



Stags' Leap

A GHOST AND A MUMMY

One's first impression of a place is what lingers later, the first summer in a new home, especially at fourteen, moving from urban Los Angeles to semi-rural Napa. Lissa Doumani remembers five guinea hens to keep the rattlers away, the fascination of secret rooms, a cupboard within a closet, the bomb shelter. There was still a post office out here, and the manor house had no electricity. No one had lived in it for some time; it was boarded up.

A goat jumped through the window of a cabin that's no longer there (soak the goat in milk, she tells us, her story unfolding in recipes). The ghost? Definitely a boy, fourteen or fifteen years old at the most. One night, shortly after her parents had bought the property in 1970, she went out with a couple of friends, children of a family who had come to the estate to pick grapes. The three found a way into the manor house through the basement and a trap door.

As they came around the passageway, he was standing in front of them in the moonlight, blocking their way forward. All three saw him. Her memory is precise. He was wearing a striped dress shirt in earth tones: gold, green, brown, black, with some stripes a different width than the others. The three friends ran back out the way they came, deliciously frightened, bonded forever. It seemed to her that his clothes were of a different era. She heard a story of a young man who stayed here when Stags' Leap was a resort, convalescing. Was it consumption? a rare cancer? Something was wrong with his eye.

Her father, Carl, had the manor house restored and eventually his family moved in. Lissa remembers her grandmother getting up at night to go to the bathroom, turning on the upstairs hall light as she went. The boy was mischievous; he would turn the light off when she got to about the middle of the passageway, then turn it back on. He



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turned the bathroom faucet on and off while she was on the toilet. Lissa would hear her grandmother softly scolding the ghost, “Cut that out, now. That’s enough.”

It was 1941, during the time when the estate was nearing the end of its resort period, that a twenty-two year old Cuban girl named Amparo met a dashing American named Fred Grange in Cuba. He was on vacation and also incidentally running a gambling casino, or perhaps, another story goes, he was looking for property on which to grow rice. In any case, he fell in love and asked her to marry.

She left Cuba with him and went out to California, to the estate where he had grown up. Fred’s parents, Clarence and Frances Grange, had bought the estate from the Chases, the original owners, around 1906, and it had been Fred’s home since he was three years old. Amparo wasn’t sure she liked that her mother-in-law had a habit of sitting on the edge of the bathtub while Fred took his baths, talking business with her son. Frances was a suffragist, something Amparo had never encountered before.

Another thing was that mummy Frances brought back from a trip to Egypt, after tipping a tour guide. It was brought out at parties in the Manor House as a curiosity, and it was around for many years, before everyone lost interest in it, or perhaps it was Amparo who took the first opportunity to hide the thing away. It gave her the creeps. By the time they moved to Marin County in the 50s, it was well forgotten, in the top of some closet in the Carriage House.

Several years later, they got a call from the Napa Sheriff’s Department asking if they knew anything about a dismembered body that had been found in a closet. “Human Remains found at Stags’ Leap!” read the headlines in the San Francisco Chronicle.

As head of marketing, Bill Piersol had his original office in the manor house for his first year, 1989, after the Doumani family had moved out. He took the gentlemen’s



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smoking room, off the side of the dining room next to the kitchen, with its antique rolltop desk, and for a whole year it was just him and the ghost. He was sitting there one day when an acorn dropped in his lap. Getting up on a chair, he scrutinized the ceiling and could find no nook or cranny through which a squirrel might have pushed an object of that size.

A couple of months later, something hit his foot under the desk, and when he got down to take a look: another acorn. He accused the property manager of sabotaging the desk, which was hotly denied. The third time, he simply stood up to walk out and the oak nut dropped right in front of him. He kept those three acorns in his desk drawer for over ten years before bequeathing them to the marketing department when his life moved him on to other things.

These stories, and variations on them, can be heard around the fireplace late at night, or down in the billiards room, after a harvest dinner, when the owls are out doing their calisthenics. Canary Cottage, sure. There's a reason it was built with two entrances. Those wives of the naval officers on Mare Island who stayed here during World War II? It's said that not all of them were exactly wives. One of them must have met a tragic end, perhaps a broken heart, perhaps something darker. It was a dark time.

What is interesting about a place that is storied, that is haunted, is not so much the legality of the claims, but the differing responses of the living, what version of the story will come out on a particular night, and the skepticism, the pragmatic belief, or the faith with which it is told or received. Many are confident. Yes, it's definitely a boy, fourteen or fifteen years old. It's obviously a woman; she loves parties; she seems wistful now that the stately manor house does not have a family living in it.

Some have seen her. Robin Gonçalves was a skeptic until she and her husband stayed in the Bees' Bedroom of the manor house after attending a golf tournament at



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Silverado. He was shaving so she walked out into the hallway to use the other bathroom. Where the hallway jogs left, she met a woman who had just walked out of the wall and proceeded to pass right in front of her. Robin ran back to the bedroom, jumped under the covers and hid. She was frightened, but didn't feel threatened. Now when she goes back to the manor house, she speaks to the lady of the manor. She remembers her vision of a young, lovely woman, dressed in clothes from the 1980s. Either this particular ghost is a recent development, or she is very fashion conscious and periodically updates her wardrobe.

After having spent the night in the Ghost's Bedroom, fresh from sleep, Robert Brittan walked out into the upstairs hallway and saw her in the bright morning air. Kathy Nelson, eminence of all things administrative for winery and estate, feels sure there is a spirit here, and senses that she's very kind. Her description is familiar, as if she were describing a long-lost sister, or an old friend. Perhaps she has passed her own self coming down the stairs from out of the future, and this place is a leak in history that works in both directions, a particularly California variation on the time warp, an epiphenomenon of the geological restlessness of the Vaca range.

Some have peripheral evidence and remain benevolent skeptics, like Bill Piersol with his three acorns, deciding at times that it was probably just fairies. Barbara Jura, Hospitality Coordinator, is comforted by the sensation of being protected, looked after, when she's in the manor house. Most everyone in their own way seems content to let the spirits carry on with as much right to inhabit this slice of geological time as the coyotes and wild turkeys, the viticultural chemist, the eternal and evolving fragrance of fermenting juices that hovers at the entrance of the historic winery building.



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A whistle in the clear morning air of August, barely a week before harvest. Looking up, the whistling comes from half a mile away, in the bowl of the vineyard. Arnulfo and his crew checking véraison.

Just last year during harvest, Mario and Helen in the kitchen, preparing for the monthly barbeque. It is around 10:30 in the morning. The door between the kitchen and the dining room opens and shuts. And then, says Helen, grimacing, the *refrigerator* door opens and shuts. Mario says, "let's get out of here." His eyes go wide and he laughs. This isn't a malevolent ghost, but it still raises the hair on your neck.

His dog, Brava, will sometimes stand and stare pointedly into what looks like empty space, watching something that Mario can't see. Helen calls to him and he'll act a little deaf. Finally, he will direct his worried attention to her briefly, before turning back to stare again at that spot, that silhouette cast by a dust mote, in midair.

Not everyone who comes here senses an emotional disturbance or anything unusual about the electrical charge in the air. Many, in fact, come away thinking of the estate as standard: a gracious and well preserved historical example of another era, a place that feels as easy as water coming off a fountain.

But it takes a thief to make wine, and one must always leave enough barrel evaporation for the angels, and when your hair stands on end you'll know you're not in the wine cellar anymore. You're probably in the drawing room or somewhere on the stairs to the second floor, perhaps pausing at the leaded glass window to look out over the Bocce court. Of course, if you want to encourage such things, you can make your way to the Power Spot, overlooking the sweep of vineyards at dusk, where a bench has been placed as an overlook, around a gnarled hollow oak.



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Allow the day to sift off of your shoulders, along your back and down to that place where we lost our tails so many years ago. We are all dying after all, and evolving, and that is a great mystery. Then you might feel her. Close your eyes. They could be her eyes. The top of your spine becomes her spine, becomes the moment after twilight, and darkens, and narrows. Then, stars along the elbow, which elongate and open briefly, a hole in time, a flutter of fate.

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Written for Stags' Leap Winery

Fall 2001 Newsletter, Volume One, Number Two, October 2001

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