

# The Haunted House

Rebecca Segall

My father blames my mother for my love of horror movies, and this list of her most irrevocable parenting faults will always include the time she left me in front of *Friday the 13th*, unsupervised and eleven years old. It only occurred to me about a year ago that this may have been too young. It is certainly my most vivid memory of the last bedroom my parents shared— I watched mummified in their floral-patterned black duvet as the masked killer made the rounds at Camp Crystal Lake and my parents entertained the adults out on the porch. And when I confirmed the details of that day with my mother and asked what—if anything—she had been thinking, the delight of memories reclaimed streaked her voice: “Yeah, what a classic!”

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It's not until you hit a certain age that you can think back on the way you were nurtured and see that some things were kind of messed up. Before that, there's no basis for comparison; your parents can do no wrong. Scenes of moonlit massacre set to '70s synth refrains haunted the end of my prepubescent life, and sometimes I feel entitled to a little self-righteousness. But in trying to account for my fierce commitment to the genre, especially in the face of film snobbery, I can't pretend seeing *Friday the 13th* wasn't a revelation. No movie had ever made me feel my own heartbeat before. No montage had ever replayed in my mind for weeks. My mother's tastes had always been a mystery to me. But it turns out that letting yourself be swept away by the occasional solid horror flick can do some good psychological work—a sort of venting outlet in its own way, horror

can make confronting the true fears of the human pageant a little more fun.

My mother quickly fed me the horror canon and got me into the R-rated remake of *The Omen* in the sixth grade (I would need her to get me into R-rated movies at the Regal Cinema in the mall for the next five years). We walked out grumbling that it was a pale shadow of the original, but one particularly hellish jump-scare had me on edge for the next week. So I asked her if scary movie images ever lingered in her mind too. She told me the iconic *Friday* scene in which a teenager is impaled through the throat with an arrow is one of the scariest things she ever saw. "But you get over it kind of soon?" I asked. Mom checked under her bed for twenty-five years.

So sometimes I take my father's side. Sometimes it strikes me that the parent's job should be to help the child *not* lie awake at night fearing the outline of the sweater draped over the chair. At the same time, what most people miss about horror is its ironic power to comfort; I realize now how deeply reassuring it was for me to learn, as a preteen plagued by nightmares, that I was not alone in being a scaredy-cat. In fact, that a whole community out there shares the morbid imaginings I thought were my burden alone.

And then it strikes me that I share these with my mother too.

Before she left my father, the three of us lived in a quaint old house in New York's forested Hudson Valley, which I was told, naturally, was haunted. It bore all the tropes, attic floorboards that moaned on windy nights, faulty fuse boxes and the works. It also came with its own neighborhood legend of drama and death: the house's owner of a century past, now-forgotten silent film actor Holbrook Blinn, had taken a mistress from up the street—a dead end called Journey's End Road. He refused to leave his wife for her; rejected and devastated, the poor girl hanged herself in the churchyard across the street. Within a week, the philanderer fell off his horse and broke his back, and his forsaken mistress has stalked the halls of Blinn House ever since.

An early fan of Edgar Allan Poe, I felt my mind ranneth over with

the fantastical tragedy of our phantom lover. But though my father conveniently forgets that my exposure to Poe was his doing, there's no way he would have explained to me the concepts necessary to grasp Mistress Blinn's woeful tale. It's hard to distinguish between authentic early memories and those we retroactively construct for ourselves, and I don't want to falsify questionable parenting decisions on my mother's part. But it's a safe bet that mom would've been the one to divulge the nature of suicide, adultery, and the mechanics of death-by-back injury. (Actually, this last one I do remember—we were walking down Journey's End and she pointed out the spot in our backyard where the horse might've bucked.)

Outside of our ghost story retellings, though, Blinn House didn't know much mother-daughter playtime. The thing is that chronic mental illnesses, like the depression and bipolar disorder she'd later tell me runs in our family, can be hard to understand from the outside. While it's hard now to remember not understanding the reality of these disorders, what I do remember is watching my mother's highs and (mostly) lows play out before me as a mysterious and disorienting change, driven by some possessive and invisible force. Regular quality time with mom was usually out of the question

during her darker periods. But perhaps in her own morbid way, she saw our house's shred of local history as the closest she and I might come and jumped at it. Except with a heartbroken, suicidal ghost as our protagonist.

I reasoned early on that Mistress Blinn meant us no harm, or we certainly would



Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds.

have been done for by the time I was old enough to read *The Tell-Tale Heart*. I also divined that she drifted about in a white nightgown, and that the cobwebs in the unsweepable corners of the staircase were her footsteps. When my dog howled on dark and stormy nights, it was because only chocolate labs could discern her spectral form. My mother, though, would swear under oath that she glimpsed a white swish out of the corner of her eye while quilting alone one afternoon. This story overlooks several facts: that the windows in the old living room cast a notoriously sharp glare in the midday sun; that she, as I later learned, was totally drugged up on antidepressants at the time; and that the Mistress granted my mother's relationship with Blinn House the macabre romance she sought in everything.

There was one other purported sighting. At family gatherings, when my mother reminisces about the House, she loves to recount the time that I, too, experienced a brush with the other side. Allegedly, I refused to dress for preschool one morning, and stood transfixed at the window; I could only say over and over again, "There's a lady in the yard, there's a lady in the yard." (There was, of course, no such lady). The story sent me reeling back then, though regrettably it predates the age of memory-making. These days, with every telling, I'm more and more convinced that my communion with the dead was an invention of my mother's unconventional parenting style.

Still, growing up in a haunted house—totally cool. The chilling drama of our Mistress never got old; it might have in the hands of a storyteller less brimming with the siren song of the occult. But somehow, my mother knew this story could be our story. Despite a general distance between us, she knew our compulsion towards phantoms and demons was something we could share. Ghosts may be scary, but the often overlooked value of a common fear is the comfort of commonality itself.

Nightmares were always a problem for me, but fairly early on I stopped seeking refuge under the ugly duvet. If those angels of darkness could creep into my bedroom, not even child-logic held that they couldn't infiltrate my parents' too. In fact, since evil was

A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity



coming for me regardless, it was of some solace to know my dying act would divert them from my safely sleeping family, defending the household in my glorious sacrifice. But even if I kept it to myself when I woke up at the witching hour, and even if my mother was not around much back then, I can't help but think that somehow she sensed the dark imagery causing the circles under my eyes. And in the way that horror movies help sublimate unspoken fear by bringing it out into the open, perhaps she tried to hold me close to her in her own unseemly way by forcing the corpse-like Mistress upon little me.

My parents have since passed through various apartments in various zip codes, passing the ghost on to new tenants. To try to trace the expandings and contractings of my relationship with my mother would be like trying to count the times *Dracula* has been remade. But nothing ever really changes. So now when I visit mom at her new house in L.A. and we open up the Word document with our running list of horror movies, she wants to get high. Like, all the time.

I put my foot down and insist that if we light up now, *The Conjuring* will be just too scary. In some ways, it has always been my job to watch out for the team. My mom would convene us around some black-magic meeting point, and I would make sure it doesn't get too scary. It's hard to remember if or how the weed has affected this. Honestly, hanging out with her in L.A. is always kind of a blur.



But I do posit a sort of counter-offer. If we wait until the end of whichever Hollywood gorefest we finally choose—until we are half-submerged in the pleather couch, nail marks on our arms from terror-clutching one another, drying off from the cathartic sweat that only a good exorcism can provoke—and *then* get stoned, it will be just what we need. I note inwardly that horror-then-smoking will maximize our time together before her boyfriend comes to pick us up. But I keep this to myself.

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I think a buddy is essential for the serious horror fan. It's a polarizing genre; there are two types of people and only scattered exceptions. You have your guys who really get off on gnawing off their fingernails while probing the depths of fear, and your guys who once saw *The Silence of the Lambs* and won't touch the stuff again. But even if you really derive pleasure from opening your heart to the subconscious realm of nightmare, it's just too scary to go it alone. It also loses much of the appeal.

I for one am a screamer, gasper, and hand-wringer, and it's nice to know someone can keep me company in that. Last year I saw a horror movie in theatres on my own for the first time and most likely the last; finding myself alone in a foreign city, and not having seen my parents in months, I sought the promise of familial nostalgia in a matinee of *Insidious Chapter 3*. The overwrought sequel to Hollywood horror master James Wan's franchise did indeed give me my money's worth as I reflexively sank into



Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere.

the charmingly predictable while still adrenaline-soaked terrors of demonic house-haunting. As others seek the familiar comfort of their favorite sitcom characters, we Wan-devotees long for those physiologically affective jump scares and eerie choral scores. But alone in my row, wrist-deep in an oversized popcorn with no one to share it with, I'd never felt less stranded. This may be hard to believe without feeling it for yourself, but sharing vulnerabilities, even if they are towards CGI-centric talking dolls (or perhaps especially if), has its own emotional utility. Cold-sweating alone each time the doll appears on screen seems to miss the point.

So it does sting me a bit that my mother doesn't have anyone to hold her hand out in California. Her boyfriend is stubbornly of that anti-Hannibal Lecter second type. Her options are to wait for my triennial visits, or to venture forth without a safety net.

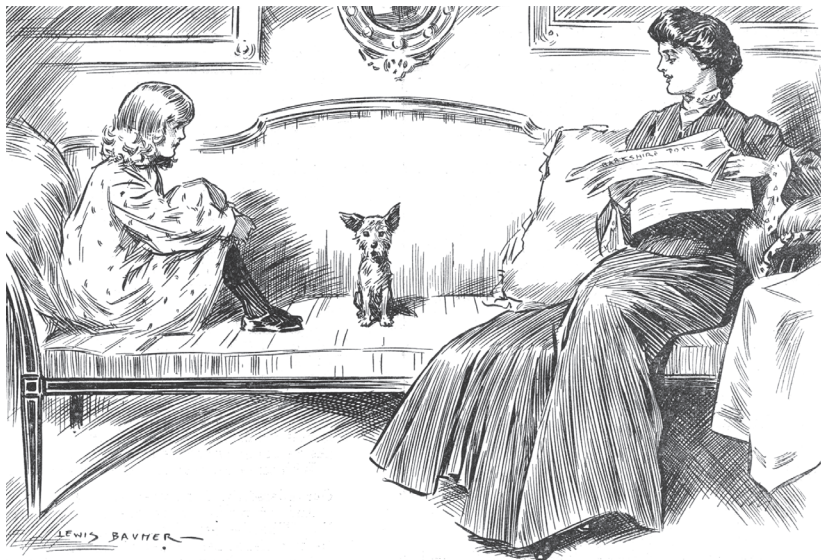
She called me up one day. She's home alone, she's bored, she's petting her cat, and she's in the mood to watch a good horror movie—do I have any recommendations? I'd just seen *Session 9*, a box office disaster but with some elegant moments of gripping psychological terror. The movie follows a maintenance crew clearing asbestos out of an abandoned insane asylum when things inevitably take a turn for the even spookier. The climax involves a highly disturbing lobotomy situation that I watched through the gaps between my fingers. Like the ever popular zombie, an old-fashioned lobotomy patient hits a sweet spot for most people between the abstract uncanny and visceral cringe-worthiness. Unlike the zombie, though, the lobotomy gets mileage out of realism: we know it happened in this world, to vulnerable people, and so is of an infinitely more sympathetic brand of horror. For me, it taps into a deep personal unease over mental health and madness. So I figured mom would have a good time with it.

A month or so later, I hit a sort of emotional low. The jury's not out yet on how beholden anxiety-depression is to genetics, but either way, it's a mother-daughter thing. Despite the hard lines I'd like to draw between us, at a certain level my mother and I are made of the same stuff. We share diagnoses, and sometimes prescription meds if one of us accidentally runs out. So when I dip into the blues,

I sometimes, incredibly, find myself calling her up. It was winter; I was pacing in the snow as she cooed gently that everything gets better, that I will be okay. And then her show-stopping insight: “Just think—if you’d been born a few decades earlier, they might have given you a lobotomy!”

I know these were her words because, though horrified tears were freezing on my cheeks, I scrambled for a pen and transcribed. Sometimes I believe I am forever building up a file against her. If I ever need to make a case against some irresponsible guardianship, not to mention her gift for saying the most horrifying thing at the most critical moment, I’ll have the documents to back me up. For days I saw myself with half a brain, drooling in an ill-fitting 1950s hospital gown under fluorescent light. But to be fair, I did laugh—*really* laugh—for the first time in days. This was, after all, *vintage* mom.

She must have known how this would sound to my sensitive ears—we’d talked at length about *Session 9*’s ghost-electroshock terror. Maybe she thought I’d take comfort knowing psychiatric treatment is making leaps and bounds. But she must also know



I used to feel that if any of the other things looked too fierce I could always hop into that chair and be safe.

we share that deliciously sick capacity for horror to distract, excite, inspire, and finally shock into laughter. It just seems like only mom would take advantage of this in consoling a depressed child.

The next time our conversation turned to our inevitable melancholy, I told her, in the tone I try to place somewhere between light-hearted jibes and sincere accusation, that, “You know, that lobotomy comment really didn’t help much.” That same singsong laughter that seized her when I’d brought up *Friday the 13th* was there again. “Look,” she said, “if we can’t see the humor in these things, I don’t know where we’ll be.”

It seems to be common knowledge that humor is a decent strategy for coping with the confounding and seemingly insurmountable perils of life. Perhaps the secret knowledge my mother and I share is that they can be mastered through fear as well. You relive and reenact your worst nightmares when you watch them on screen, but you can kind of sit back and enjoy this time around.

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I chalk up the most recent, rawest development between us to the rise of a subgenre I like to call “stressed-out single mother horror.” Granted, obsessive, dangerous mothers have been big since the horror renaissance of the ’70s. Jason’s vengeful mom is actually the one behind the hockey mask in *Friday*, and the late Mrs. Bates is arguably the agent of violence in the genre-setting *Psycho*, though channeled through her sociopathic son Norman. Anyone who’s seen *Carrie* will tell you it’s the ruthless, religious fanatic mother who pushed her telekinetic teen to the satanic prom night bloodbath.

But a new maternal demonic force shines in some of the more impressive scary movies of late, the best example being last year’s Australian masterpiece *The Babadook*. The film weaves nighttime fear of the supernatural with emotional terror, tracing the story of a stressed-out single mother and her son, who fears the titular monster. Through art film-level cinematography and pacing which may just win over the genre opponent, it is the mother who turns out to drive the Babadook’s haunting of their house; the broken family is

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restored only when they finally acknowledge their suppressed grief over the long-dead father.

My mom and I have now watched *The Babadook* three times together, and once apart. It's become one of our standards. We can gush for hours about the sublime editing and storytelling moments that gave us the chills. And in the end, this seems to suffice. The emotional pangs and twisted family dynamics that so resonate with us in the movie can go comfortably unspoken. We watch a protagonist on the edge of a nervous breakdown be consumed by unseeable mania, tear her domestic life apart at the seams, then purge her rage through the power of a mother's love; then we can pretty much call it a day.

They don't churn out smart psychological horror as much as one might hope, so I was pretty excited to see Austria's newest cerebral-torture flick *Don't Tell Mommy*. The movie follows a household's descent into madness when a mother comes home from facial reconstructive surgery and her sons fear she is not who she seems to be. Not a perfect film but one I would recommend to the brave of heart. When I confessed to my mother on the phone that I'd seen it without her, I concluded my in-depth review with a plucky "You'll like it—it's about a stressed-out single mother!"

Even without voicing the unvoiceable "—like you" at the end, I realize this joke might not go over as such in most families. But it is our biggest family inside joke in the moments where we once-estranged two most closely resemble a family. Household instability; dark threats invisible to others; possession by forces outside of one's control—these are basically what every horror movie is about. It might be nice to hear my mother address these horrors out loud, apologize for past hurts and for haunting our house, and heal our shared possessive illness. But it may also be enough just to be with her and let someone else in the room do the addressing for us. If that person is a horrified babysitter on screen, covered in red paint and hiding in the closet, I don't really see what's wrong with that. The trauma is real enough, so the faker the blood the better, actually. Before we inevitably cry together over the universal dread of never overcoming it all, I'm hoping we can scream a bit too.