

The Family

“They were dressed in their Sunday best, staring at me”

Little girls love a sleepover. It’s so much fun to swap secrets, giggle about the cutest boy in class, give the Barbies an extreme makeover. It’s also a rite of passage, proof that you’re growing up, a way to show mum and dad that you can sleep away from your bed and blankie, can face alone those fears that creep into your room, cloaked in moonlight. Once the muffled giggling and whispering fades out, when eyelids begin to droop, lashes quivering over peachy, pillow-warm cheeks, then little girls sleep like the dead. Not with them, usually. But not all sleepovers are the same.

Amy Shepherd loved hanging out with the girl across the road. Her friend, Martha, had four brothers, and Amy, being much younger than her two half-siblings, was effectively an only child. Growing up together in rural Wellington, between Dubbo and Orange in western NSW, the third graders zigzagged between each other’s homes, playing tips, building cubby houses and enjoying the comfortable routine of life in a typical Australian country town.

One autumn evening in 1993, when Amy was seven, she toted her nightie to her friend’s house. It wasn’t her first time sleeping over. Martha’s place was practically a second home, but that didn’t diminish her excitement. Before bed, there was time for a game of hide-and-seek, the girls’ laughter filling forgotten corners of the 1960s weatherboard house. Then they played dolls and brushed their teeth. When it was finally time for lights out, Amy fell into a peaceful sleep, nestled beside her friend in a king-single bed.

In the middle of the night, her eyes snapped open. She needed to go to the toilet. Grumbling inwardly, because she’d been nice and warm, the child got up and padded through the silent house, sensing a shift in its rhythm. Sometimes, when a home’s inhabitants are all in bed, in the hush of the early hours, it is possible to feel a house breathing, tap into its resting pulse—especially in the country, where the darkness and silence is so dense you could almost scoop it into your palms. All finished, Amy returned to the bedroom, where her friend’s bed was flush against the wall, Martha fast asleep on the far side. She climbed in beside her, turned back around to regain her comfy position ... and there they were.

“A family of three—a mother, father and a little boy—dressed in their Sunday best. And they just stood there, staring at me.” Sitting in a café in Sydney’s Queen Victoria Building, Amy’s raisin toast goes cold as she unspools a story that makes me want to stop the shoppers around us, shake them out of complacency, alert them to mysteries snug inside their loved ones. Now 22, the criminology student has a kind, open face, with watchful green-blue eyes and dark brown hair. When she smiles, which is often, the corners of her eyes crinkle, spilling the warmth inside her. But there is something else in her expression, something disconcerting. It is fear. Even 15 years later, the memory of what she saw that night still terrifies Amy Shepherd.

In the darkness of the small bedroom, as her friend slept on, oblivious to Amy's attempts to wake her, the family inspected her with detached curiosity; they could have been on a Sunday stroll at the zoo, and Amy the exotic import. "They looked like people, but you could tell they weren't," recalls Amy, because of their "glowy" quality. The trio stood side-by-side, the parents in their 30s, their son around 10. All were dressed in what appeared to be the fashion of the early 1900s, the males in dark-coloured suits, the brunette woman in a long-sleeved dress with a scarf tied neatly under her chin. "Her skin was very pale," says Amy, diving deep into her memory for the details I'm hungry for. "That's probably what gave off the glow."

Clearly in command was the father, who was "straight-faced and very tall," says Amy, reluctantly agreeing to try to sketch the scene in my notebook. The picture she draws is of three stick figures standing in a line between a doorway and a bed, with another stick figure lying on the half of the pillow closest to the people. What it points out is that it must have been a very tight fit in that bedroom that night.

"I don't know how long we stared at each other for," she says, in a low and even voice, "but eventually the mother bent down and whispered something to the little boy and he nodded, then came over to my bed. He reached out to my leg and went to touch it. That's when I freaked out and threw the blankets over my head." The whole episode lasted between five and ten minutes—an eternity for such an uncanny exchange—but the questions it raised will haunt Amy for the rest of her life. "Who were they? What happened to them? Why haven't I ever seen them again? Did they give up on me because I didn't help them? Did they find someone who was able to help them?"

It's a story that "freaks people out," admits Amy, who learned this the hard way the next morning. "The first thing I told my friend's parents when I woke up was that there were three people in my room. They thought I was crazy, but when I told mum and dad, I was so adamant, they believed me." Amy's mum Judy remembers it well: "She was telling me about a mummy and daddy and a little boy there in the bedroom with her," says Judy Shepherd. While meeting 'the family' is Amy's earliest memory of seeing spirit, her mum says she was younger when she first showed signs of psychic awareness. "Countless times, she'd sing out to me, 'Mum, what are you doing?' and I'd wake up saying 'What?' and she'd say, 'You're crouched down in the hallway.' But I wasn't. I was in bed."

Two years after the ghostly family, Amy saw a teenage boy in her lounge room. She caught him out of the corner of her eye, whipped around and watched the stranger make himself comfortable in one of the family's chairs. Growing up, Amy was plagued by a litany of strange events: feeling pokes in the side, seeing balls of light travelling through the house, her bed moving—once, so forcefully that the headboard was shoved against the wall—and hearing voices. "I've gotten into the habit of listening to music when I go to bed, otherwise I can't sleep," says Amy, who'll pop in her iPod to avoid the chatter. "It's nothing really clear, it's like hearing a group of people, a gathering of sorts. I could always hear it in my bedroom. Last time I was home, they were all talking rather loudly."

"Amy is a very level-headed, sensible girl," says Judy, the friendly 48-year-old herself very much a straight shooter. In a matter-of-fact way, she tells me about the

night her husband awoke to a feather-light touch on the forehead from a blonde, six-year-old boy: “The little boy ran down our hallway, through the front door—with the noises of the front door opening and closing—and my husband just lying there, stunned, and this voice in his head saying, ‘Get up and have a look.’ Then he heard the footsteps, the little boy running down our driveway, barefoot.”

Intriguingly, but certainly not atypically in these accounts, Judy—who like Amy has felt her bed shoved roughly against the wall—also hears the muffled speech that her daughter describes. One night, she awoke at 2 am to the sounds of music, chatter, a gathering in full swing. “I thought, ‘Who’d be having a party in the middle of the week?’ and being a sticky beak, I got up to investigate.” She followed the sounds to the bathroom, where it seemed to be loudest, stood on the bathtub and opened the window, but it wasn’t coming from outside. “It wasn’t deafening. If you can imagine someone in the other room has the radio on and there are two men in conversation, but in the background, there’s a party going on? That’s what it was like.” Baffled, she swivelled slowly around in the glare of the bathroom, trying to pin point the source. It made no sense, but the noise seemed loudest the closer she stooped to the ground. The din, she discovered, was snaking up the bathtub drain.

A year went by, and Judy organised for well-known medium Deb Webber (who appears on the Nine Network show *Sensing Murder*) to take the stage at the Wellington Soldiers Club, where Judy worked. “That was the interesting part,” says Judy. “She knew nothing about me, but said I’ve got several ghosts in the house and that they’re channelling through a drain in my bathroom.” Four weeks before my phone conversation with Judy, Amy was home from uni, and mentioned to her mum that she had not been able to sleep for the incessant chitchat in her room. “I thought, ‘Well, maybe they’re channelling through the air vents now because it has to come from somewhere! I mean, you tell people this and they think you’re crazy. We are *not* crazy people.”

In fact, Amy, who hopes to join the Australian Federal Police, is the poster girl for a happy, functional upbringing. The single student speaks lovingly of her mum and dad, her siblings and “awesome” extended family. It is mainly her loved ones she confides in when she experiences something she can’t explain, and her eyes still get moist when she remembers a recurring nightmare that sickened her as a kid. Night after night, she witnessed her parents’ execution in a Nazi concentration camp: “I watched them being shot to death, over and over and over again. The camp was lit up. I was on the outside of the fence and they were on their knees. I’d wake up crying, sobbing. I didn’t even know what a concentration camp was when I was little.” She shrugs at the suggestion that she may have been glimpsing a past life. Deciphering the dream is not a priority for Amy. She’s just relieved to have left that deathscape behind.

Since Amy has moved to the city to study, things are considerably quieter at home in Wellington. “Now they’re with Amy. She’s the one with the special gift,” says her mum. It’s just not a particularly *welcome* gift, bemoans her daughter, since “I just don’t know what to do with it.” And who could blame her? A busy young woman juggling a demanding course, part-time work, family commitments, and as many crime thrillers she can squeeze into her scant leisure time, Amy could probably do without phoning her mum at 2 am because “my whole bed just jolted and it scared the crap out of me!”

Sometimes, it's worse than that. In December 2007, 14 years after an anonymous turn-of-the-century family left an indelible mark on her girlhood, Amy woke to find another uninvited guest, this time, inside her uni dorm. "I jolted awake and there he was. He was tall, he was solid, just standing next to my book case, looking at me." Who was this shadow man, and what unearthly terrain do these drop-ins populate? Amy wasn't about to ask. "I just said, 'Oh God, not again' and threw the blankets over my head."

Perhaps it is wiser not to look at them. Best not to think about how long they linger, watching, wondering if they'll step closer. Tut-tutting at the gall of these fleshly intruders who steal into their world.

By Karina Machado

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