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CURATING THE DEAD

“There’s a boy here, of course.”

It was my first day. I’d been hired to help with the holiday-season rush at a small historic house museum located in a tiny nature preserve tucked alongside a Toronto expressway. That morning, as the city was hushed by the year’s first snowfall, I’d taken the subway and then a bus and then walked down a steep hill, half-slipping on the slick pavement. I arrived, eventually, at Todmorden Mills Heritage Museum and Arts Centre, home to a weathered 19th-century brewery, a papermill and two small historic houses, one yellow and one grey.

“A boy? Like . . . a ghost?” asked the other young woman who’d been hired at the same time as me.

The staff member training us nodded. “That’s right. A little boy sitting on the fence swinging his legs. I saw him out of the corner of my eye, but when I turned, he wasn’t there.”

“Could it have been a real little boy?” I asked. “Who ran away?”

“Absolutely not.” The staff member leaned over the antique printing press she was demonstrating, slotting lead type into place. “I told you, he disappeared. I also saw a man in Victorian clothes once, looking at me from the archives.” She pointed up at a paper-jammed loft space above us. “He was gone when I turned on the lights. There are *definitely* ghosts here.”

I exchanged a glance with the other new girl.

We spent the morning touring the two houses, learning to demonstrate the printing press in the brewery, teach a lesson about the science of optics in the old papermill, make cookies in the yellow house and talk about the innovation of kerosene lamps in the grey house. Like many small museums, Todmorden Mills had a lot of history and a lot of ideas going on at once. Part of the papermill was an art gallery, and part was about to be converted into a theatre space. A community theatre group had held a yard sale on the premises a few days earlier to raise funds. I happily took home two unsold beer steins and a stack of plates. It was my first job after university.

At lunchtime, the other new girl and I were in the staff kitchen, making coffee, when a jar of crab apple jelly fell off the top of the fridge next to us and shattered on the linoleum floor.

“Oh, my God,” she said. “Maybe the ghosts don’t like us. Did you see that fly across the room?”

We fell into the museum’s holiday rhythm. Every morning, we opened the shutters of the houses and did a walk-through, checking for signs of raccoons or other animal invaders. Then I’d put a Victorian-style dress on over two petticoats and struggle through the snow to the yellow house, carrying a tray piled with baking supplies. The day was spent bent over the hearth, showing Grade 2 students how to fry sugar cookies on a flat iron griddle hung over the flames. The cookies tasted distinctly bacon-y, more smoked than baked.

I made candied orange peel and pomanders, led tours of the houses, taught children to print their own greeting cards. The days were long and busy, and I’d say goodbye to visiting school groups and tourists with a hoarse voice, waving arms covered with flour and ashes, my fingernails stained with printing ink and my hair stinking of smoke. Toronto gets dark by 5:00 pm in December. We’d finish the day by closing the houses in the last of the twilight, latching the shutters, turning the lights off one by one.

As I locked up the grey house one night, my heart started to pound. Nothing had happened, but as I moved from room to room, I was filled with the sense that someone was watching me. I pulled the last shutter closed and stood under the single remaining lit bulb.

“If you’re there,” I said out loud, “leave me alone, please.” The frightened feeling flowed away in a rush, like water going down a drain. I flipped the last light switch and left, locking the door behind me.

Afterward, whenever someone mentioned ghosts—which was often—I had advice to give. “You have to ask them to leave you alone. They will. Just ask politely.”

A dump truck came and cleared the remains of the theatre group's yard sale out of the papermill. Soon it was transformed into a gleaming new performing space.

"There's a ghost in here," a newly hired theatre technician told me.

"Have you seen it?"

"No, but I can feel it." He stared up at a door in the wall of the second floor that opened into thin air, all that remained of the papermill's once-complicated workings. "It's a young man. I can tell."

"If it bothers you," I said, "you have to tell it politely to leave you alone."

"Not it," the technician shook his head. "*He*."

I found myself feeling jealous of his conviction, of how specific and clear his sense of the ghost was. My own experience had been just that brief sensation of being watched, and now I didn't feel the presence of ghosts at all. And, honestly, I sort of wanted to. Even though I wasn't experiencing eerie encounters, others certainly were. Visitors to the museum asked me about ghosts on an almost daily basis. They didn't seem to mind that I couldn't tell them much beyond my own brief sensation of haunting and what I'd heard from other staff. They'd happily take the opportunity to tell me about their own ghost experiences, or those of their friends, or just tell me what they generally thought and believed about the supernatural. I'd never talked about ghosts so much in my life.

Never, that is, except for a brief period when I was about ten years old. That year, someone gifted me a blank notebook, bound in red faux leather with a black spine. I was so enamoured that I found a pack of rub-on transfer letters, each one a medieval-style drop capital backed with a square of ornate gold vines. I positioned them carefully, made sure they were straight and well-spaced, and rubbed hard with my thumbnail, permanently adhering the title MY DAIRY to the cover. (Incidentally, I am dyslexic.)

The diary was meant to be a juicy and heartfelt collection of all my preteenage secrets. But when I discovered it many years later, I found that it contained only one entry:

Dear Dairy,

Today at recess we talked about ghost raising. It is SCAAAAAARRYY!!!!

That single, very excited sentence was apparently the only thing about Grade 5 that I felt was worth committing to the page. And the thing is, it really did make an impact. I vividly remember the conversation that inspired it. One afternoon, in the middle of a Northern Ontario winter, I was standing on the playground with my friends, ankle-deep in snow and shivering. Emily, the boldest girl in our group, suddenly asked us if we'd ever heard of ghost raising. We hadn't.

She explained the process, which was simple. To ghost-raise, one had to stand in a darkened room—"Pitch dark"—in front of a mirror. A bathroom would work perfectly. The next step was to face the mirror, look deeply into it, and then repeat the phrase Bloody Mary thirteen times. At this point the ghost—Bloody Mary—would appear and either stare at you, break the mirror or kill you. Emily wasn't sure which.

I remember being flabbergasted by the concept. Somehow, I'd been walking around, living my ten-year-old life, unaware that I possessed the power to reach through time and space and bring a ghost back from the dead. Not only that, I could do it in the same room where I brushed my teeth and read the *Woman's Day* magazines my mom kept on the back of the toilet. It was a terrifying, intoxicating idea.

What I didn't realize was how ancient the idea was. It's unclear how long children have been scaring themselves by summoning Bloody Mary, or even who she's supposed to be. Many paranormal enthusiasts insist that she is Mary I of England, the Catholic queen nicknamed Bloody Mary for the hundreds of religious dissenters she had burned at the stake during her reign. While so many executions are nothing to sneeze at, her nickname might actually be a bit unfair compared with other monarchs of the era. Some estimates suggest that her father, Henry VIII, ordered the deaths of 57,000 to 72,000 of his subjects, including two of his own wives, and yet no one tries to summon his spirit at sleepovers. So, while Mary I was far from bloodless, she certainly isn't the most murderous monarch in history.

Sometimes, when it comes to ghost raising, Bloody Mary isn't involved at all. According to academics studying American folklore in the 1970s, children participating in early versions of the ritual chanted the name Mary Worth, which is also the name of a long-running American comic strip. The Mary of the comic strip is a kind-hearted local busybody who, notably, hasn't murdered anybody. Variants on the ghost's name also include Mary Whales and Mary Jane, among others. Today, the game has spread far beyond America and is

played by children worldwide. Whoever she is, Bloody Mary has an undeniable appeal that has lasted for more than fifty years.

Researchers note that the game is played mostly by girls, and particularly by girls between the ages of nine and twelve, which was certainly true for me and my friends. In a 1998 article titled “Bloody Mary in the Mirror: A Ritual Reflection of Pre-Pubescent Anxiety” in the journal *Western Folklore* (Vol. 57, No. 2/3), American folklorist Alan Dundes suggests that Bloody Mary is a subconscious way for girls to confront their anxieties about menstruation and the transition into womanhood. After all, playing Bloody Mary at a sleepover might be the first time that a preteen girl thinks about blood in a bathroom, but it certainly won’t be the last. Is it possible that the true horror of Bloody Mary is puberty?

While Bloody Mary may have originated sometime around the 1970s, the method for summoning her is much older. Catoptromancy, the practice of divination using a mirror or other reflective surface, appears throughout history. A magic mirror is used to see into the future in the ancient Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*. The ancient Greek traveller and geographer Pausanias describes a temple of Demeter located in a beautiful grove near the sea. There, worshippers seeking answers about an illness would lower a mirror into a well using a cord, stopping when the rim just touched the surface of the water. They would then peer down into the mirror; the reflection they saw within it would, according to Pausanias, indicate whether the afflicted person in question would die or recover. In the time of Bloody Mary I herself, the famed mathematician and occultist John Dee used a polished obsidian mirror to attempt to contact angels and demons, whom he hoped would help him solve the mathematical and scientific conundrums of the day. For much of my museum career, I worked at Spadina Museum, an opulent mansion in Toronto that now functions as a historic house museum. Spadina has in its collection a book of party games and decor ideas from the 1920s, published by a company that made decorative crepe paper. One of the suggested games was to walk backwards down a staircase into a darkened basement while looking into a hand mirror to catch a glimpse of one’s true love. The interwar period had a breezy attitude toward personal safety—the museum’s collection also included a children’s book from the era featuring illustrations of nude Kewpie doll babies playing with rifles from the First World War. The 1920s were a wild time.

My school friends and I may not have known that we were toying with a millennia-old ritual, but we were still very excited about it. We talked about Bloody Mary obsessively for a while but, for all our talk, we never worked up the courage to actually try it. Many times over the course of that year, I would stand in the bathroom in my house before bed, remind myself that I didn’t really believe in ghosts, and take a deep breath to start saying her name. At that point, I would abruptly change my mind and scurry away, too scared to follow through. This was my position on ghosts for the next twenty years. In my own mind, I was very firmly a Person Who Doesn’t Believe in Ghosts. But I thought about them a lot and felt a prickle of nervous excitement whenever they were mentioned. Today, in writing about Bloody Mary, it occurred to me that the thought of the ritual *still* made me nervous. And I still hadn’t tried it.

So, I did. I, a middle-aged woman, stood in my bathroom with the lights off. My bathroom has no windows, so it was indeed *pitch* dark, as my elementary-school friend Emily had specified. I faced the mirror, more than a little embarrassed by how fast my heart was pounding, and repeated Bloody Mary thirteen times. And . . . nothing happened. Of course nothing happened. I didn’t expect anything to happen. And yet, going through the ritual still produced a queasy tingle of anticipation.

In truth, Emily’s instructions were a bit lacking. Most versions of Bloody Mary call for a candle in the bathroom, not darkness, and most versions of catoptromancy require some form of lighting so you can actually see the mirror or reflective surface in question. In fact, the phenomenon of your reflection appearing to shift and change if you stare at it for long enough is a well-documented optical illusion, called Troxler’s fading. First identified in 1804, the fading effect occurs if you stare at anything for long enough and is thought to happen as the neurons in our brains responsible for vision adapt to unvarying stimuli. This is likely why most versions of Bloody Mary involve chanting her name a certain number of times. Chanting is creepy enough on its own, but chanting for a while, say thirteen times, is likely to keep you staring into the mirror long enough to induce Troxler’s fading, thus making your reflected face appear to change and distort, and produce a good slumber party scare.

As I emerged from the bathroom with an embarrassed sense of relief, I was struck by how Bloody Mary, a widespread children's game, is a sort of seance. Bloody Mary is a technique for preteens to attempt contact with ghosts in a way that's half serious, half joking. And while we may grow out of slumber party games, that mixture of fear and fascination around ghosts never really leaves us.

When I began working in Todmorden Mills, I discussed ghosts with museum visitors nearly every day, even though the houses were solidly middle-class homes filled with the kind of beautifully mundane objects that make up everyday life: a ceramic cheese box, an embroidered sampler stitched by a schoolgirl, a fancy glass epergne meant to display flowers and fruit on a dining table, a loveseat upholstered with shiny woven horsehair to mimic the look of expensive leather. They were cozy and humble, faded by time, but not sinister. Still, I found that everyone wanted to talk about ghosts, and this seemed to be the experience of every museum professional I met.

If a scary atmosphere wasn't sparking visitors' interest in the supernatural, what was? Was it, I wondered, something about the nature of museums themselves? After all, it's hard to walk into a museum and not be confronted by death. Whether you're looking at fine art or dinosaur bones, you will inevitably encounter an object that was once connected to someone—or something—that is now dead. This is even more true of historic house museums, where entering means walking into the home of a dead person. At history museums, we do more than just enter their spaces: we look closely at their belongings as we wander from room to room, examining their lives with a level of detail and intimacy usually reserved for our families and closest friends. In a historic house museum, you're likely to enter the original owner's bedroom and perhaps discuss their sex life. You'll look at the rooms where the occupants nursed their children, where they stored their food, even their bathrooms. If you're lucky, you might see examples of their clothing or even be guided by a staff member wearing a reproduction of those clothes. A historic house museum allows us to engage with the rich details of a real person's life, to feel their presence deeply, all the while knowing that they are long dead. And perhaps it's this overwhelming psychological presence of death that leads us to questions about ghosts.

Museums have been part of human culture for a long time. The oldest known museum, located in the state of Ur in the Neo-Babylonian Empire, dates to 530 BCE. The museum's curator was Ennigaldi-Nanna, a princess and the high priestess of the empire. Ennigaldi-Nanna's official role in society was Entu, the living human wife of the moon god, Sin. In addition to the duties associated with her sacred marriage, Ennigaldi-Nanna seems to have found the time to maintain an excellent museum of antiquities. When the chamber of her museum was excavated in 1925, archaeologists found neatly arranged artifacts labelled with clay cylinders that outlined their history in multiple languages. Incredibly, the youngest artifact predated Ennigaldi-Nanna's museum by seven hundred years, and the oldest by roughly two thousand. This means that the artifacts in the museum were as chronologically distant from Ennigaldi-Nanna as artifacts from Ancient Rome are from us.

As ancient as museums are, ghosts are even older. The first known depiction of a ghost, also from the Babylonian Empire, predates Ennigaldi-Nanna by a thousand years. The ghost is depicted on a clay tablet, now held at the British Museum. A faint but expertly rendered drawing depicts a bearded male ghost whose wrists have been bound in front of him. A woman walks ahead of him, leading the ghost toward the underworld via a long rope attached to his wrists. The image is so faint that it can only be seen under specific lighting conditions. The text accompanying it appears to be part of a guide to banishing unwelcome ghosts by addressing whatever unfinished business has brought them back to the world of the living—in this case, loneliness. Inscribed in cuneiform, the tablet gives specific instructions for dispatching a male ghost in need of a lover through an elaborate ritual that involves making figurines and adorning them in specific clothing and jewellery, preparing vessels of beer, burning censers of juniper and praying. The instructions end, ominously enough, with the phrase, "Do not look behind you." If this scenario sounds familiar, it should—hauntings caused by ghosts with a grudge against the living and solved by addressing their lingering issues is the premise of many modern horror movies.

Ghosts have been with us for at least 3,500 years. And in all that time, human interest in them has never waned. A few months after I began working at Todmorden Mills, a newly hired manager called me in for a meeting so we could get to know one another. We chatted about our backgrounds, our skills and interest in

museums and, of course, ghosts. I told her about my very vague feeling of being watched in the grey house, and about the stories others had told me.

She nodded seriously. “So . . . have you heard about Mackenzie House?”

I had. Mackenzie House and Todmorden Mills are both operated by Toronto’s municipal government, along with eight other history museums. I’d heard of Mackenzie House, but had never visited. The new manager seemed excited to tell me about it.

“It’s considered the most haunted house in Canada. Do you know why?”

I shook my head vigorously, wondering how a place could be categorized as the most haunted. How did you measure haunting?

“Back in the fifties,” she began, “when the house became a museum, a husband and wife were hired as caretakers. They actually lived in the house, slept there. One night, the wife woke up and saw a woman leaning over her bed, staring right at her. After a few minutes, the woman disappeared. The next night, the wife woke up again, and the woman was there again. But this time, the woman did this . . .” Maintaining intense eye contact, my manager leaned in and pinched me lightly on the arm.

I yelped, more in surprise than pain. “The ghost *pinched* her?”

“The ghost pinched her,” she confirmed, nodding. “After that, the woman refused to sleep in the house and there were no more live-in caretakers.”

“But is that true?”

“Yup. It was in the media at the time, and it’s in the museum’s records.”

That part was true, sort of. Ghosts aside, Mackenzie House is a small yet fascinating museum in Toronto’s downtown core. Located at 82 Bond Street, just a short walk from the city’s famous Eaton Centre, it was home to William Lyon Mackenzie, a fiery 19th-century journalist and politician, and his wife, Isabel. Mackenzie’s life was one of considerable drama and adventure. At various points, he was exiled, imprisoned, led the failed Upper Canada Rebellion and was elected the first mayor of Toronto. He is such an interesting and influential figure in Canadian history that there are two separate museums in Ontario dedicated to telling the story of his life (the other being the wonderful Mackenzie Printery & Newspaper Museum in Queenston, Ontario).

Mackenzie only occupied the house on Bond Street for about a year before his death in 1861, though his wife, Isabel, lived there for another twelve. It’s a row house, narrow and tall, comfortable but somewhat cramped. It was saved from demolition in the 1930s, when Mackenzie’s grandson, William Lyon Mackenzie King, was the prime minister of Canada. Mackenzie House is an excellent example of the kind of modest, middle-class homes that are so rarely preserved. The buildings that become historic house museums are far more likely to be grand and stately. Because of this, some visitors develop the mistaken idea that the past was generally more opulent and elegant than the world of today. In fact, a far greater proportion of Victorian people lived in houses like Mackenzie house, homes that are lovely in their own way, but on a smaller, more familiar scale.

What Mackenzie House lacks in size, it makes up for in notoriety. The house tops lists of haunted locations and is often referred to as The Most Haunted House in Canada or The Most Haunted House in Toronto. In 2018, a local news station produced a segment about the house, titled “Is This Toronto’s Most Haunted Home?” In the clip, a pair of costumed historical interpreters show a news crew around the house while telling a story nearly identical to the one my manager told me. Except in this version, the couple are named as Mr. and Mrs. Edmund, and Mrs. Edmund is slapped by the ghost, not pinched. The interpreters also explain that, while they’ve never seen a ghost themselves, there are stories circulating of people hearing footsteps on the stairs, ghostly hands playing the piano, and the antique printing press operating by itself late at night. They go on to say that when the house was donated to the city in 1960, the inventory of belongings included ‘one ghost.’ An archdeacon was brought into the house to perform an exorcism, and the whole thing was televised.

The media aren’t the only ones leaning into the story of Mackenzie House’s ghost. The City of Toronto’s municipal government is typically a staid institution, but its official website page for the museum states: “Rumoured to have its own resident ghosts, Mackenzie House explores the border between rebellion and respectability, life and death. Are you brave enough to discover all this for yourself?”

The idea of a haunting so real and well-documented that even City Hall officially acknowledged it was fascinating to me. I had to know more. I went looking for the original media reports about the Mackenzie

House ghost, or ghosts, hoping for more details. What I found were a number of stories from Canadian newspapers, all from 1960, all telling similar, but not identical, versions of the story I'd heard. The *Montreal Gazette* claimed that two separate caretakers and their families were driven from the house by ghosts but didn't name them. The *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* only reported one caretaker couple, identified as Mr. and Mrs. Alex Dobban, not Edmund. The Dobbans only lived in the house for a month before they were driven out by fear, the paper claims, but in that time, they heard footsteps on the stairs, the antique piano played itself, and the Victorian printing press ran not once, but for three nights. The article even included a wonderfully dramatic quote from Mrs. Dobban, who declared, "There's something in this house, and I'm not staying with it."

On March 30, 1961, the CBC ran a TV segment on the program *Toronto File* about Mackenzie House. In the grainy black-and-white footage, bespectacled host Ed McGibbon interviews author and broadcaster Richard S. Lambert, a noted paranormal enthusiast of the era. Lambert was famously, and rather controversially, the author of a nonfiction book about a small community on the Isle of Man whose residents claimed to be haunted by, of all things, a talking mongoose. Upon relocating to Canada, Lambert worked extensively with the CBC and wrote *Exploring the Supernatural: The Weird in Canadian Folklore* (A. Barker, 1955), the first book to study paranormal phenomena significantly in Canada.

The segment has a delightfully camp quality. Lambert leads the reporter around Mackenzie House, indicating the portraits of William Lyon and Isabel Mackenzie and declaring that she has an "odd" face, and her husband a "fierce" mouth. Bob Edmunds, the son of the former caretakers, is interviewed in front of the house. He repeats, rather cagily, the story about his mother being slapped by Isabel Mackenzie's ghost, before adding that "some people believe in something, others don't." As Edmunds describes hearing ghostly music emanating from the piano, the CBC's camera pans wildly through the house and crashing, discordant music plays. Poor Isabel Mackenzie's portrait is superimposed on the screen, floating over the footage, which seems a bit unfair, as there's really nothing odd or menacing about her. Eventually, Archdeacon Frank of the Anglican Church makes an appearance, seeming rather amused by the whole thing. The host claims that the archdeacon is about to perform an exorcism of the house, an apparent second attempt, as an exorcism the year before failed to get rid of Mackenzie House's ghosts. The archdeacon, however, refuses to take a stand on the existence or nonexistence of spirits and proceeds to cheerfully read a couple of psalms, say a prayer and give a blessing to the house. It's all rather anticlimactic, but the segment ends with another round of jarring piano music and, for good measure, yet another shaky, handheld shot of Isabel Mackenzie's portrait.

What interested me even more than the TV segment, however, was an article from the same period. On June 25, 1960, a headline in *The Toronto Daily Star* read: "Ghost Ghastly Hoax Typewriter Squeaks." The article alleges that the Mackenzie Homestead Foundation, the group working to restore the house and turn it into a museum, admitted to the newspaper that the ghost story was a hoax. With great embarrassment, the foundation explained that all the ghost activity reported elsewhere, including the footsteps, the eerie piano concerts and the self-operating printing press, were part of a story cooked up by the foundation and another Toronto daily newspaper (not named), to drum up interest in the house and promote tourism. The foundation's officials were apparently dismayed to see that the story instead became a media sensation. The article even featured an interview with Mr. and Mrs. Dobban, standing in the house under a portrait of William Lyon Mackenzie, huffily denying contributing to the ghost stories or leaving the house due to a haunting. *The Toronto Daily Star* also reported that a thorough investigation failed to find evidence of another set of caretakers frightened away by spirits and declared the whole thing a "ghastly hoax."

So how is it that a ghost hoax thoroughly debunked in 1960 was still reported in the press in 2018? The answer is that, incredibly, the debunking didn't seem to matter at all. Just two years after *The Star's* report, on March 8, 1962, *The Globe and Mail* ran a story about Mackenzie House that repeated every detail of the alleged haunting, including the footsteps, the piano and the printing press, and added the bit about the caretaker's wife being slapped by a ghost hovering over her bed. *The Globe* breathlessly described the ghost's "stern visage" and the "ringlets about her neck" and noted that the caretaker's wife was left with "two welts" on her cheek after the supernatural assault. It went on to describe two sets of caretakers, who complained about apparitions in frock coats and "spectral women who flitted about the house." The article even included an interview with the supposed former caretakers, who are unnamed in this version. One of the wives

declared, “I couldn’t stand it any longer . . . the constant strain of feeling someone was watching you; the feeling that you weren’t alone.”

It’s unclear whether this article is just a retelling of the articles from two years earlier, or if the Mackenzie Homestead Foundation restarted the hoax with another round of interviews, hoping to generate more publicity. What is clear is that the handful of media articles and the TV spot about the haunting of Mackenzie House outweighed *The Toronto Daily Star*’s debunking in every way. The home of Toronto’s first mayor was now firmly established in the public’s mind as a haunted house, and the story acquired a momentum of its own. A bizarre newspaper article from *The Quebec Chronicle-Telegraph* on December 12, 1968, titled “School Teaches Witchcraft in Grade 8,” tells the story of a young Toronto schoolteacher who visited Mackenzie House and experienced “chills, apparitions, and unwordly music.” The teacher apparently shared this experience with her students, who reacted much as I and my friends did to the story of Bloody Mary. The whole class, the article claimed, became obsessed with ghosts and began studying them, going so far as to hold a seance to try to contact the spirit of Isabel Mackenzie, staging a play about beheadings (I should be clear here that neither Isabel nor her husband were beheaded, but this seems like the kind of thing 1960s tweens would do), and planning a class trip to Mackenzie House to experience the haunting themselves.

Museum professionals are an earnest bunch. We have dedicated our careers to not only learning the truth of history but communicating it to others. And so, I’ve found it frustrating throughout my working life when I uncover a piece of misinformation that has somehow been repeated over and over again as fact. A good example of this is the idea that people in the past were all far shorter than people today. This is an oversimplification of a rather complicated idea. In fact, average height varies a lot throughout history and is greatly affected by nutrition and overall health status. Well-fed and healthy people in the past were similar in size to well-fed and healthy people today. However, this doesn’t stop visitors from walking into historic houses and declaring that all the antique furniture in front of them is tiny, because the people back then were just so small. At Spadina Museum, I used to keep a modern folding chair hidden behind a door so I could demonstrate to tour groups that it was the same height as the Victorian-era chairs. The myth was so powerful that visitors needed proof to change their preconceptions.

The haunting of Mackenzie House is especially maddening because the misinformation isn’t accidental or the result of a mistake; it’s a deliberate hoax, engineered for publicity. But the persistence of the Mackenzie House ghosts in media and culture suggests something important about ghosts and museums: visitors like the 1960s schoolteacher and her students are deeply invested in ghost stories. They don’t just want historic house museums to be filled with the objects once owned by the dead, they want them to contain the dead themselves, still present and animated as spirits. And it’s that desire for an interface with something haunted and invisible that primes them to experience the otherworldly. The ghosts of Mackenzie House may have been invented, but visitors, again and again, have experienced them as real.

One thing I learned early in my museums career is that, where ghosts are concerned, it’s alarmingly easy to mislead people because so many of them *want* to believe. While working at Todmorden Mills, I was asked to develop a Halloween program. It was to include a walk through a creepy forest, some ghost stories, hot apple cider, and the reading of Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” a classic of gothic fiction.

The evening of the program came. It was sold out. My group was especially boisterous, comprised mostly of young adults looking for Halloween fun. I led them into the kitchen of the site’s smaller cottage. One of my colleagues was seated at the table, in the room’s only chair. The group packed into the small space around her. There were so many people that I was forced to stand back in the corridor, peeking in around the edge of the kitchen door. My group was the last to visit this stop on the program, and I could hear my colleague’s voice was tired from reading the story several times already. Indeed, I had to lean in to hear her properly from my position at the door. People shuffled closer to the kitchen table, pressing in.

“The Tell-Tale Heart” is a terrific story, but the elaborate Victorian prose and the strained softness of my colleague’s voice were working against her. People began to shift from foot to foot, uncomfortable from standing on the bare wooden floor for so long. Eyes began to wander around the room, and I caught a few people glancing back at me, clearly wondering when we’d be moving on and if there would be cookies soon. I heard muttering.

For a visitor to be bored, for anybody to be bored, is anathema to museum workers. Feeling a slightly panicked need to help my colleague out, I shifted my stance until I was leaning against the door frame, with the right half of my body in the hall. Using my right hand, I began to tap on the wall in the hallway, two short raps at a time, producing a sound rather like the beating of a heart. It was a weird thing to do, but I was hoping I could add some atmosphere to the story. My colleague was so focused on her reading that she didn't seem to notice, but a couple of visitors did. They glanced around the room, looking for the source of the sound, then turned their attention back to the reading. It was working.

I tapped louder as the story progressed, filling the space with the sound of a wooden, distant heartbeat. At the tale's dramatic ending, the group burst into enthusiastic applause. I guided my group out of the house and toward their long-awaited cookies and cider. One of the participants approached me, shaking her head.

"That was really creepy!" she exclaimed. "I didn't expect the special effects on this tour to be so good!"

I thanked her, surprised and pleased that my stupidly low-tech improvisation had worked. But what I heard next shocked me. As we made our way down the muddy hill, I overheard two participants talking softly.

"Dude," said the first to his friend. "I swear to God I could hear a heart beating while she was reading."

"Oh, my God!" his friend replied. "I heard it too! I heard it like . . . in my mind. Do you think . . .?"

"I think it's haunted," said the first friend, nodding sharply. "Yeah. I think this place is haunted for sure."

"I think so too! I've actually been feeling that way since we got here!"

"Me too!"

I was stunned by how easy it was to perpetrate a ghost hoax, even accidentally. Visitors seemed to long for museums to be haunted. I found this strange, but I couldn't deny that I, too, had experienced both the feeling of a spirit and the desire to see one, even though I was officially a Person Who Didn't Believe in Ghosts. This tension that I saw in myself and others, between fear and desire, real and unreal, fascinated me.

And so, I decided to explore the subject like a true museum professional, with both historical research and hands-on activities. It was obvious that being haunted isn't always a passive experience. Like preteens daring each other to step into the darkened bathroom and summon Bloody Mary, people deliberately and eagerly seek out ghostly experiences. They want to see spirits, to hear them, to feel their presence. But how, exactly, is this done? How does one speak to a spectre? I wanted to know what techniques were used to communicate with the dead historically, and whether anyone was still using them today. What would it feel like to talk to a ghost? I also wanted to know how, exactly, all of this intersected with museums. Why is it that these spaces where we learn about the real and tangible world are also where we want to have conversations about the intangible and unprovable? Why do we love a haunted museum?

There are about 2,700 museums in Canada alone, and over 100 billion people have lived and died over the course of human history. So if ghosts exist, there are surely a lot of them, and there are plenty of museums to haunt. I had a lot of exploring to do.