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Where the Orphans Played

BY J. M. RUQUET

PART I

Currently, I'm kicking myself for writing this down. Either because I feel like it's dumb, or the fact that I wish I wrote this down earlier. Probably both. The reason is because this is a story where the events that take place are questionable. I still don't think what happened actually happened, but as much as I want to deny it, it did happen.

And it happened to me and my friends.

I'm also kicking myself because I listed this under "Nonfiction" in my writing files.

For once, I want to set the record straight on something I experienced the summer after I graduated high school. Whatever I saw must have been a figment of my imagination. And before I jump into this, I also feel like I need to acknowledge that I have an affinity for ghosts,

UFOs, cryptids, and the macabre. Spooky shit. I have a bias on wanting to believe such things. But I still don't believe in the thing I saw not so long ago, in the remains of the abandoned orphanage outside of my hometown.

As much as I wish I was, I'm not bullshitting about what I'm going to tell you.

If you take Route 13 going toward East Homer, you're going to find nothing out



Main Building, Cortland County Poor Farm, Cortland, New York. Robert Gailor, Jr., December, 1981. Looking northeast from Loring Crossing Road at west wing and central unit. Courtesy of the Cortland County Historical Society.

of the ordinary by country road standards. There are a few houses, a mobile home park, self-storages, and a handful of local businesses that come and go. And, if you take a right on Lorings Crossing Road, go past the asphalt company and over the creek, you'll see the building that piqued my interest the day I first saw it.

In high school, I ran cross country and the back roads that we ran were some of my favorite routes to run. I was either a junior or a sophomore when we first ran past the buildings at Lorings Crossing. There was a barn in the back with what looked like a lettuce farm, a small schoolhouse, and two large buildings shaped in a "Y" formation, as if you put packing boxes in a line, then pushed the middle one down a little.

The building in the front, however, was missing the entire west wing. From the looks of it, it had burned to the ground.

According to legend, as told by our team captain, the estate was part of an old orphanage that the county had operated during the 1940s. The side of the building was burnt down by a handful of the children due to abuse going on in the main residence. At the time, that was all I knew about the estate. That is, until a couple of years later, when some friends and I were driving those back roads on a foggy night. We had gotten a little lost on the road, and that's when I saw the building again. I told my friend, who was driving, to take the right turn up ahead. On the way we had taken, we somehow ended up on Route 114, parallel to Route 13. As my friend turned, the headlights revealed the big brick behemoth that was the building. When the lights washed over it, it almost looked like it moved closer to us in the fog.

Now, obviously it did "move closer" to us, because we were driving toward it, but it still *felt* like it was moving on its own. The massive goliath stood like a testament to the dark past it was hiding.

Now, I know what you're thinking: spooky building, a bunch of teenagers with nothing to do, and a low fog? I know, it sounds like some bad, clichéd horror writing. But again, I'm just describing what I

remember from back then. Maybe it wasn't foggy, and my mind just remembers it like that. But, it was definitely a wet, rainy summer night. I wasn't really drinking a lot back then, not as much as I would the next summer, so I would hope my memory is fairly clear. In a small town, you either drive around with your friends and eat Taco Bell, or sit around in a house and do nothing but gossip about others. Like any teenager, I took part in both, but I really had a distaste for the latter.

I'm getting off topic now, but the point is that we were a bunch of bored teenagers with nothing better to do on a Wednesday summer night. So driving and Taco Bell it was.

So, when we pulled up to this place, our undeveloped brains decided, "Hey gang, let's check out this abandoned orphanage." Like Fred from *Scooby* freakin' *Doo*.

As we turned into the gravel driveway, the headlights lit the burned down side of the main building. A two-story brick institution, which was said to have housed the wards of the county, sat closed and collecting dust. Dave, Kendall, and I got out of the car to check out the old schoolhouse first. We could barely see inside, but with our flashlights, we could make out old desks and chairs stacked to the sides of the room. The windows and front doors were locked shut. None of us wanted to break the glass to get in there.

Walking back to the car, past the main building, I noticed that the front door was missing steps. Either taken out on purpose or rotted away over time. Maybe removed to discourage anyone from trying to get in. Lucky for me though, I happened to be a try-hard.

"Hey guys hold on. I want to check one last thing," I said to my friends.

"Well I'm hungry and this is dumb, so I'm going to wait in the car," Dave answered.

"We just ate."

"I'm still hungry."

Dave was like a buff Shaggy Rogers (also from *Scooby Doo*); the kid could put down food. He was also Russian.

Kendall followed behind me, still fairly curious and hoping something would happen as well.

I wanted something to happen, too. And again, I don't believe it, but something did occur.

The bottom of the door was about three and a half feet above the ground. On either side of the door were glass panes, so you could look in. Typically, the panes are made opaque for homes, but for this building they were crystal clear.

Getting up to the door wasn't that hard. The door had a fairly sturdy handle and there was at least a two-inch ledge to stand on. With the flashlight from my phone in hand, I lifted myself up and put the light on the window pane.

The light shone through into what I would call the main lobby. There was a staircase, a fireplace in the back, and furniture covered with protective sheets or something.

Because the fog had cleared just enough, the moon behind me was also able to shine a little bit of light into the main room.

Then something stood up. Either from behind a couch, or what I thought was the couch, a massive black object stood up, almost as tall as the room. Like someone stepping on a rake, the swiftness and the size of this mass was truly haunting. It was like a vampire rising from a coffin.

It could have been a couch flipped up on one side...or a bear standing on its hind legs!

My immediate thought: Nah. That's gotta be in my head, that's not real.

I waved my hand, and I could see my shadow a few feet in front of the mass. Standing on the edge of the door, holding the door knob tight, I swayed my head from side to side, hoping the mass would move the same way. Whatever that mass was, it wasn't created by my shadow.

God, I wished it was.

Not my flashlight or the moon behind me was causing the black mass, as far as I could tell. And honestly, I thought it must be some big animal that somehow found its way into the building.

Until it rushed the door! In hindsight, swaying my head the way I did may not have been the best idea.

Animals, like bears or deer, have a kind of gait when they walk or run. You can see it at night, too. I was still on the ledge when the thing first stood up. I was trying to see what animal it was. But this thing didn't have any kind of gait. No movement, except a rapid floating toward the door. And yes, that's the best word to describe its movement. Like floating or gliding across the floor. I could feel a tightening in my gut and that freezing sense of doom in the back of my skull. It was followed by a subtle shivering up my spine.

I launched myself from the ledge and onto the grass behind me. Either it was the sound of myself landing or the thing behind me, but I heard a scrapping, thudding

sound. I won't lie, I yelled like a banshee. I freaked Kendall out, and Dave was laughing in the car when we came running back to him. Jackass had locked the door, too.

I didn't look back at the ledge after I jumped. For some reason I couldn't. Looking back on it now, I think it was because (and again, I think this is stupid), because I knew it was looking at me. Whatever *it* was.

PART II

As humans, we are still animals, with old animal instincts when it comes to being in danger or when we're afraid. Fight or flight, am I right? That gut feeling people talk about is a real thing. After all, our species has relied on it for years. Why do you think we have survived for so long?

A couple of weeks went by after that Wednesday night exploration. My job at

the lake started, and I forgot about what I saw. Until I was hanging out with the same group of friends again on another Wednesday night, with nothing to do. I wanted to go back to the orphanage to check it out once more.

First, I had to do more digging into what happened there.

What caused it to burn down? Why did it close? Were there still kids living there when the fire happened? If so, did they have to be moved somewhere else because of the fire?

I started where every great researcher starts: Google. I searched for "Cortland County Orphanage," "Orphanage burns down in Cortland County." I even searched real estate websites for the plot of land.

Eventually, the only things I found were old photocopies of newspapers that vaguely



Asylum—East wing, Cortland County Poor Farm, Cortland, New York. Shirley Heppell, January 1981. Looking westward. Courtesy of the Cortland County Historical Society.

mentioned an orphanage in the county, not far from Ithaca, which I thought was strange considering that the estate was fairly far away from town, let alone Ithaca. Maybe a different orphanage had burned down before the west wing of this estate did?

The next piece I found was a bit strange as well. And if there's a part three to this story, I'm going to go back and try to find where I found all this info.

The next piece to this puzzle was a report of a census having been taken in the county five years before the federal census. According to the county census, there were 40 "wards of the county" residing in Cortland. So, I checked the federal census five years after that one. In the federal census, taken *after* the random county census, there were *zero* orphans residing in the county. Within five years, unless all of the orphans were 13 and turned 18, they all vanished off the records. How?

Sadly, I can't remember the exact years. I want to acknowledge that without proof of what I am saying, this information could just be rejected, but for the sake of my memory and the story, this is what I found.

More questions kept arising about this estate on the outside of town.

I decided to call the Cortland County Historical Society to see if they had any information on this building. When I called, a man named James answered the phone. He could've been anywhere between 50 and 70 years of age. I asked him if they had any information on an orphanage on Lorings Crossing Road or at least on the farm estate that was out there.

There was an odd moment of silence on the other end of the line. A silence that gave me the impression that either there was uncertainty about the question, or a fear of the question.

"Yes, hold on one moment. I'll look it up for you."

I waited. I waited a little longer. Then finally...

"Hello, are you still there?" asked James

"Yes, I'm still here."

"Well sir, I'm sorry, but we do not have

any information on the subject you requested." That's an odd way to phrase it, I thought to myself.

"Nothing? Not even the building that's out there? It looks really old." Not that everything that appears old is historical, but I would have thought this building had the potential to be.

"Yes sir, I'm sorry we have no information. Have a good day."

And then he hung up. *Rude.*

Another dead end? Usually the historical society people were super eager to help others in their research, even offer other places to look. But not this time, I guess. Was James hiding something or was the estate genuinely not on county records?

I needed to know what this place was and what happened.

Eventually, another dreary summer night came along with nothing to do. I was with my friend Kendall again and suggested we go check out the building one more time. Dave was done with the building, and he certainly didn't believe I saw anything. And honestly, at this point neither did I.

Before I tell you what happened, I want to make it known that I didn't have any siblings younger than 13 at the time. There also weren't a lot of kids that lived on my street back then. And as I remember, it had been raining all day.

It was around the same time of night as before when we reached the estate. We had actual flashlights this time. I'm not sure if it was the flashlights, but walking around the estate didn't feel as creepy as it had previously.

This time it felt playful. Maybe it was due to the fact that I didn't think anything was going to charge at me again, or maybe because I was finally doing some *Goonies*-level shit before I started college.

As we walked around the same way we did before, we didn't see anything. Not even a black cat or a full moon. I went back up to that door again to look in. I saw everything I saw before, but whatever held the space where the black mass had stood was now gone. All that remained in the main room was empty space, canvas covered furniture, and dust.

Disappointed, Kendall and I turned around and left the way we came. For the last time, I drove away from that building.

It wasn't until I got to Kendall's house that I noticed something I hadn't seen before we left. Pulling into her driveway, a light was shining through the passenger side window from the neighbor's garage.

"Uh, hey can you just raise your right hand for me? With your fingers spread out?" I asked.

"Why...?"

"Just... entertain me for a moment."

As she lifted her hand, I looked at the size of it.

"Why do you want to see my hand?" She asked me, confused.

I told her to look at what was on the window, revealed by the light that was shining through.

A child-sized handprint was smack in the middle of the passenger window, clearly on the outside. It looked too small to be either of ours. And remember what I said earlier? I didn't live near any small kids. It was raining that day. And kids love to put smudgy finger prints on what they can, including windows.

That was the last night I went to visit the estate. I've told this story to friends a few times over the last couple of years, and they seem to believe the story more than I do. Was that handprint really as small as I remember it? Could it have been my mother's handprint? She drove the other car we had, though. Even if she did put her hand on the car, why smack in the middle? And wouldn't it have washed away in the rain?

Or was it actually a memento of a forgotten, playful soul? Was that playful feeling I felt that night really just mine, or was it from a hidden energy around my friend and me?

I don't know, but reason has me doubting it was the latter. Still, back then I couldn't find any information on the place.

It's been a decade since I've been there. A part of me feels sad that I haven't gone back. That place gave me the best ghost story I have.



Aerial view, Cortland County Poor Farm, Cortland, New York. Vick's Sky Prints, ©1979. Looking northeast. Courtesy of the Cortland County Historical Society.

However, since I started writing this, I have an urge to look back into this farm estate, this place where the orphans played.

PART III

Okay, everything so far is the original story, and how I told it for a handful of years. It is my belief, for stories, that the magic is in the mystery when it comes to a good one, but there were some things that didn't sit right with me.

I tried going back to find the old documents that I originally saw online in 2015, but I haven't been able to find any of them. As someone who believes in research and holds himself up to a certain standard to find information, I needed to dig deeper into this place that haunts my story.

So I did. And the results aren't pretty.

The estate in question is, in fact, the old Cortland County Poor Farm—a place where during the late 1800s, if you couldn't pay your debts, was a place the state government sent you. When I was going back and searching “Cortland County Orphanage” online, I went into the images section and saw one single photo of the main building and underneath it, “Cortland County Poor

Farm.” There it was, a Wikipedia page for this creepy place.

You've got to be kidding me, I thought, where the hell was this page five years ago? Making me feel like a failure of a researcher, it turns out the place is on the National Register of Historic Places. It was placed on the list in 1982.

I will be fair with myself. I was only 18 when I first tried to find out more about it. Finding information on the place was more of “I'll find what I can at first go” kind of research for me. But damn, how'd I miss *this*?

It turns out the place originally belonged to a Judge John Keep, who was a justice of the peace as well as a prominent and respected citizen. According to the documents that I found, he was reputed to be kind and generous to the poor and unfortunate. He might have turned over in his grave if he knew what was happening there after the county purchased his farm.

According to the document from the National Register, in 1824, the Secretary of State of New York, J. V. N. Yates surveyed the poor relief programs in detail throughout the state. In his report, he found that

the current systems in place were inhumane, inequitable, and overall, a cost to the state. He identified a lack of productive employment as a central defect. Yates' solution to the issue, which was enacted into law in 1825, was poor reform, which required each county in the state to “establish a workhouse connected with a farm, the paupers there to be maintained and employed at the expense of the respective counties, in some healthful labor, chiefly agricultural.”

So, basically, the state government took advantage of the poor (like many governments do, apparently). And over time, because the population of the state kept growing, so did the poor and needy populations. As the farm kept getting more people, it eventually became overrun with residents. More buildings were added, but by the 1850s, not only was the farm trying to take care of the poor populations, it was also attempting to care for the mentally ill. According to the estate document from the National Register database, the building directly behind the main house was fashioned into an insane asylum.

Why the hell wasn't this in the story I was told my sophomore year?

I found another document from 1864 as well. It's the report from the 88th Assembly of the State of New York when a team of state inspectors went to each county to report on the state of the poor farms. If I'm going to leave you with anything truly haunting, it will be how our nation took care of the monetary and psychological needs of its people.

The provision for the care of the insane poor in the county of Cortland is shockingly bad. Of eighty-eight paupers, thirty-one are insane; being more than one-third the whole number. Eighteen are males and thirteen are females. About twenty-four of this number are of American birth. Not a single case has ever been treated in an asylum, although several have been admitted for fifteen or twenty years; fifteen cases are mild, nine are violent, and twelve are excitable. Eleven are filthy, several are not only insane but

Here's an excerpt from the state report on the Cortland County Poor Farm:

1864 Cortland County Poor House

Posted on September 19, 2013

“The provision for the care of the insane poor in the county of Cortland is shockingly bad. Of eighty-eight paupers, thirty-one are insane; being more than one-third the whole number. Eighteen are males and thirteen are females. About twenty-four of this number are of American birth. Not a single case has ever been treated in an asylum, although several have been admitted for fifteen or twenty years; fifteen cases are mild, nine are violent, and twelve are excitable. Eleven are filthy, several are not only insane but have become idiotic. None of the males perform any amount of labor, six females perform some indoor labor. There is no system of amusement or light occupation to divert the mind of any. Ten are destructive, nine require occasional restraint; the violent are controlled by close cells and straight-jackets. The house has not a full supply of water. The insane are not all required to wash hands and face daily! The arrangement for cleanliness and ventilation is imperfect; several are confined in cells without the privilege of coming daily to the open air!! The building is a story and a-half wood structure, ill adapted to the purpose for which it is used; the ceilings are low, the bedsteads are wood, and usually two sleep in one bed; in one bed three sleep; in some instances a sane and an insane sleep together. Such as are able, come to a common table, the others have food carried to them; the diet is such as a farmer's table affords, plain but ample. The rooms are heated in winter with wood and coal stoves, with stove pipes running through the rooms, without attention to uniformity of heat. There is no accommodation for the various grades of insane; but the violent cases are kept in cells in a building off from the main building. In one ward ten are constantly confined. The sexes are not kept entirely separated, and male attendants are employed to care for female insane. The atmosphere in the rooms is generally unwholesome. At this institution recent cases are received! Two cases were received in 1864. Ultimate recovery by management or treatment is not held in view. Dr. H.O. Jewett, who visited this house says, “the edifice is a badly constructed affair. It was originally a farm house, additions having been made to it; the cells are seventeen in number, 5 1/2 x 6 1/2 feet, ten feet ceiling in front, the wall above being finished upon the rafters; there is one window of eight lights to each cell. There are really no means except accidental ones, for ventilating the various rooms; and with the present arrangement of the house uniform or appropriate warmth in winter season is out of the question; neither is there sufficient help employed in the establishment to ensure anything like proper cleanliness of the apartments or persons of the inmates. The common claims of humanity would seem to demand some regulations which will secure more attention to the physical comfort and moral training of each individual, and the special medical treatment of the insane.” What language can be more explicit or more earnest? Is it any wonder that in such want of care the insane become idiotic or demented, and the mild cases incurable?”

SOURCE: Documents of the Assembly Of The State Of New York, Eighty-Eighth Session, 1865, Volume 6, Nos. 199 to 112 Inclusive, Albany: C. Wendell, Legislative Printer, 1865, Pages 188–9.

New York State County Poor Houses:

<https://inmatesofwillard.com/2013/09/19/1864-cortland-county-poor-house/>

have become idiotic. None of the males perform any amount of labor, six females perform some indoor labor. There is no system of amusement or light occupation to divert the mind of any. Ten are destructive, nine require occasional restraint; the violent are controlled by close cells and straight-jackets. The house has not a full supply of water... The building is a story and a-half wood structure, ill adapted to the purpose for which it is used; the ceilings are low, the bedsteads are wood, and usually two sleep in one bed; in one bed three sleep; in some instances a sane and an insane sleep together... There is no accommodation for the various grades of insane; but the violent cases are kept in cells in a building off from the main building. In one ward ten are constantly confined. The sexes are not kept entirely separated, and male attendants are employed to care for female insane. The atmosphere in the rooms is generally unwholesome...

So, what did I see that night half a decade ago? Was it the soul of an angry pauper who couldn't really leave the property? A young child abandoned by their parents? Or a violent patient in need of proper care?

Whatever it was I saw that night does not compare to the horrors that this building had seen in its prime.

May we never repeat those mistakes again. ▼

John Ruquet, MSIS, is from Cortland, New York, and is a graduate of Siena College and SUNY University at Albany. He currently contributes to the Jefferson Historical Society's digital image collection project and helped construct the Proctors Collaborative Scene Shop props catalog. Small town life has shaped him and his interests, and he hopes this story will do the same for you. Photo courtesy of the author.



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