

## Into the attic

When someone claims their 6-inch-high frozen yogurt sundae, tumbling with crumbled snicker bars and gummy bears, is only 100 calories, I give them the benefit of the doubt. When someone insists their pet boxer, straining at the end of his leash, snarling and spitting at me, is actually a nice dog trying to make friends, I hold open the possibility that Fido is just having a bad day. When someone declares they were passed over for a promotion because their boss hates people who wear loafers, I try to believe. But sometimes I just can't.

I don't believe lucky numbers can help anyone win the 100-million-dollar Mega-Jackpot lottery. I don't believe Nessie looms in famous Loch Ness, cleverly evading all detection. And I really don't believe my bread can toast up with the image of beloved Great Aunt Ida's face to let me know she's still around, looking out for me – it isn't a sign, it's a breakfast dish. No, I am a supernatural cynic, a skeptic, a scoffer, and a scorner.

I know numbers, man-made constructs symbolizing a quantity, cannot impart forces on flying numbered ping pong balls in a clear tube careening like toddlers in a ball pit after a bag of Sour-Patch Kids, selectively directing this ball then that ball into a lottery machine hopper in the exact same order as the birthdate of Elvis Presley. Could Nessie, often claimed to be a dinosaur, remain living disregarding the expiration date on all biological creatures? The giant barrel sponge, *Xestospongia Muta*, is one of the longest-lived animals on Earth and can survive as long as 2,300 years, but Nessie can live from dinosaurs' time, 150,000,000 years ago? And why would Great Aunt Ida waste her time contouring the heating elements of the toaster just for an ambiguous self-portrait? Why not just write her message on a napkin, "Dayton is a pit, you gotta move!" She can accelerate and decelerate the speed of individual electrons in copper wires, but she can't move one pencil? The slam dunk of rational thought simply wins the day by reducing the possibility of these occurrences to an impossibility.

When it comes to ghosts you would be right to think that I don't believe in them either. Some people want to believe so badly. A plate falling off a vintage restaurant's display shelf is surely the act of a now-deceased patron expressing displeasure with the new decorating theme. Boards creaking in an old tavern is certainly the wandering spirit of a long-ago gambler shot dead after caught cheating. A chill wind always whipping through an old train station must be the apparition of dedicated Old Man Porter racing to make the last train over and over in perpetuity. Believers are so convinced, and old homes, with a long list of previous but now deceased residents, are just primed for conjecture.

For ghost believers, my parents have the perfect house, a 150-year-old Victorian near Poughkeepsie, NY. It retains the old-timey dark green trim eyelining the windows of the white clapboard siding, rising to a peaky, steeped, asymmetrical roofline. Shawled in a wraparound porch, it stubbornly stands tall and gaunt through the years. Inside, with antiques visible from any view point, the many-windowed, light filled living room gives way to the dramatically darkly painted dining room that finishes off in the vintage kitchen of milky white.

On the second floor, each of the three bedrooms has its own theme. The master bedroom is French Country with a lacey poufy white comforter on a tall, dark cherry poster bed. The second bedroom goes utilitarian as an office/TV room in which my father cloisters himself away avidly following sport scores, paying bills or rendering his to-do list for the day. The third bedroom has blue toile wallpaper on the walls and ceiling, an old-fashioned iron-frame bed, and generations worth of childhood dolls and stuffed animals carefully seated amongst the shelves, chairs, and toy cribs, everyone facing towards the room's center, a hundred forever unblinking eyes seeming to silently scream for release. The worst? The hopeless stare of a child-crafted paper mache hand puppet, face looking like a ball of dirty, sticky, sugar cookie dough, and who, somehow, lost one painted-on eye.

And though the house came as two stories of finished rooms, my parents renovated part of the attic into an office for my mother. Creaky and irregular old wooden steps transport her up to a space large enough for a desk, two tables, a series of filled book cases and a futon. Letting in plenty of light are two good-sized windows preventing the area from feeling cramped or claustrophobic while giving her an expansive view of the Hudson River. When all our families stay at the house and every traditional sleeping space is used, we have to take turns sleeping here. One time it was mine.

I drove up from Virginia with my daughter, Melanie, joining my Bostonian brother and his wife for a family visit. Originally, my parents wanted to put Melanie in the attic, but she was only five at the time, and thinking of her having to navigate all those stairs in an emergency discombobulated my brain. Instead, I volunteered to

sleep there. A bed is a bed as far as I was concerned. Mom was thrilled to have a house full of family, and she would take it upon herself to make sure whoever slept up there was comfortable.

Mom, a children's book editor and perpetual motion machine, gets up in the middle of every night to fulfill a promise to read someone's manuscript, to write personal notes in each of the 300 Christmas cards she sends out every year, or to prepare a speech for a writer's group she adopted like taking in a scruffy, 3-legged puppy, then she returns to bed for an hour or so, waking up at 7:00 A.M, bright and perky, ready to help. While her nights are action-filled indeed, her days are not for the weak either. For breakfast, she may prepare a spread of French toast and bacon, grapefruits halved and sectioned, a bowl of blueberries, strawberries and raspberries selected for both color and visual pleasure, a sampling of dried cereals, milk in a pristine white pitcher, and orange juice in clear, dainty juice glasses. Putting out lunch, mom will include bread of wheat, rye and white, a lunch meat plate with turkey, ham and roast beef, a bowl of each tuna salad and egg salad, a bowl of salad-salad, mayonnaise, mustard, ketchup (for some reason), salad dressings, pickles, potato chips and a bowl of apples. Dinner could be an authentic Czech affair with succulent roast duck, fluffy homemade dumplings, and sweet sauerkraut with caraway seeds. In between meals perhaps she'll bake cookies with the grandkids, working it in around cutting out paper dolls and constructing for them a full doll wardrobe covering day-wear through red carpet gowns. Then, working on a 1000-piece puzzle with my father sounds good, and afterwards, a half hour drive to take us antique shopping in Rhinebeck, stopping on the way back to get our nails done and our eyebrows waxed (why not? We are already here!), go home and play a game of hearts, play another game of hearts, and then play another game of hearts.

And that's not all!

Want yarn made from possum fur? She knows a yarn shop that specializes in that. We can go later today. Keen on vintage books? You'll be reading your own collector's edition A Tale of Two Cities before you can say "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." You want to learn how to fly an ultralight? "Well, I think it might be a bit difficult to find a place today ...," Mom hesitates. "But Mom...," someone says. "You know what? Let's do it!" Mom rebounds.

In cold weather, Mom builds a friendly blaze in the fireplace, in warm weather she'll sit us by the kitchen window to watch the black capped chickadees visit the house's hanging suet, and in all seasons, she insists the table be fully set for meals including lighted candles and cloth napkins, making it look like a photo from a home and garden magazine. All of this is for us but also for the house. Mom loves to make it a participant in her energized activities, as if the house were some creaky, great-great aunt passed into Mom's care. Christmastime is special for the house and Mom. She dresses it up in wreaths, poinsettias, garlands, and gold-red ribbons spiraled up the stair bannister. Placed in the living room is the crown, a giant Christmas tree enveloped in multi-colored light strings and festooned with pewter, porcelain, and glass ornaments that tickle the eye with blue, red, green, white and purple.

At other times, she'll take out old photographs of the house. She delicately picks one up. Puts the photo down in front of us. Pauses for us to register the moment, sure we are grasping the profound of such a lovely, old house and its history. Then on to the next photograph. As house protector, she stands guard over the old floral wallpaper in the bathroom against overly boisterous bathing grandchildren and defending from any replacement, the original stairs up to her office garret though new ones would be less harrowing. Her job as caretaker even extends to the home's tragic story of the early 1900's when the lady of the house, Mrs. Keller, hung herself in the attic. What caused the home's tragedy is unknown to mom and irrelevant anyway. All she knows is that the house needs love that much more because of it.

It is conceivable that I have felt some resentment towards the house when Mom won't put up shades blinding the bathroom window, or she insists we spend an afternoon sitting on its porch battling away yellow-jackets, but it is a warm and loving house, and I was glad to be there for our weekend visit. To end our full day, we settled in front of the TV for some good, creepy, mysterious, murder show. Yes, I am a scoffer of the paranormal, but I do love an eerie, spine-tingling story. Finishing the show, we dispersed to our respective bedrooms. Up in the attic, I read in bed until I got sleepy, turned out the light and fell asleep in the inky darkness.

Well into my R.E.M. sleep, I suddenly became fully awake. It wasn't caused by a shout, a door slamming shut, a scratching at the window. It wasn't a touch on my shoulder, a grab of my foot or a sudden wave of cold air. It wasn't an overwhelming waft of perfume, wasn't a reek of old Hudson River water. With my body still in sleep position, my mind was completely absolutely alert for no apparent reason. Processing the situation, I no longer

felt the atmosphere as inert and nescient, though the night was perfectly silent, the air perfectly still. Yet, I knew what was happening.

I.  
Was.  
Absolutely.  
Positively.  
Doubtlessly.  
Being watched by a ghost.

More than that, I knew the ghost. It was Mrs. Keller, the lady who, all those years ago, hung herself in that very space. She was beside my futon, leaning over me. Not only did I, at that moment, believe the ghost of Mrs. Keller existed, there was no question that she was a malevolent spirit set on harm and evil doings. As I lay there in bed, eyes clamped, body locked, heart racing, I was undividedly, unconditionally and utterly terrified

“Chris!!!!” I silently demanded at my ghost-sensing self, “You don’t believe in this crap! You are a hard-core, ultra-rational, non-believer in nonsense! Stop being an idiot!”

“But Chris!!!” strained my voice as I silently screamed back, “I know that, but this time it is a ghost, and she is standing over me! WHAT SHOULD I DO?!”

“Open your eyes and see that there is nothing there!”

“Are you crazy? I can’t open my eyes. Making eye contact only empowers the ghost with the ability to DO ME HARM!” I wailed back, hermetically sealing my clam shell eye lids

“Oh my god! Where did you hear that?! That makes no sense!”

“I didn’t hear it anywhere; I just KNOW! It’s, like, some intrinsic truth!”

“Stop now and calm ....”

“WAIT! WHAT WAS THAT SOUND?! SHE IS RUSTLING AROUND THE BED TO TRICK ME INTO OPENING MY EYES!”

“Chris, sweetie, it is an old house and old houses creak and make noises. Tree’s moan and ...”

“Or she is moaning!”

“Now take a step back and reason this ...”

“Hang on, maybe she isn’t mad that I violated her sanctified room or maybe she doesn’t even know I’m here!!! Maybe she is just walking around lamenting her fate and regret! Don’t draw attention to yourself, team. Quietly, calmly, little tiny breaths in and out. *weee whoo weee whoo.*”

“She doesn’t know you are here because she isn’t here! Come on physics teacher, ghosts can’t exist, they can’t do things. There are only four types of forces – electromagnetic, gravitation, strong, ...”

“Wait, she knows. Why else is she looming over my bed?!”

“Just turn on the light and look! Come on, you can do it!”

“You are right!”

“I am glad you finally see that you are being ridiculous!”

“OBVIOUSLY!!! LIGHTS. FRIGHTEN. GHOSTS! If I can just turn the light on without opening my eyes I WILL LIVE THROUGH THIS NIGHT!”

“Oh dear god.”

“Yes, yes. The light!”

“So, ghosts exist and are also photosensitive? Really?!”

“WAIT!”

“Ah, a crack of lucidity starting to creep in?”

“But, then I’ll have to move, and she’ll know I’m awake! Then she’ll be able to send a swarm of black flies to engulf me or make the blind chords draw me up, hanging me by the neck until I die. So wicked this one is. Ok, Ok, I walk on the razor’s edge. I have to reason this out carefully now...”

“You are running amuck! Snap out of this!”

“SHUT UP! Either help or shut your face! I can’t listen to you right now. I AM IN A LIFE OR DEATH STRUGGLE HERE. OK. I have one chance to make it out alive. I have NO other choice! I have to move in a single motion to the light, with my eyes closed, and pull the switch before she can pounce on me. That will expel her from this realm and I will live to see morning.

“Really?! Really gonna go through this whole thing?”

“Oh god! Can I do this?”

“You remember mercilessly mocking the husband for watching a Big Foot special on Discovery ...”

“OK. OK. OK. One. Two. Three...”

Arms flailing isotropically, face protectively pinched into a tight dot, mind shut down to its purist caveman survival instincts, I launched myself towards the standing lamp at the side of the bed and pulled down on any,

and all, things I could grasp. Amongst my frenzied clutching and yanking, the light finally flicked on. Gasping for breath, sweat dripping down my face, neck and chest, heart pounding like a marching band drum corps, I opened my eyes and looked around.

I was alone. Mrs. Keller was gone. The lamp stood humbly by my side, oblivious to its life saving valor amid the pandemonium. I scrutinized my surroundings, my blanket crumpled in a snarl next to the bed, the pillows, projected across the room, slumped against the bookcase, against the file cabinet, and my book face down on the floor, pages smashed, bent and ripped. But I didn't care about any of that.

I was alive.  
I was safe.

And I no longer sensed any presence, my warm, glowing, yellow lamp light shield repulsing any apparition. Not exactly relaxed, but, relieved, I could convince myself to shut my eyes and try to go back to sleep, trusty floor lamp shining courageously by my side. By the time my breathing slowed down and my sweat dried, I had fallen asleep despite the 75-watt beams shining into my face. Exhausted by my narrow escape from death, I slept straight through the remainder of the night, warded from further existential peril.

Waking to the morning light, I dragged my body out of bed and plodded down the creaky stairs, my nighttime encounter's shadow trailing behind me. Over cereal at the breakfast table I said, "Mom, I didn't sleep well at all. I had the most distinct feeling I was haunted by Mrs. Keller." "There are no ghosts in this house!" Mom exclaimed in the same tenor she would if I had said her mother poked babies and mocked them until they cried. She didn't dispute that there were ghosts, just that one would be here in this lovely and loved home. Which was really beside the point as far as I was concerned, unsettled feelings needed to get settled here. It wasn't just being tired. It wasn't just the psychological hangover from having had my brain plunged in a torrent of adrenalin as if I had fought my way out of a high-speed train car derailment. Staring into my bowl of cheerios bobbing up and down in the white milk, a feeling of intense guilt was coalescing.

Who was I last night? I thought of myself as Dorothy, not the Cowardly Lion, as Will Robinson not Dr. Smith. Why that acquiescent, bounteous embrace of the supernatural? I hadn't just flirted with believing, I was leading the psychic Bloody Mary's New Orleans Ghost Tour. What happened to the logical self I had always known? That self just threw spit balls at a gun fight. How could I betray myself like that? If someone told Yesterday-Me a story like this? I might respond with: "Maybe you should wear garlic to sleep tonight or put a ring of salt around your bed. You can tie a horseshoe to your forehead." Sitting there at our breakfast table, I did not believe in the Loch Ness monster; I did not believe in lucky numbers; and I did not believe in ghosts, but the dissonant shadow from the night continued to lurk. "It's OK," I said to myself, "There must be a rational explanation!" Just saying this already made me feel more my old self. In the meantime though, I forced my daughter to share her room with me, a bit dishonestly telling her it was because I missed her too much to sleep without her

Now, this happened before Google and information's easy and unlimited availability; so as much as I wanted to delve and resolve my self-betrayal, life's demands back home easily outweighed any trip to a library this required. Instead, I ignored that it happened, and, in time, fell back into scoffing and dismissing. There was one hitch to this ostrich-in-the-sand tack, however. Every time I was in the old house and refused to sleep in the attic, an indignant inner voice would barge into my otherwise content thoughts about how scrambled eggs emulsify or why, under a microscope, tears from grief look different than tears from onions. "You call yourself a scientist?!" accosted the voice. "You might as well take a trip to find Big Foot's poop," she might add crudely. And, over time these accusations snowballed en force out of my mental holding pen. By letting stand my time with Mrs. Keller, was I really different from the lady in front of me in the everlasting DMV line when she said she was going to pass her driving test because, "Today, Leo's have a high degree of analytical ability!?" Could I really judge Dick, wearing his lucky boxers to the Washington Capitals hockey game against the Pittsburgh Penguins, never washing it because it would strain out its fate determining ability? I wanted to laugh at Aunt Ida toast, but how could I given my attic aversion? By this time, my daughter had left for college leaving me a lot of free time, and google, the I-can-find-the-average-diameter-of-a-man's-nostril, was on the scene greasing the path I needed to put this internal battle to rest.

And one morning I got up, dressed, poured myself a cup of coffee and sat down in front of my computer. Fingers starting on my keyboard's home row, I tapped the question into Google's search bar, "Why do people believe in ghosts?", to which Google answered in 0.61 seconds with a list of over 29 million results. Recoiling, I immediately typed in "goats at play videos" and allowed the results to take me to lands with adorable kids joyously springing over sleeping dogs, triumphantly cresting sitting cows, and springing off the proximal adult

goat to successfully complete a backflip. A perfect 10! And the goat videos led me to other videos including cats-knocking-things-down, dogs-that-say-“I love you” and finally culminating into hanging-upside-down-sloths-eating-carrots. These empty calories of the internet left my brain warm, content and happy. And at my bed time. Following a good night’s sleep, I got up, dressed, poured myself a cup of coffee and sat down at my computer ready to pick up where I left off the night before with what promised to be a great lady-vacuuming-her-duck video, when I saw my search history of ghost believing staring at me accusingly – Google had done its part to help me and I was doing nothing to help myself. “Yes, Google,” I said, eyes downcast, “I know, I know.” Reluctantly turning from what looked to be a very happy duck, I brought up my search results from the day before and selected the most scientific sounding websites listed.

After reading a few scientific sources, I compiled a list of potential causes for seeing or believing one had interacted with ghosts, angels, demons, or any of their supernatural brethren. Right away, I could eliminate a lot of the prospects. Taking psychoactive drugs? Nope. Having a near-death experience. Nope (though long stays with family can feel that way). Meditating deeply? Nope. Hypnosis? Nope. Sleeping anomalies? Nope. Being in a coma? Nope. Of course, I could be in a coma only *thinking* I was awake and going about living my life, and mentally manifested a Mrs. Keller within my mental manifestation. But nope, too Escheresque. Moving on.

Another candidate, brain damage was next. I have been known to walk in tight little figure eights in the parking garage when I can’t remember where I parked. But this behavior seems less indicative of physical insult to my gray matter than of quirkiness, weirdness, whatever you want to call it, so not that one. Next came some unfamiliar terms-as-cause. First was the “natural born dualist”. These people believe that the body and sense of self, the soul if you will, are two distinct entities so that a soul disconnected from its body could float around, untethered. But untethered souls run smack right in the face of scientific findings that it is the hyperactive networks of brain neurons that creates a “self” and if not for the physical connections of axons and dendrites sending and receiving electrical impulses I would be a very large potted fern. I am no dualist. Next! There was “Agentivity” and “Patternicity”, both conferring intentional cause to and deliberated order in events. This would be like a person trying to put the salt shaker back on the high kitchen shelf and it falls and they try to put it up again and it falls and they try to put it up again and it falls so they throw the salt shaker across the room because something keeps knocking that saltshaker off the shelf! I fume at the salt shaker falls as much as the next guy, but don’t believe some deliberate being is behind it all. I was nearly out of candidates, but all was not lost, there was one more. The Sensed Presence Effect.

Pausing, *Yes, I thought, it was a sense, a sudden sense, that Mrs. Keller was present that dark night.* It was a promising start, but I needed to know more. I leaned into the computer screen and eagerly read on. The people experiencing this phenomenon included names I knew. Ernest Shackleton, famed polar explorer, who, while stranded at the bottom of the earth with his crew, battling their way to a distant whaling station, commented that as his party of three overcame disjointed tippy ice floes, treacherous frigid waters and desolate lifeless terrain, he had the distinct impression that a fourth presence joined his party. Charles Lindbergh, flying through fog and sleet, sleepless, all alone for 33 ½ hours while keeping his plane 10 feet above the open ocean on his transatlantic flight to Paris, felt the fuselage behind him fill with spectral presences, “... vaguely outlined forms, transparent, moving, riding weightless with me in the plane conversing and advising on my flight, discussing problems of my navigation, reassuring me, giving me messages of importance unattainable in ordinary life.” Juric Robic, competing in the 3,000-mile non-stop transcontinental bicycle [Race Across America](#), sensed that he was being chased by a “howling band” of black-bearded horsemen. OK, so I didn’t know Juric’s name, but what a dramatic story! And he, like the others, hadn’t claimed a belief in ghosts before or after their experience – it was one blip. I sat back in my chair. These daring, gutsy adventurers. These skilled, hyper-capable citizens. These brave trailblazers, assaulted by mother nature’s harshest temper, pushed to the brink, forced into a life or death struggle, all sensed a non-corporeal being, an unearthly visitor welcomed or not, an inexplicable, unbelievable, unexpected yet undeniable reaching out by a something, a someone. Just like me.

Well, maybe not *just* like me. I lack a bit in the daring department – when confronted with a helicopter ride over the Grand Canyon, I will hold the purses and backpacks on the ground. My skills top out at keeping each arm and leg on its own rhythm on a drum kit. And my trailblazing peaks at buying slippers with rubber lowers so I can wear them out to the grocery store because I believe they can pass as shoes and “why shouldn’t we live more comfortably?” But more importantly, was I “pushed to the brink”? When my brother refused to help clean the kitchen after dinner that night, was I at my existential limit? I mean he helps just enough so we can’t say he never helps, but he does no more. Just thinking about it and I’m gritting my teeth. Uncomfortable? Yes, but maybe, maybe, not quite like the punishing conditions of escaping the Antarctic, crossing the Atlantic Ocean solo or biking across the entire US continent. And such extreme experiences seemed a necessary ingredient. Shoulders slumped, I sighed, conceding that as promising as the Sensed Presence Effect started out, it was not my cause.

Google tried to give me other scientific explanations, but it failed, leaving the elephantine cognitive dissonance still standing before me, unresolved. "I am science girl! I am logic lady!" I bleated. Why had I believed, all-in and without equivocation, the ghost of Mrs. Keller was glowering over me that night? This betrayal mustn't stand, but research, despite its valiant effort, wasn't going to come through this time. What could it be? I considered and I contemplated. I mulled. I reflected and I ruminated. I moped. I dallied and deliberated. I meditated. I confronted and cogitated. Then suddenly, I knew. I knew what happened

Throwing a double fist pump into the air, comforting serotonin spreading throughout my cerebral cortex, I knew what it was. Let's call it the "Yeah, but just in case..." response. It goes something like this: Yeah, I don't believe in the supernatural, but just in case I'm wrong, when in strange, shadowy conditions primed for shenanigans, I won't say that out loud." If by some sub-sub-atomically small chance it is true that a ghost or the devil could materialize and cause harm, I don't want to be that one person who, while claiming he didn't exist, is overheard by the fire-loving, gut-eviscerating fellow. I wouldn't want to antagonize him. On some dark, moonless night, in an old cemetery with crumbling headstones, standing over dead decaying bodies - the devil's minions - I would start out on the slightly more positive foot by respecting the remotest possibility of his existence. Then he won't have to sic a demonic red-eyed pig-dog on me while I am running away from my 5th grade Math teacher, shrieking for the homework I forgot, again, and crawling out of an inert TV, forcing me to careen into blood oozing walls, while the red guy engulfs me in the anguished endless blood curdling shrieks of other non-believers. All to make his point that he is real. I don't want to be used to set an example

So, move over logic genes and make room for your "cover your bases" kin. It's a harmless cushion to keep around. It isn't exactly believing that ghosts exist, it is, rather, a passing, momentary, situation-dependent belief that maybe I don't not believe in ghosts at all times. I was, in that dark room, in that distant attic all those years ago, an ephemeral not-not-believer

Another Mrs. Keller-type phantasmagoric curve ball may come at me some future deep into the night, black, dank and musty, fermented and sharp, tingling and prickling, creaky and whistling, where the world falls away into a distant, tiny singularity. Fear rooted stubbornly in the primitive parts of my brain, I will not be able to talk myself out of believing, will seal my eyes shut, will lunge for any light I can hope to switch, will wait until the bright electric yellow light pierces through my eye lids, and only then will open my eyes and feel like I have narrowly avoided a premature and decidedly gruesome expiry.

And that means, while my particular extended belief system can come out on a dark night, up creaky stairs, in an isolated death-visited attic, another's may come out while taking a walk inside the dusty hall of a civil war era library or standing beside a lake in Scotland. I am, in my own way, with my own version of mysticism and superstitions, just another Big Foot believer. We can't always control what our brain tells us.

I'd like to say I won't judge, but I probably will. But now I will sigh only a little when someone excitedly tells me they found a lucky penny. I will sneer, but with only one side of my lip when they talk about their latest palm reading. Maybe a little less eye roll, maybe a little less sass.

But most importantly, I will not sleep in the attic ever again