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One, Two, Three, Four, There’s a Shadow in Your Dorm:

A scientific investigation of Goucher’s ghost stories

Part 1:

Have you ever walked into an empty room on campus and felt like you are being watched? What about hearing strange sounds in your own dorm? Objects moving by themselves from one place to another? Every place has its spooky tales, and I bet you are considering transferring after everything you’ve just read. If you are, don’t worry! Fear of the supernatural is something I have struggled through myself. And I’ve learned that sometimes, what we perceive as a lost ghoul, may in fact be our own shadow. Inspired by my desire to find rational explanations to Goucher’s most bizarre occurrences, I enlisted logic and science to help me with putting the entire campus under perhaps the most thorough ghost investigation it has ever undergone. And the results were shocking.

When I began digging into the dark pages of our institution’s history, it seemed to me as if someone had deliberately ripped them out of the book. Searching the web, I found but one article referring to paranormal sightings at Goucher, and no one seemed to know much about the spirits that are said to roam these walls. However, I had been informed of one particular place where a lot of the sightings were reported: The old Goucher Archives in the Julia Rogers building. Built in 1952, the building was originally home to all of Goucher’s records, until it was decided that its halls were simply too narrow, and insufficient for the job, and it was moved to another location in 2009. But within those years, a staggering amount of paranormal activity has been reported there. Many of the stories regarding the ghosts are actually mentioned in the other article I read, titled *Ghosts of Goucher*. However, they are present in an interesting variety. From deceased former Goucher Presidents reappearing to make sure rules were followed, to students becoming mysteriously trapped in a room with no way out. But I was not going to turn right away to the supernatural explanation of all of this. At least not yet.

While I could not yet explain the latter occurrence, a theory about the former came to my mind as I looked into the history of the building itself. In particular, its construction details. All buildings constructed before 1978 were painted with paint containing a certain level of lead. In most constructions, lead levels were insufficient to cause immediate discomfort to the human body. However, if inhaled or ingested for long periods of time, lead has the ability to lower IQ, slow reaction time, cause vision impairments, but also, cause hallucinations. And so, after this information was kindly provided to me by Goucher College Chemistry Professor Kevin Schultz, the question arose: Could the apparitions reported by so many people be the result of mass lead poisoning? Logically, after 1978, all campus buildings should have been repainted to meet the new safety standards. An inspection wouldn’t bother either. I decided I should perform a lead test in Julia Rogers, to either confirm or refute my hypothesis. If lead was found in the paint, our institution would get into a very unpleasant situation. However, the procedure would have to wait. My priority now was to collect more ghost stories, as well as find someone who can confirm them.

The very next day, I went into the Special Collections of the current Goucher archives building, and inquired for more information on the topic. I was greeted by Ms. Deborah Harner, Goucher’s Public Services and Education Archivist, who welcomed me kindly, and listened to my request. Surprisingly, neither she nor anyone else seemed capable to help me any other way than to recommend speaking with Theatre Professor Michael Curry, who is in charge of the ghost tours around Goucher. However, he was on sabbatical at the time. So far, I had hit a dead end. I had read the one article I found on the web, and decided to contact Lilian Fernandez, a witness and current Residential Assistant who, along with her friend, claim to have heard a chair moving in their former room, with all the chairs being physically in place. But with no actual proof to begin with, all of this sounded like a bunch of mere campus legends, or even publicity stunts, and I began to worry that I had signed myself up for one big snooze fest. However. what happened next completely altered the course of my entire investigation.

That day I was in my computer programming class, and we were almost done with our work. Satisfied to have finished, I began chatting with a classmate about the premise of a television show that inspired my research. When I stated my purpose, I asked her if she had any paranormal experiences on campus, or heard of any strange occurrences. While her answer to my first question was negative, she supplied me with quite an interesting piece of information: She indicated that the new Goucher archive collection included a series of photographs with a “creepy doll” appearing on each of them through time. To me, that sounded like a moment from Stephen King’s *IT*. So, perhaps, the problem wasn’t in Julia Rogers after all. I had to understand where the mysterious doll came from, and whether it had anything to do with the campus’s paranormal history. The next day, I went to the archives again. And once more, none of the staff members seemed to have a clue about the mystery doll. That is, until we found the photographs my friend was referring to. The doll depicted turned out to be Sophie More, named in such a way due to the fact that she had been given as a gift from the sophomores to the freshmen in the year 1911, and symbolized the discipline that freshmen were supposed to have once entering college grounds. She was the mascot of the freshmen until 1931, and was featured during various on-campus events, such as sports games. So, it turns out there was a disturbing doll created to instill discipline. I had to know more. After requesting information about the doll, I was surprised to receive an email stating that the archives have an entire folder on the doll in their possession. But two long hours of reading and photographing the documents came down to nothing. Sophie More seemed like a regular doll used as a mascot for various events. What I did find, however, was a strange letter, from a certain “Jessie”, to a certain “Margaret”, which concerned the passing of Sophie More from the sophomore to the freshman class. What caught my interest in that letter is the following line:

*“I think this might have been done the same night as the rose petals softly fell-weren’t we sentimental. Anyway, I am glad you resurrected dear Sophie Moore. She is so pretty.”*

I was certain the two professors referred to resurrection as a metaphor for something else. But for what? Restoration? Keeping the tradition alive? Or, perhaps, they had become so attached to the doll, they treated it like a real person in some cute but also slightly disturbing way? Although the theory seemed like a stretch, everything had to be kept in mind. As of then, I was certain I was wasting my time. That is, until I met my first witness of paranormal activity.

Former Alumni House worker Hannah Dowling was the first of several people I managed to interview face-to-face, after a series of repeated dead ends. According to Ms. Dowling, a Goucher alumna herself, she had been working at Goucher for only 3 years, but had already noticed something very unusual about the campus. She was recommended to me as someone who knew about Goucher’s ghost stories, and in particular, Sophie More. I asked her about the latter, expecting her to laugh it off, saying it was a regular, creepy doll. What she told me instead, made my blood run cold: “…she comes alive”, she commented, “It’s very strange. I’ve never seen it. She stays in doll form. Like, she’s still a doll. She walks around…There’s footsteps, there’s shadows, but there’s nobody in the building.” Even though I was previously expecting such rumors to exist, the information I had collected in the archives pointed to nothing of that sort. When I asked Ms. Dowling where she had gotten the information from, she told me it was a legend passed on through generations, just like the object involved, and no one had personally told her about supernatural experiences with the doll. Since I had no witnesses, I had my explanation right there: Campus folklore created by fame seekers. But Ms. Dowling’s recounting of supernatural events had only just began. “She’s been in this building. In a glass case. And one day, she just vanished, and then she showed up again.”, she told me with an “I-can’t-explain-none-of-this” look on her face, “Like, this was recently, too… As in, like, I was here, so, in the past three years…She completely disappeared, and, we couldn’t find her, and we didn’t know where she was…and then she showed up again, and she was back in the room. Again.” Despite how mysterious all of this might have looked to a person experiencing it, to me it sounded like a misunderstanding, or at the very worst, an elaborate prank. But the bizarre thing was that, according to Ms. Dowling, Sophie More had been gone for a period of two entire years. Where did she go? Taken for restoration? Then why didn’t anyone on campus report it to the college administration? Used in a prank? What motive would one have to pull such a trick on the entire institution, especially for so long? Stolen and returned by a regretful thief? That seemed like a stretch, but still, had to be examined. I asked her whether any students were known to participate in pranks, especially ones that resembled supernatural phenomena. She replied that, in general, no such pranks were done. The only pranks she knew about were done during sports season, and “Human’s vs Zombies” week, they didn’t resemble anything like what she told me was happening. Suddenly, our conversation was interrupted by Ms. Deborah Harner, who came in claiming she knew the current location of the doll, which was great news, since now I would have a chance to examine it. Meanwhile, Ms. Dowling told me a second story. And this time, it was a personal experience.

About two years prior to our meeting, she had been attending a Theatre class in the Meyerhof building of the campus, specifically the Blackbox theatre, in 2016. The Blackbox theatre, also known as the Mildred Dunnock theatre, was named after stage and screen actress Mildred Dunnock (1901-1991). A famous and flamboyant woman during her lifetime, she is told to be pursuing that fame even in the afterlife. That day, everything indicated that this would be a regular day, as each student was performing their assigned task. What happened next, resembled the beginning of a horror film jump scare. “The lights just randomly went off”, Ms. Dowling says, “In the middle of class. And all of the electricity in the room stopped working, but the whole rest of the building still had electricity. It’s been told that she likes to mess with the electricity when she’s angry. And so, she stopped everything, and we couldn’t do anything-some of us were in the tech room, working with the mikes, and they completely stopped. And then, about ten minutes later, everything turned back on.” Finally! I had my first clue! But what was this? Short circuit? Burned wire? Another prank? Hallucinations were immediately excluded, as the entire class witnessed the occurrence along with Ms. Dowling. So was it really Millie, as students and faculty lovingly call the ghost, playing with the lights? There was only one way I could figure this out: I had to inspect the theatre. Ms. Dowling confessed to me that although she has always believed in the supernatural, the theatre incident hasn’t scared her, and the only reason why she does not visit the place is to not interrupt performances. In fact, her opinion is that Mildred Dunnock’s ghost just want to be noticed. “It might just be to get attention.”, she says, “Because she was an actress, so she liked to have attention, so…It’s never scary, though…it’s never anything that could harm anyone, it’s just almost attention seeking”. She told me of several more paranormal occurrences in the Blackbox theatre, reported by her friends. “Lights go out.”, “Doors shut…”, she commented, “A broom will drop… There is no wind”, “Stage equipment falls over”. These were things I could not explain yet, but they sure were useful pieces of information. After a great conversation, I thanked Ms. Dowling and headed to my dorm to analyze the evidence.

And so, what did I have so far? A doll created to instill discipline comes to life and disappears, and the ghost of an attention-seeking actress plays spooky games in a theatre. It felt like I was working on two cases at once. But I had one thought in mind: How can it all be explained rationally? What if the phenomena attributed to Dunnock’s ghost were indeed cries for attention, albeit not from the ghost, but from a completely real student, or even faculty member, who wants to create suspense? Perhaps ghost sightings were a way to boost the institution’s reputation. In that case, I would have to be cautious with how much of my intentions I reveal, and who I reveal them to. But it was time to start my actual investigation, either confirming, or debunking my theories.

The very next day, I met with Lynn Satterfield, Director of Alumni/ae Affairs, for a thorough examination of Sophie More. When I spoke to her, she seemed to not know that much about the doll’s supernatural side. She was extremely surprised when I informed her of its supposed wanderings, and said it always was a regular doll to her. But when I asked her if she knew anything about its mysterious disappearance in the time period 2017-2019, I received a very confusing answer: According to Ms. Satterfield, Sophie never disappeared. She claimed that, as far as she could recall, she was always in her glass case, and was never moved. I requested that she let see the doll with my own eyes, and perhaps examine it. When I entered the room and first saw Sophie, she seemed to glare at me with a wise, yet disturbing glare. I attempted to calm myself down, reminding myself that the creepiness was only added by my own imagination, which I had been previously feeding with campus legends. And yet, I found myself half-expecting Sophie to suddenly move her arm, blink, or even call out to me. Swallowing my fear, I started doing what I came there for. As I was not allowed to take the doll out of its glass case, all I could do was take pictures of her from all sides. During the process, I zoomed in on every little detail that could give me a clue as to why the doll was said to move around. When I was done with that, I decided to take a look at the books, of whom the room was full. I wanted to find any materials related to the supernatural or occult, that might have motivated a potential perpetrator into setting up a spooky puppet show. But all that seemed to be there were yearbooks, several science encyclopedias, and some finance books. The subsequent examination of the doll’s photos did not reveal any kinetic mechanisms to explain her relocation. But then again, no one had seen her actually walk, so a different explanation for the reported shadows and footsteps was still entirely possible. What the photos did reveal, however, was a lid on top of the glass case, which offered a possible way of making the doll “disappear”. While waiting for assistance in the Alumni/ae House, or when exiting the building, I carefully opened what seemed to be a storage area, and found that there was enough space to hide the doll there. Perhaps someone put Sophie More into storage, and everyone forgot about it? Or was it some sort of a personal publicity stunt? I just needed to figure out two things: Who might have had an advantage from this, and why Ms. Satterfield’s response on the topic differed from Ms. Dowling’s so much. But now, it was time to do some actual, scientific explanation.