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Marines are Ghosts

“Why did you let me die in the fire? I didn’t want to die.” We all periodically recall some devastating event in our past better left forgotten. Yet, a young boy out of Virginia Beach keeps holding onto these painful memories, memories of what may be the child’s past life. Andrew, the aforementioned 4-year-old boy, recently started telling his mother of disturbing memories no one his age should know. He became hysteric and spouted memories of his own death. The boy’s mother was completely skeptical until her son voiced too convincing of details to ignore: “I live at 860 Main Street in Sumter, Georgia.” A quick search initially gave no leads to the unfolding mystery… And then a flood of new knowledge was unleashed.

U.S Marine Sgt. Val Lewis died in a bombing explosion October 23rd, 1983 in Beirut, Lebanon, more than two decades before Andrew’s birth. The Marine’s place of residence was indeed the same 860 Main Street in Sumter, Georgia. The boy’s parents revealed photos of six other marines who died in the bombing. Andrew was convinced they were all his friends. Surely startled, Andrew’s family decided to go to Georgia and visit the gravesite where Sgt. Lewis was buried in an attempt to give Andrew closure and void him of these past memories. After laying flowers at Sgt. Lewis’s grave, the child ran to a different grave and proclaimed the veteran to be yet another friend, leaving the family with even more unanswered questions.

An innocent child may be possessed by the lurking spirit of a fallen warrior. Or the breaking story may just be some elaborate hoax for attention. The coincidences seem too many to take the story lightly, yet in this setting of the paranormal, every detail, regardless of size, requires intense scrutiny. Paranormal stories, especially when distributed by for-profit organizations, are always spiced-up in a way to grab our attention. In an ironical sense, the paranormal is a fascinating concept that is meant to captivate and “possess” an intended audience. Ghosts, demons, cryptids, and gods are the beings of legend or faith and for that, gain a following. We concern ourselves with stuff of legends as a way of enlightenment. Even though it may not be our main motive behind reading articles of the Loch Ness Monster, or watching documentaries about Bigfoot, each story has an underlying duty to define a culture. Underlying themes of paranormal stories considerably define our culture in their pursuit for molding the basis of human grasp on the afterlife and outlining an approximate account of national history.

Human understanding of the afterlife is shaped by our own philosophy of personal existence. In the case of Andrew’s story, the element within and concerning the afterlife is his spiritual possession. Andrew’s spirit has been held hostage by some entity. Common modern day belief can help us understand what is happening to the child. The legends responsible for possession are demon’s and ghosts. Respectively, as portrayed in common literature and media, one is generally known to be extremely vile to the living, while the other rather neutral. Through the knowledge of who is possessing Andrew (respected Marine Sgt. Val Lewis) and the spirit’s known non-harmful intentions, it is fair to acknowledge the spirit as a ghost rather than a demon.

Many theories explain how a ghost comes into being. Most popular are the commonly known and widely accepted theories of ghosts being souls stuck in purgatory, sentenced to a world between heaven and hell; another possibility suggests ghosts are souls in the next life where they merely view the physical world; yet, others simply suggest ghosts to be figments of the imagination. No one theory holds majority control over the others and people are free to choose what they believe. However, even with a multitude of theories answering the oh-so-important question, *“Where do we go next?*,” these stories completely illuminate our understanding of the afterlife as void. We don’t know anything. These stories create such a possibility of outcomes for the next step in our spiritual journey that we, humanity, can’t be certain of. Our understanding of the afterlife is defined by uncertainty from these ghosts.

Even after paranormal experimentation, our understanding is not even fractionally complete. One such test deals with near death experiences, the closest humanity can get to experiencing the other side and managing to come back. A near death experience is an unusual experience taking place on the brink of death and recounted by a person after recovery in the form of an out-of-body experience or a vision of a tunnel of light. The God Helmet was an experimental apparatus developed by neuroscientist Michael Persinger to study creativity and the effects of subtle stimulation of the temporal lobe. Most reports from Persinger's lab consist of people sensing spiritual presences; people often interpreted these to be that of angels, a deceased being known to the subject, or a group of beings of some form, including reports in which the participant has experienced what they perceive as God. Persinger reports that at least eighty percent of his participants experience a presence beside them in the room, whilst about one percent report an experience of God, and others report less evocative experiences of another consciousness or sentient being (Edmonds 2008). The temporal lobe is responsible for a plethora of feeling and stimulation could either make the subject perceive a presence when, in reality, there is nothing there, or enhance our senses to a point capable of perceiving the apparitions. There are the conflicting ideas surrounding the device. Are the feelings apparitions, or are they stimulation? Humanity just can’t be certain.

Our culture is defined by this uncertainty. The whole point of religious faith, something unarguably popular in culture, is the uncertainty. Each faith has its own uncertainty: Christians believe in Heaven and Hell, Buddhists believe in reincarnation, and Norse Pagans believe in Valhalla. Even atheists have faith in the afterlife as leaving existence (atheists, when deceased, believe they enter an emptiness. There is nothing, there is no one, much like there was before conception). Each faith carries on their tradition of answering, *“What happens next?”*, by repeatedly handing down stories. Angels, demons, monsters, and creatures are all paranormal legends that have been romanticized through countless generations. It’s safe to say they’ve assimilated into our understanding of, or lack thereof, the afterlife. Word of mouth is a powerful tool, and these stories being passed around have made the theories of the afterlife infiltrate our culture.

Paranormal stories subtly illustrate a general telling of local history. Andrew’s story serves a hidden purpose of sharing history. Anyone familiar with the story knows Andrew is possessed by a fallen warrior, and it’s no coincidence. The story hints at tensions in the Middle East and their horrifying effects on soldiers. The spirit of the Marine repeatedly says he didn’t want to die. He didn’t want to be burned alive. The story is a way to remind us that these soldiers are putting their lives in absolutely danger in order to secure America’s interests. War is happening in the Middle East and we can’t and shouldn’t ignore it.

These stories are just ways of telling history in imaginative ways. The history they tell is made into a variety of romantic shades or an emphasis on the imaginative. Stories start with inspiration. As best put by Richardson, “the restless history of the region created a sense of social and historical tenuousness that was crucial to producing ghosts” (Richardson 2003, 23). Each story needs its muse, and Andrew’s muse is Sgt. Val Lewis. The tensions in the Middle East, replete with acts of withdrawal from the modern world, ostracism, and violence, was apt for the development of the muse, as it left a considerable supply of potential ghosts. Each potential ghost is every fallen warrior killed in action. The story is then given elements of the imagination: possession, hauntings, and afterlife. Then the story is ready to be spread like gospel. Andrew’s story has been circulating by mass media sources (Fox and AOL) and has reached an ever-growing audience. These sources briefly mention the conflicts of the Middle East which the reader acknowledges as parts of history. These romantic stories remain through the ages and have infiltrated our culture.

Paranormal stories have an emphasis on imagination and emotion over reason, a belief in inspired genius, a sensitivity to the supernatural or transcendent within the physical, the natural world, an intense interest in the folk past, and a yearning for the marvelous and mysterious. These paranormal stories have entrenched themselves in our culture and have effectively shaped our understanding of the afterlife and local history. In the case of Andrew, there is more than just the physical world. The metaphysical world is existent and could surely be our next home. As for our past, these stories offer us insight. Some sort of event inspires the creation of these stories, but the event is hidden behind curtains of imagination; the curtains just need be pulled back and the truth revealed.

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