

A Ghost of the Olfactory

by strannikov

While you might expect that such a matter could be resolved within a decade or two, disputes continue to this day in Middletonburg about whether ghosts reside where the living live or vice versa.

In most towns most ghosts reside where the living live and rely on the living's continued habitation for their spectral existence. People living in small towns thus know the difference between their town and its cemeteries: neither the quick nor the dead haunt the graveyards and cemeteries, and the ghosts for their part seem to prefer lurking in the inhabited homes and in the minds and memories of nearby residents.

This helps explain why it often occurs in small towns that established residents will relocate at least once in their brief lives, often as far across town as possible, to the point of building or moving to a new residence a mile or so outside of town. While anyone could concede the utility in vacating a haunted residence, merely moving next door or down the street seems never to suffice: some discernible but uncertain distance permitting a certain perspective is required to make the move worth the effort, since so often it is the only or final such relocation to be made prior to residents' own final transplantation to a local cemetery (the contemporary fashion of cremation still has not arrived in Middletonburg).

Sometimes, though, a ghost is inspired to haunt a vacant dwelling, or maybe it's accurate to say "to haunt a vacant dwelling no one has any interest in inhabiting". The case of Miss Miriam from just a few years back comes to mind.

Middletonburg's town librarian some years ago was Miss Miriam Lowell, who'd wound up living alone in the old Lowell home she'd inherited once her mother died. This was the house she herself

was found in barely eight years later, face down atop the second-floor landing.

Miss Miriam was discovered one day in late May, when temperature and humidity were already vying for first place, clad in a long velvet dress, the fabric almost as heavy and stiff as oilskin, the color of an overripe plum or a quite-ripe eggplant. Her close-cropped auburn head was almost wedged into the corner of the pine plank landing, swollen from days of inattention, her right upper lip in death looking almost pared away but in fact simply lifted and pushed up into her cheek by her apparent fall, it had not in fact been torn off. What had been her thin cheek bulged with an unsightly bruise, revealing not so much a death grimace but a frozen mouth full of forever lifeless grey teeth.

The fragrance of sour death hung about her on the landing and had accumulated for the unnumbered days she had lain there undiscovered, an odor you might encounter on a very still afternoon in a hot secluded clearing a few days after a remote and fierce battle. Her mailman, Toby Swann, had tried to deliver a Noritake Easter egg she'd ordered weeks earlier for three days in a row before forcing his way in, he'd spied her car finally inside the detached garage (Lorna Pembroke, assistant librarian, had supposed her to be attending a state library conference scheduled that week, just prior to taking a week's vacation).

Volunteer emergency responders were charged with retrieving Miss Miriam from the landing. The four men attempted delicacy and courtesy, since in her day she had been attractive enough, although distinctly peculiar (a Lowell family trait) and unhelpfully forbidding for a librarian. Ever since her mother's death, she had grown more and more remote from this town her mother had lived and died in, more and more aloof from the town she herself had been born in, grown up in, and died in. Joe Hancock and Herb Farrow had to push and jostle then drag Miss Miriam by her swollen ankles to pry her face loose from the corner she'd fallen hard into, then had to turn over her inert malodorous form, rough treatment they would never have accorded her in life (again, this

was late May, just after Memorial Day weekend that year, and the large frame house had never benefitted from central air conditioning: to everyone's relief, no flies appeared until after she'd been found). Rolling her onto her back, her face was seen mottled with the bruise and the other discolorations of death, and her mangled smile was no welcome sight as they wrenched her onto the stretcher that Smiley Holt and Grant Penrose tried to help guide her onto. Her dead weight settled into the supple canvas before they could drop her with even less ceremony. (The four men each confessed while her post-mortem was underway how unwelcome a task they'd found turning and lifting her: the death aroma clung to her more tightly than the sturdy dress she inevitably filled in on those warm days she had lain alone.)

Editor at the time of The Middletonburg Herald, I didn't get to the Lowell house until an hour or so after she'd been taken off. The dense hanging odor had not left the stairway and already seemed as permanent a feature of the pine landing as the wood's grain, the doors downstairs had all been opened and all the windows upstairs had been raised to no avail that warm and still day in late May. Two box fans were turned on, neighbors brought over two more and then another two. A dark stain could be seen to infect the wood hours after her removal.

Nothing more vicious than a heart attack had taken Miss Miriam, the coroner reported the morning before the funeral two days later, a congenital defect never diagnosed, striking her at age forty-two. The mortician felt robbed, but Lorna and the Library Board insisted on a closed-casket ceremony. Miss Miriam had never married and so was buried in Pine Ridge Cemetery in the plot next to her mother (Mr. Lowell, her father, had disappeared when the troop ship bringing him home from Okinawa sank in a storm between Hawaii and California). The charm of her former looks and the memory of her curt laugh could be recalled only by the scarce handful who'd known her from childhood: the fierce haughtiness and the disconcerting, unyielding stares she had taken to accosting

library patrons and townspeople with ever after her mother's death would not soon be forgotten, however.

The acute fragrance of her death could not be forgotten, either, as it was just as strong three months after her death as it had been on the day of her funeral. The odor of death lingered into autumn and winter months and seemed to haunt the fine old house, the only one in Middletonburg with Italianate pretensions, as suggested by the gleaming white balustraded porches on both floors and a few Palladian windows on the ground floor. Miss Miriam had died without heirs, no aunts or uncles or cousins, no nieces or nephews, and without a will. The only enduring thing she left behind was the stark fragrance of death, that and what would have been a lovely old house stuffed with decades worth of the Lowells' collected furnishings, antiques, and bric-a-brac.

The house sat there and remained sitting in just that condition for the years following Miss Miriam's death: it was torn down this past week, I learned just today (I now edit The Effingham Times), six years after Miss Miriam vacated the premises. Not the antique furnishings from downstairs, nor the heirloom silverware and crystal, nor the porcelain collections nor the breakfronts housing them, could be salvaged from the odor that, descending from the second-floor landing, had never left.

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