled in the corner, hoping the thing couldn't hear me. Then my alarm went off. An obnoxious wailing noise that would wake me up in any situation. I was surprised by the harsh tone. The thing seemed to be as well. Its

gentle tapping turned into an all-out assault on the door. What had sounded like a finger tapping on the door now sounded like Muhammed Ali beating down the door. And then, all of a sudden the door slammed open and the thing walked into the room. Only that's not quite right. It had gone from outside the room to inside it, but it didn't quite walk or float or make that transition in any normal way. A black figure just entered the room. I don't think there's a language in use today that could properly describe this thing. Vaguely human shaped, it stood at one end of the room while I got to my feet shaking like mad.

"What the fu-." That was all I got out before the thing began to scream, a low hollow sound that went on longer than any scream I had heard. And then it ran toward me and its body began to disintegrate as it did. By the time it reached me it had turned to smoke and the scream still reverberated in my ears. I fell to my knees and blacked out.

When I awoke next, there was no otherworldly horror outside my door, and to my delight the sun was just starting to peek over the horizon. The door was closed, and there was a part of me that was sure what I had experienced was some crazy dream. This notion was quickly dispelled when I went out to the telescope to finally shut everything down. On the door's glass window there was a greasy handprint with finger too long to be natural. There was a similar handprint on the telescope's body, indicating that this thing was responsible for the "glitch". I got out of that place as fast as possible, and I only returned if I was with at least one other person. I never said anything about the experience, and nobody else ever reported anything like it. Either I was the only one who was visited by that thing, or we all decided to keep quiet.

I'm older now, and I moved away from Minnesota and that hellish observatory. Some years ago I landed a teaching position at a university in the southwest, and I've had no otherworldly experiences here. As crazy as it sounds, I forget about this incident most days. Most of my time is spent teaching, grading, and being with my family. I only remember it now because of something I saw the other day. I stayed in my office late to finish writing an exam (I could hear some of my students a few doors down studying for said exam), and when I left I saw something that made my blood turn to ice. On my door's window was a greasy hand print, with fingers that were just slightly too long.