



Hauntings

In the story "Lui?" by Guy de Maupassant, a man feeling restless, lonely, sad, goes out to wander the rainy streets of Paris alone. He returns to his room late at night. Standing on the threshold of his flat, he sees a man sitting in the armchair in front of the fireplace in the near-dark. Thinking it's possibly a friend come to call, he enters his flat and approaches the figure, but the chair is empty—he is alone. Terrified, the man barricades himself in his bed like a child. For weeks afterwards, he paces about his flat, convinced and petrified the figure will return. He loses sleep. His mind starts to unravel. To put a stop to the madness, he decides to get married to the first person he finds. Not out of love, but simply to not be alone ever again with the figure, who he never sees again.

When I first read this story a few years ago, I found it a bit ridiculous. The man's behavior was overtly childish—hiding in bed, fearing the dark, seeking companionship more out of a sense of a need to be looked after than out of any sort of emotional connection. It wasn't even a proper ghost, I thought to myself, just a figment of the man's imagination, a sort of projected doppelganger perhaps. Despite his terror, he never sees the figure again—perhaps it was just a trick of the light. While I am usually respectful of ghost stories, this one simply seemed laughable to me. But then, in the midst of the recent pandemic, I began to spend all of my time alone as well, and suddenly the meaning of the story fell into place.

At first, I chalked it up to simply smoking too much weed. I thought it was making me paranoid. At the outset of confinement, I had fallen off the wagon, as it were, and I started buying massive quantities of the stuff, to kill the boredom, to stave off the anxiety of the situation.

One of the reasons I have always loved my bedsit is that it feels secure. There is no way to hide under the bed, there are no nooks or crannies anyone could lurk in. The only window, which takes up a whole wall, is four stories up and impossible to open from the outside. I sensibly locked the deadbolt every evening. An impenetrable, cozy little fortress.

But, nevertheless, I began to have a fear that there was someone in the flat with me. It was worst in the bathroom. I would be in the shower, or closing my eyes to wash my face, and I would have the irrepressible sense that there was someone standing just behind me, towering over me, quite near. A man, I thought. I would open my eyes as quickly as I could, ignoring the soap stinging them, and whirl around, challenging whoever was there to try and fuck with me. But, of course, there was no one.



THE DEAD RETURN, FOR I SAW HIM!

It happened at night, as well. I would lie awake, wondering if the Man was there in the flat. Wondering if he would come for me. I would turn on the light and search the two small closets that no one, save perhaps a small child, could hide in. I would check the lock on the front door. Of course, it was bolted. But the feeling would linger, nonetheless. I had become just as childish and foolish as the narrator I once scorned in Maupassant's story. I began to wonder if I, too, should just marry the first person to come along, plague risks be damned.

I decided the paranoia was too much, and besides, the habit was too costly. I quit smoking weed (again), cold turkey. As anyone who has ever stopped smoking copious amounts of weed will know, when you do, your dreams (or nightmares) come flooding back. For weeks on end, I would wake up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat, clawing at the blankets, trying to fight back whatever phantom had been after me. It felt like there was no escape from this Man, awake or asleep.

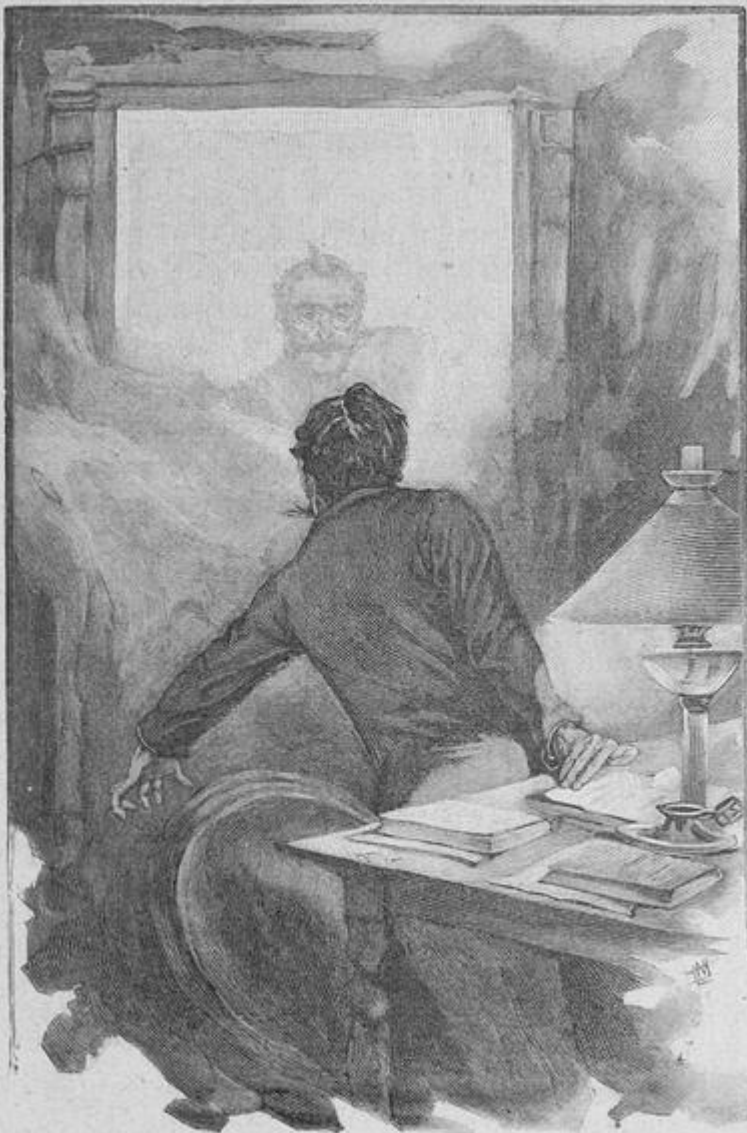
Finally, after weeks, the THC cleared my system. I began sleeping through the night again, with relatively few nightmares. I thought perhaps the worst of it was over. I was able to secure a job that allowed me to go out into the world two days a week, which took an edge off of some of the copious amounts of time I was spending alone, in my flat. But it wasn't enough—the Man still lingered on the edges of my imagination. I would bend down to the sink, cover my face with water, eyes closed, soap slippery, and then foamed on my fingertips and across the bridge of my nose, but there was no relief in it. I closed my eyes and I felt as if I could sense him there, just behind me. I tried to ignore him, but washed my face too quickly anyway.

I am far from the only person to be haunted by this thing, this specter, this sensation. My grandfather, who has a wry sense of humor and penchant for reciting ditties, would tease me from a young age:

Yesterday, upon the stair,
I met a man who wasn't there.
He wasn't there again today.
Oh how I wish he'd go away.

I loved this poem as a child. I thought it was delightful, in a way, the way the man was both there and not-there at the same time. I would think about him often, lounging, or not-lounging on the stairs. I would wonder what he did all day, and why he was just sitting there, on the staircase. What was his story, I wondered?

It wasn't until now that I ever thought about the other person in the poem—the speaker, their pleading, desperate tone of voice. Their bewilderment and incomprehension at being haunted by this strange, immovable, silent man. The ghost in the poem is much like the man in Maupassant's narrator's flat (or mine, for that matter)—they don't actually *do* anything to us. They are silent, stoic even. They do not interfere with us or attack us. Their mere presence—and our own terror—is enough to drive us a bit mad.



The Victorians, of course, were absolutely captivated by the way that ghosts, even benign ones, can drive us to madness. This poem, so playfully recited by my grandfather, is called “Antigonish”. It was written in 1899 by William Hughes Mearns and is thought to be about the Caledonia Mills in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. The property was the setting for a number of unusual fires, believed at the time to be caused by poltergeists. In 1922, a researcher, one Walter Franklin Prince, concluded that a resident of the farm, a young girl named Mary-Ellen, had set the fires herself while in an “altered state of consciousness,” according to a report on the event he gave to the *New York Times*. Prince—and the general public—certainly felt his findings were the last view on the matter, but I’m not so sure. Even if Mary-Ellen set the fires herself, and it wasn’t the ghost, who is to say that the ghost didn’t drive her to do it?

A favorite text of mine when I was about the same age Mary-ellen was when she set about starting fires on her parents' farm was a massive red cloth-bound volume printed on thin, almost transparent paper entitled *Great Tales of Terror and the Super-Natural*. One of these stories was, of course, "The Turn of the Screw" by Henry James. What captivates most about the story is the way that the reader is never sure, exactly, whether the narrator, the governess, is truly seeing ghosts or simply losing her mind. In the end, she takes her own life—or is killed?—driven to it by these haunting creatures.

In the recent television adaptation of this Henry James story, *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, it is similarly unclear whether the governess (in this telling, an au pair) takes her own life due to a lingering depression or whether she is driven to madness by the ghost of the Lady of the Lake. She first sees the Lady at Bly Manor in a terrifying moment when the Lady tries to drown her, a ghost sick with grief and revenge. Years after the au pair escapes from the property, she begins to see this figure once again, in the kitchen sink, in the bathtub, through windows. And like the man on the stairs, or the man in my flat, the Lady of the Lake does not attack the au pair in any material fashion. The figure does not attempt to make contact, to grab the au pair by the throat, pull her down into the water's depths. Her mere appearance is enough to drive the woman to jump into the lake herself.

I found the Maupassant story "Lui?" when doing research on the writer Kate Chopin's translations of his tales. Chopin was an avid reader of Maupassant, having read nearly everything he had ever written that she could get her hands on. But she only translated a small selection of his stories, the ones—I think—that spoke to the themes she was most drawn to: madness, sexual perversion, desire, loss. Chopin experienced no small amount of grief herself. Her beloved husband died of scarlet fever at a young age, which was in part what drove her to writing and translating to earn a living in the first place. And so, one has to wonder, if she didn't sense a mournful, spectral presence in her own life, though she never herself wrote quite so directly about ghosts.

While an admittedly mediocre translator, her translation of one passage of the tale seems particularly apt:

Yet what means this persistence—this obsession? Its feet were quite near the fire! It haunts me! This is senseless, but so it is. Who? It? I know that it does not exist—it is nothing. It exists only in my apprehension—in my dread—in my anguish! Enough of this.

Chopin does something unusual here, and throughout, in her translation of this tale. In the original French, the third and fourth lines read, "Il me hante ... Qui, Il?" Typically, this would be rendered as "He haunts me ... Who, him?" But Chopin has chosen to depersonify the haunting figure. It's as if she wants to underscore the eerie Otherness of the man. Or, perhaps she couldn't bring herself to render the being as human, as if doing so would make it too real, as if doing so would invite a ghost to take up residence in her St. Louis home, where she lived alone.

Perhaps appropriately, the origin of the word *haunt* has been lost to time. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, which tends to typically evince a slight whiff of disapproval of the French dictionaries, itself points to the *Littre* entry on *hanter*, which in turn shrugs and suggests perhaps the word is a homonym for *entrer*, to enter. While we are thinking about homonyms, it would seem to me to be amiss not to note the very close, and also of unknown origin, *honte*, meaning "shame." The original sense of *haunt*, in English at least, is thought to be "to practice habitually, familiarly, or frequently." By the 16th century, the verb had become part of figurative language, to be visited by "unseen or immaterial visitants" – whether ghosts, notions, or critically, disease.

And so, in this word, *haunt*, we have a constellation of notions that seem to point to a common understanding of the unseen Man lurking just behind me. It is something that has entered and keeps coming back. It is unseen, figurative, sculking just out of reach of the concrete. And, perhaps, it is figurative of illness, whether of the plague that rages outside which I seek to escape from, or a mental illness of the sort alluded to by James and Maupassant, two writers who knew not a little about this kind of sickness. These haunting figures may be immaterial, or nearly so, but they are also not unreal. They are the fractals of life that come to us from the corner of our mind, seen out of the corner of our eye, or perhaps not at all. They are of microparticles, dust, shadow, formlessness. They come back, again and again.

There is no satisfying ending to tie up the questions you may still have about the Man in my apartment. I can report to you, with some of the same distress of our various narrators, that I felt him again today, while I was in the bath, attempting to cleanse myself of the virus that spreads unabated just beyond my front door. There is nothing for it, I've decided, but to make my peace with him. Perhaps he will prove a gentle kind of madness in the end, the kind that won't drag me to the bottom of the lake.

-- Min, Paris, October 30, 2021

First two images from Kate Chopin's translation of "Suicide" by Guy de Maupassant, published in the St. Louis *Republic*, June 5, 1898

Third image by Georges Lemoines, published in *Le Horla* by Guy de Maupassant, 1910