

## Free Spirit

by Barry R. Taylor

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Now isn't this great, Owen decided, as he threw his sleeping bag on the bare floor. I'm spending a night alone in a haunted house. I'm actually doing that. Clever me.

The Hawthorne House, where Owen was reluctantly bedding down, did have a chilling reputation. Standing at the edge of town, it was a grey, two-story clapboard, set back from the street and shaded by a rank of tall trees. The yard around it had long since surrendered to wild grass and brambles. Dark windows and deep shade gave the house an air of perpetual gloom. Everyone left it alone. Everyone knew it was haunted.

The interior of the house was empty. All the furniture had been removed years ago, save for a couple of broken chairs. There was nothing in the living room, where Owen had decided to settle, but four sooty walls, a non-functioning light fixture and an old fireplace. Gold-coloured curtains, tattered and dusty, framed the big windows on one wall. The dirty windows were unbroken. Even mischievous teenagers left the Hawthorne House alone.

It wasn't fear that motivated Owen's discontent. Owen had no time for ghosts and ghouls and all that lot. Owen was a practical man. But the next ten hours or so did promise to be very uncomfortable. The abandoned house had no electricity, no running water, and no heat. In late October the room was cold. The fireplace was useless because Owen had no wood.

He laid out his sleeping bag on the hardwood floor. His electric lamp, sitting on the floor nearby, translated his movements into dancing shadows on the walls. He pulled a few necessities out of his rucksack: some snacks, a paperback novel, a woolen toque, a flashlight, a water bottle, and an empty bottle to serve as a chamber pot. Just in case.

Owen was immensely irritated with himself. He was here not to prove a point about the afterlife or to demonstrate his own bravery but only because he had let his roommates get to him. A trio of gullible fools, in Owen's unkind opinion, with whom he shared rooms only to save rent. They followed football like a religion. They traded conspiracy theories like baseball cards. They believed in pretty much everything supernatural. They had nothing in common with their sensible, hard-working roommate. Owen had given up arguing with them.

The dimwits had succeeded this time though, in goading him into doing something dumb. Prove that hauntings aren't real, they challenged. Spend a night in the Hawthorne House, by yourself. You know what happened to the last person who tried that.

Owen had no idea what happened to the last person who spent a night in this house. He probably froze to death. He arranged the sleeping bag where he could look out the window at the sky, pulled off his shoes and climbed into the sleeping bag fully clothed. He turned down the lamp, then tried to read by flashlight for a while.

The room was almost unnaturally quiet. The windows were soft-edged pools of lighter grey in the darkened room. Leafless, night-black trees kept silent vigil outside.

Owen was unconcerned about being harassed by a malevolent spirit. The only life in this house was squirrels in the attic. Still, he had to admit there was something off about the house. Behind the damp autumn chill lurked an unsettling feeling that something wasn't right. The darkness about him seemed laden with emotion, a sense of . . . what? Grief, perhaps. A deep melancholy. A feeling of endless sorrow permeated the space, somehow lending the darkness added texture.

Of course, he was probably reacting to the history of the house. Like all true haunted houses, the Hawthorne House had been a scene of violent death. The memory of it cast a pall, even now. Owen had felt it from the moment he climbed in through the kitchen window. All the outside doors were boarded up. The rest of the building, which Owen had explored briefly, was unremarkable, empty and very dark. Light from the street did not reach this far back. There were four bedrooms. One of them was locked.

Owen yawned. He glanced at his watch. Time to get some sleep, if the chill would let him. He set aside his book and pulled on his toque. He turned down the lamp but left it on, so the room wouldn't be pitch black. He settled his empty rucksack as a make-shift pillow. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

The room was utterly silent. The subtle night noises of an active house, the hum of the refrigerator, the whisper of heating fans, the clicks and pings from pipes cooling and contracting, were entirely absent. No clock ticked. No tap dripped. The only sound was the faint sighing of the wind. Owen lay in a tiny pool of light surrounded by the foreboding darkness of the old building. Outside the windows, the cloud-strewn sky was barely visible through the trees.

“Booooooooooooo!” a voice whispered.

Owen opened his eyes. Had he heard something? He looked around. The grey-dark room was empty. “What was that?” he said.

“Boooooo,” the voice ululated, a little louder. There was no mistaking it this time. It was a feminine alto, and seemed to come from everywhere at once, as if the darkness itself had given voice.

Owen rolled his eyes. He had expected this. “Look, whoever is pranking me, if you’re trying to frighten me you’ll have to do a lot better than that. You guys are so lame.” He turned up the lamp until the light reached the walls.

“Booooo?” said the voice. It seemed uncertain now.

Owen listened. He still couldn’t place where the voice was coming from. It seemed to be right beside him, yet across the room at the same time. He shrugged. The guys had gone to some trouble to set this up.

He sat up. He said, “All right, very well done. Who are you, who boo’s at strangers? Are you one of Chet’s girlfriends?”

A long pause. Then the voice in the air said, “My name is Ariana. I live here.”

“Right. Sure you do. So what’s with the boo’s?”

“Isn’t that what I’m supposed to do?”

Her uncertainty gave her away. Owen said, “Of course. You said you’re name is Ariana. I suppose you mean Ariana McNaughton?”

“That’s right. Do I know you?”

Owen got to his feet. This was the scare he had expected. Ariana McNaughton was a university student who had been brutally murdered half a century before. Her killer was a serial murderer who had never been caught. The affair was so gruesome that Ariana’s roommates had moved out. The house was old and creaking to begin with so no one else wanted to live there. Eventually the owner abandoned it completely. Strangely, it was still standing, more or less intact, all these years later. Ariana McNaughton and her awful death had become an urban legend.

Owen had anticipated a ghost prank. Still, there was something genuinely spectral about this unbodied voice that floated in the night air. It unsettled him more than he cared to admit. He decided to let rationality take the wheel. He picked up the flashlight and began shining it

about the room. “All right. All right, if you are Ariana McNaughton, how old are you?” He looked up the fireplace flue, checking for hidden electronics.

“I’m twenty-one,” said the voice. “I mean I was twenty-one when I – but that was back then. It’s all so scattering. What year is this?”

He lifted a dusty curtain, examined the wall behind it. “It’s 2023.”

An intake of breath. “Really? Far out. It’s been so long.”

Time for a critical test. “How long has it been, Ariana? When did you die?”

The voice replied instantly. “September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1973. Around one in the morning. It was after a football game that our team won, 28-17. That horrible man stabbed me seven times right in my own bed and why did you have to bring up that awful memory!” There followed a shriek so loud and imbued with such pure anguish that Owen cowered before it. The walls reverberated with Ariana’s wails.

Owen felt the hairs rising on the back of his neck. Who was he talking to? Either his roommates had researched the Ariana McNaughton legend with more diligence than he thought them capable of, or . . . no, that couldn’t be. Yet that scream seemed very real.

“I’m . . . sorry?” Owen said, when the screams had died down a bit. “I should have realized that would be traumatic for you.” He shook his head. Was he apologizing to a ghost?

“He stabbed me!” the voice wailed. “Again and again and again. It hurt like the world, I was screaming and begging him to stop but he kept stabbing and stabbing and I could see my own blood everywhere and –” There followed another wall-shaking scream that chilled Owen’s blood.

“All right, all right, take it easy now,” Owen said, when he regained his own composure. “I didn’t mean to upset you.” Was he really talking to a ghost? The situation had become surreal. The disembodied voice who called herself Ariana was no prank by his idiot roommates, he was sure of that now. The deep pain in those shrieks of agony would be impossible to fake. Yet the alternative was so fantastic, so far outside his realm of belief, that it scarcely seemed credible.

He would have more proof. The ghost seemed to remember every detail of her own death. Maybe he could verify her story. Out loud he said, “September 25<sup>th</sup> 1973, you said?”

“Y-yes.” Her voice was still shaky.

Owen retrieved his cell phone from his knapsack. He opened a browser and looked up ‘Murder of Ariana McNaughton.’ A bunch of hits came back. It took only a moment to confirm the date. Owen’s eyes went wide. He almost dropped the phone.

He said, “You – You’re Ariana McNaughton. Stabbed to death, right here in his house in 1973. Your murderer was never caught, your death never avenged. You’ve been trapped here ever since. Alone, hopeless, with nothing but your own anguish and that terrifying memory to keep you company. Ohmygod I had no idea.”

“It’s a total bummer,” the ghost said. She sobbed.

Again her voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Owen looked around, trying to place the source. “You have a charming voice,” he said. “Why can’t I see you?”

A heavy sigh. “I can’t materialize much any more. It takes too much . . . I don’t know, psychic energy? Is that what you call it? I think I’m fading away.”

“That’s – that’s too bad.” He couldn’t think of anything else to say. He was not practised in conversation with spirits.

“It’s too bad for you. You would have liked what you saw. I was a real dish.”

“You were?” This was interesting.

“Absolutely. I was gorgeous. Everyone said so. You would too, if you could see me.” Her voice was smug now.

Owen said, “Maybe I can find a picture.” He thumbed his phone.

“What’s that thing in your hand?” the spirit wanted to know.

“This? Why it’s a cell phone, of course. Oh, wait, 1973, you wouldn’t know. This is . . . like a radio, and a telephone, and a library sort of . . . oh crap, this is really hard to explain. Fine, imagine a miniature colour television that can show any show ever, whenever you want. And books and newspapers too.”

“Really? That is off the hook! Can you find, like any book on your little television?”

“Pretty much, nowadays.”

“Great. Find the Bowlerson College yearbook for 1972. Can you do that?”

“I can try.” He opened a search engine and looked about. “Oh, wait a minute, here we go. Thank goodness for the Internet Archive. Where should I look?”

“The sports section. See the full-page picture of the cheerleaders?”

He flipped electronic pages until he found the picture. “Wow. Good looking bunch of girls. Even in grainy black and white. Which one is you?”

“Left side, front row. Long brown hair. With the big pom-poms.”

“Left side, front – Oh! Oh my goodness. Well. Uhm, yes, you were a . . . a real dish, as you said.”

“Told ya. There’s another pic on page sixty-two.”

“You memorized all the pages with your picture on them?”

“Well yes. Naturally.”

He flipped to page sixty-two. There was Ariana again, in miniskirt and knee socks, along with a trio of slightly less hot girls, selling something to support the Annual Hospital Funding Frolic.

Owen stared at the girl in the picture. Her smile was dazzling. “I was born too late,” he muttered. He sat down in the old wooden rocking chair, still staring.

He bolted to his feet. He set the chair bobbing wildly. “Where did that come from!” he demanded.

An ethereal giggle. “From me, silly. You looked like you needed to sit down.”

“You can do that?”

“When I need to. This is my house.” A pause. “That was my favourite chair, back, you know, before. It was way peaceful to sit there and read a book or just watch the stars. I used to sit there sometimes when I had visitors, like you. But people tend to go all freaky-deaky when they see an empty chair rocking by itself. Then someone would start telling stories about the poor murdered girl and I’d get upset and start crying and they’d all book it for the door.”

Another pause. “I don’t get many visitors any more.”

“I’m afraid you have a bit of a reputation,” Owen explained. “For scaring people.” He sat down in the rocking chair again, but tentatively, as if it might bite him.

“I had a bit of a reputation when I was alive too,” the apparition said. There was more pride than shame in her voice. “I was a *very* popular girl. Why not, I was a stone fox. All the guys loved me. I loved teasing and showing off for them too. And . . . well, I wasn’t always as hard to get as maybe I should have been.” She paused to giggle, an oddly vaporous sound in the empty room. “Course, some of the girls didn’t like me. They said I shouldn’t be sharing myself

so much. And they were crazy jealous because I was head cheerleader and everybody watched me at the games. Sometimes they called me a . . . you know.”

Owen said, “I do know. We hardly use that word any more. Cruel and judgmental.”

“For real?”

“Nowadays you would be called a sexually active young woman with a healthy libido.”

“And nobody complains? Or calls you names? Or gives you scowling lectures about how to dress and behave?”

“Not any more. As long as nobody gets hurt, you are pretty much free to do as you please, in bed or out.”

“Radical! Isn’t that like . . . free love?”

He thought about it. “Well, yes I suppose it is like that. With a few more precautions.”

“Oh, that is way better. I think I like 2023. And my libido is out of sight healthy.” This was followed by another unearthly giggle, which transformed midway into a forlorn sigh. “It used to be, that is,” she amended. “Before . . . all that.”

“Please don’t start crying again. It’s hard to bear. I think I get what you’re feeling. You’re by yourself so much, all the time really. That must be awful. So lonely.”

“I’m always lonely,” the voice in the air replied. “And always bummed out. It never gets better, never goes away. When there’s no one here I sort of . . . I don’t know, go to sleep? I’m not sure. Anyway, time passes and I don’t really notice until someone else comes to visit, and that makes me feel a little better – but I always scare them away again.” Her sobs filled the room, almost physical in their intensity. Owen expected to see tears drip down the walls.

“Poor Ariana,” Owen said, with genuine sympathy. “Trapped in this big old house, all by yourself, year in, year out. No wonder you’re forlorn.”

“It’s horrible,” ghostly Ariana said, through her sobs. “I’ve heard people say they can feel my presence in the house. I guess I give off bad vibes because I’m so sad.”

He nodded. “I felt that when I first came in,” he said. “I can feel it now. The sadness. It fills the air.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be such a downer. I can’t help it. I was young and beautiful and going to college and then – I think I’m going to cry again.”

“No, don’t do that! Please. Look, think about something else. Remember your college days. What were you studying?”

She perked up instantly. “Besides boys? I was an English major. Hey, I wrote an essay on William Godwin that got a B-plus. He believed in free love too!”

“Good for you,” replied Owen, who had no idea who William Godwin was. “Hold on a second.” He turned to his phone again. He did a quick search on “William Godwin” and discovered he was an English novelist, philosopher, and early proponent of utilitarianism, which didn’t help at all because Owen had no idea what utilitarianism was. But the complexity of the subject suggested a bit of sense and substance behind the phantom party girl.

He said, “I’ll, uhm, have to read up on him sometime.” Owen was taking a business degree. Then he looked about the empty living room, wanly lit by the electric lamp. A chilling thought struck him. “Ariana, I don’t mean to upset you, but – what happens when the house itself is torn down?”

“Oh, that, that won’t happen. As long as I’m here, the house stays too. I don’t know how that works either. I’m sort of one with the house, or something. I keep it fixed so windows don’t break and the roof doesn’t leak.”

“I wondered about that. Still, there’s dust everywhere and water stains on the ceiling; the wallpaper is peeling and the floors creak. The place is starting to look like a classic haunted house.”

“I know, I know.” She paused to let out a heart-rending sob. “I’m not keeping up any more. It has something to do with . . . fading away. Not enough psychic energy? I don’t know how to explain it. I’m a bit of a space cadet, you know?”

“I’m sorry, a what?”

“A space cadet. You know, an airhead.”

Owen said, “I’m not sure I believe that. I don’t want you to fade away. I know I just met you, but you seem like a sweet young woman.”

“Oh. Thank you!” For a moment the leaden air in the room seemed lighter. “Don’t I scare you? I’m a ghost!”

“You’re not really frightening. Not now anyway. Although you are rather high maintenance.”

“What does that mean?”

“Uhm, never mind.” Owen’s logical mind was pursuing a lead. “Wait, wait. Psychic energy. What you need to keep from fading away. Do you have any idea where it comes from?”

“Not really. I think maybe it’s connected to other people. Like, maybe their life energy helps keep me alive? Or whatever I am. Anyway, I always feel better, stronger, after I have visitors. But no one ever comes back because I give off such awful bad vibes and people get scared when I cry and break things.” She paused. Owen could sense that she was fighting back tears. “When I get really upset, blood runs down the bedroom walls.”

“Oh. That would be off-putting. In the bedroom of course, because that is where you – ” He stopped himself before he set Ariana off again. She was already sobbing; her dolour was palpable, like a cold mist filling the room.

The image of Ariana’s blood triggered an idea. Ariana had been murdered in 1973, and her killer had never been found. Allegedly. There was no DNA profiling in 1973. Owen said, “Ariana, please don’t get upset. Do you know the name of the man who – who killed you?” There was no gentle way to say it.

“Yes.” The word filled the room.

“Who was he?”

“He said his name was Hamilton Ascot. He made it sound rich and upper class. I met him at a football game. I was cheering. He was smooth and charming and wearing super hip threads. We went out for drinks. He convinced me to keep my cheering outfit on because he thought it was sexy. I drew a lot of stares at the tavern, but I didn’t mind. We came back here, to the house I was sharing with three other girls. Of course we ended up in my bedroom. He was as charming as a songbird.

“Something about him seemed off the mark though. We made out on my bed for a while, and started to loose our clothes. He excused himself to go to the bathroom. I was suspicious. Hamilton Ascot sounded too fancy to be real. I found his wallet in his jacket and looked at his driver’s licence. His real name was Larry Quinten. I knew I should get out of there. But then he came back and he had a really long knife and ohgodohgodohgod!”

Her cries shook the house again. The lamp flickered. The walls groaned a sympathetic dirge. Owen fully understood now why so few people could spend a night in the Hawthorne House. Ariana’s cries were terrifying, and penetrated everything. He had to fight the instinct to cover his ears and run madly for the door.

Instead he said, “Let it out, Ariana. Let the world hear your anguish.” Wait, was he counselling a ghost now?

His cell phone was still open to a search engine. He entered “Larry Quinten” in the text box. He read the most complete entry that came up. He said, “Ariana, I think you should hear this.”

Perhaps something in his tone caught her attention. The funereal moans subsided a little. “What – what is it?” she asked.

Owen read: “Larry Claymore Quinten, aka the Cheerleader Killer, was a serial murderer active in eastern Canada from 1970 to the mid-1980s. He was responsible for the deaths of at least four young women and probably more. All were attractive university students and most were cheerleaders. All were stabbed repeatedly with a long knife. Most were killed in their own beds, wearing their cheerleading costumes.”

Ariana’s voice was a scream. “Why are you telling me this! Stop it, stop it, stop it! Nooooo!” A cloud of ash erupted out of the fireplace. The curtains billowed. Owen’s flashlight flew across the room and smashed into the wall, spewing shattered glass everywhere. The floorboards heaved and groaned beneath his feet.

“Listen!” Owen shouted. “Please listen! Quinten was arrested in 1985 after the death of a cheerleader in Charlottetown. He confessed in detention to two other murders and hinted at others. Subsequent DNA evidence links him to the deaths of Catherine Anne Letour . . . and Ariana Constance McNaughton.”

He paused. The room had grown silent, tense with expectation. Owen read: “Quinten was sentenced to life in prison, without parole for twenty-five years. He died in prison in 2006 at the age of sixty-eight.”

A long, long silence. Finally Ariana’s voice, quavering and small: “They caught him.”

“Yes. Yes they did. He’s gone, Ariana. Justice has been served. Your death has been avenged.”

At once the room seemed brighter. The air sweetened as the atmosphere of grief and dejection receded. A fire came to life in the fireplace, burning logs that hadn’t been there before. It cast a warm glow across the empty room.

Ariana said, “Thank you. Thank you for telling me this.”

“My pleasure. Really. You deserved to know.” A pause. “What happens now?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve been here so long, I don’t know what’s to become of me. I don’t want to fade away.”

“I don’t want that either. May I make a suggestion?”

“Please do.”

“I need a place to bunk for the rest of the semester. My roommates are morons. Maybe I could stay here? I don’t have much stuff, and I promise to respect your space. In return, perhaps you could have some of my psychic energy. And a friend to talk to.”

A few heartbeats passed. Then Ariana said, “Would you clean up a little too? Somebody broke your flashlight.” A broom and dustpan appeared beside the fireplace.

He grinned. “I’ll take care of that. Maybe I’ll give the whole place a good cleaning.”

“Thank you!”

“Well that’s settled then,” Owen said. “I’ll move my things in tomorrow. After I collect a few dollars from my roommates for winning a bet.” He turned his phone off, put it away. He gestured toward his neglected sleeping bag.

“At the moment though, I am seriously tired. May I go to sleep now? Without being tormented by a crying ghost?”

A giggle from beyond. “Don’t worry. I won’t say boo.”

