



The Ghost Tour

By Shane Folke

"What did you think 'one hundred percent authentic ghost experience' meant, exactly?"

"Come on, Max. They all say that. Magicians say that. My dad says it when he plays Santa at the mall. I'm just not comfortable with something where I need to sign a waiver."

Max could barely contain his frustration. This experience had been booked over a year in advance. And now, just feet from the front door of the most haunted house in America, Melissa was getting cold feet. He couldn't believe it.

"I'm going to step over here and prepare a few things," Ryan, the tour guide, said. "I'll give you a few minutes to decide." He picked up his backpack and sat down on the concrete steps of the two-story Victorian house before adding one final thought. "If you're not sure about this, you shouldn't do it. It's okay to back out. No harm, no foul. But once we go in, we can't come back out until it's over. No matter what." The warning reinforced Melissa's hesitation, but it made Max even more excited.

"Melissa. I want to do this so bad. I've been waiting for this day forever."

"Then just do it. But I'm not going in there."

"That's not fair - "

"No, I mean it. I'm not upset. I like all this horror stuff. I do. But I'm never going to be into it the way you are. I'll wait outside, and besides," Melissa said, holding up her bottle of wine, "I've got this. I'll be fine." Max wasn't convinced she was being honest about how she felt, but the look in her eyes was soft and genuine. He knew that even out here, she'd end up getting creeped out, but she was trying. And he loved her for it.

"You're sure?"

"Go. Just don't take too long. If I finish this bottle before you get back out here, you're buying me a second one for the walk home."

"Deal." Max kissed her forehead and buried his nose into her hair. The smell of her vanilla and honeycomb shampoo always comforted him. "I love you. You're the best. I mean it!" As Max let go, the tour guide was getting back to his feet.

"Okay. Glad that's settled. This whole thing shouldn't take more than an hour and a half. The front door is going to be locked until we finish." He turned to Max and said, "You seem like a tough enough guy, but

I can't risk you getting scared and trying to leave before we're done. Do what I say, and we'll be safe. Got it?" Max agreed, then gave Melissa one final hug before they headed into the house.

Inside, the house was in even worse condition. The walls were cracked and chipped away. The dried, dead floorboards creaked and groaned with even the gentlest steps, and thick dust seemed to be suspended permanently in the air. The entire house stunk of mold and rotten wood. Ryan locked the door behind them as Max took in the atmosphere of the room. "How long have you been doing this?" Max asked.

"At this particular house? About three years. The only way this works is to build up a relationship with the spirits. The ghost here is a little bit on the aggressive side; that's why I only do these tours a few times a year." As he talked, Ryan turned on a small Bluetooth speaker that was clipped to his belt, and slow, gentle jazz music echoed through the house.

"What is that?" Max asked.

"Buddy - the ghost here - he likes it. It's the only reason he tolerates my visits. Follow me."

Ryan led Max through the foyer and into a decrepit kitchen. There was no fridge and only the skeleton of a stove. They passed through into what must have been a bedroom at one point. It was clear that Ryan had been inside earlier to prepare. The room was illuminated by half a dozen red candles, and a pentagram drawn from salt took up most of the floor. They knelt at the far end, away from the door, at the apex of the Pentagram. Ryan handed Max a small, velvet bag. Inside he could feel dried herbs and leaves. He brought it to his nose and breathed in. It smelled spicy and slightly sweet. "That's your Gris-Gris," Ryan explained. "I'm from New Orleans, so some of my practice comes from Louisiana Voodoo. This is a talisman that's going to create a bond between you and the spirit world. You need to put something of yours inside. Hair, an item, spit, anything." Ryan took another bag of Gris-Gris and placed it in the center of the Pentagram, then gestured for Max to do the same.

"Mon pote, je t' appelle pour la commune," Ryan began. Max couldn't understand any of it, but he felt the room growing colder as he spoke. He plucked a few hairs from his head, placed them inside, and then put his Gris-Gris into the circle. "Écoutez-moi et visitez la plaine astrale. J'ai apporté le cadeau de la musique et je ne demande moment de contact en detour." It felt instantly as if the temperature of the room had dropped thirty degrees. Max tried to ignore the icy numbness that was setting over his skin, instead focusing on the drums and syrupy trumpet sounds that filled the room. "Êtes-vous ici?" Ryan asked. "Êtes-vous ici?" They waited in silence for a reply, but Max had no idea what to expect. Would he see something? Hear something? What is a real ghost encounter actually like? The question burned in him, but now he wasn't so sure he wanted to know the answer. One final time, Ryan spoke, asking, "Are you here?" And that's when Max heard something.

A slow, whispery hiss. It sounded vaguely like the word 'yes' as circled through the room, passing right through him. It was so faint that Max could barely hear it until it was echoing inside his head. The feeling of this phantom voice passing through his head was ethereal and thrilling. Max couldn't help but smile. He watched as the flames from the candles tipped forward one after another as the entity passed around the room. The hair on his neck stood on edge, and the closest thing he ever remembered feeling was when his father took him to the zoo as a child, and he stood face to face with a lion for the first

time. Being in the presence of such intense power, being so close a force of death itself. There was nothing else like it.

"Puis-je vous parler aujourd'hui?" Ryan asked. "Please?" The entity picked up speed, spinning around the room like a hurricane. The force of it nearly knocked Max over, but he caught himself against Ryan, who looked concerned and surprised by what had happened.

"Buddy? Is something wrong?" Ryan asked. A deep rumble filled the room, and the floor began to vibrate, blurring the salt lines but not breaking the Pentagram.

"Ryan, what's happening?"

"I'm not sure. Hold on."

The rumbling persisted for several seconds and then stopped. The jazz music glitched and skipped as the sound of static and random noise pierced through. It grew deafeningly loud, then all at once the strange sounds morphed and changed until they formed a deep, electric voice.

"GET OUT."

Max felt the adrenaline flood through his body as he fought every instinct to bolt for the door.

"Esprit, je m'excuse de vous déranger." Ryan's voice was shaky and timid. He was terrified. "Nous allons purifier l'air, puis nous partirons."

"GET OUT NOW."

The room shook harder, spreading the salt across the floor until the Pentagram was hardly recognizable. The Bluetooth speaker exploded in a shower of sparks, and the place went quiet. "Is it gone?" Max asked. He'd had enough, and wanted to get out as fast as possible.

"I don't know. I don't know what that was." Ryan dug a flashlight out of his backpack and used it to scan the room. He examined the salt pentagram on the floor. "Do you see any breaks? Is it still intact?" Max followed the light's jerky movements but couldn't focus long enough to make out the Pentagram's edges.

"I can't tell." Max gave up and watched Ryan's face, desperate for clues. Were they in danger?

"We need to redraw it." Ryan said. He poured more salt into the blurry Pentagram, then used a long steel ruler to hastily sharpen the edges. He grabbed Max by the shoulders and positioned him in the center. "Open you Gris-Gris bag." Max obeyed, and Ryan filled it with a mix of what looked like dried leaves and sticks, then poured three drops of an earthy scented liquid into the bag. "Close it up. This is witch hazel." Ryan explained as he dabbed some of the liquid onto Max's forehead. "You need to stay right here. Keep that Gris-Gris against your chest, and don't leave this circle. You'll be safe. I need to make sure that thing isn't still here somewhere before we leave. I'll be right back."

"Ryan, I-" Max didn't have time to object before Ryan was out of the room, closing the door behind him.

The room wasn't as cold as it had been, so Max was surprised when he noticed sweat accumulating on his forehead. He clutched the Gris-Gris bag with his right hand, not daring to move it away from his chest. The flames of the candles around the room danced and threw shadows all around him. The sound

of his heartbeat throbbed through his head and into his ears. Max pulled his cell phone from his pocket and struggled to unlock it with his left hand. Melissa had told him to register both his hands into the fingerprint scanner, 'just in case.' He wished he'd listened. He could still hear her saying it. "It takes five seconds, Max. You're being stubborn." If he left this room alive, Max knew he'd never question her again. Finally, he got the phone unlocked and began composing a message to Melissa.

'Smth happened. not sure what's going on. I-'

"Max..." Hearing his name made Max jump out of his skin. His phone flew from his hand and banged around on the wooden floor before settling face down. Max looked towards the door as his eyes adjusted from the brightness of his phone screen back to the dark room. His hands trembled as a figure took form in the doorway.

"Melissa?" He hadn't noticed, but his lungs had been locked full of air, and when he exhaled. When he recognized Melissa an immense relief coursed through every fiber of his body.

"I didn't mean to scare you." Melissa said, stepping into the Pentagram. "I heard some noises and-" All around them, the salt of the Pentagram began to crackle and pop.

"Damn it!" Max exclaimed.

"What is happening?"

"I don't know. There's some spirit in here or something. Ryan is...I actually don't know what Ryan is doing."

"Should I go look for him?"

Max weighed his options. It would be a good idea to find Ryan and figure out what's going on, but the last thing he wanted was to be left in this room alone. But Melissa could stay. She hadn't seen what he'd seen. This room couldn't be any freakier to her than the rest of the house. Plus, she'd be safe with the Gris-Gris.

"No. You take this," Max said, handing her the Gris-Gris, "I'll go find Ryan. Don't leave this circle. This thing is called Gris-Gris. I don't know exactly how, but it will keep you safe. I promise."

"Okay, please hurry." Max planted a kiss on Melissa's forehead. He took a deep breath of her scent, searching for the comfort of vanilla bean and honeycomb, but all he could smell was this decrepit house. He let go and tried to shake off the feeling of dread that came with his deep breath. "I'll be right back." He said. Just as he turned away, he stopped and asked, "Hey Melissa?" He turned back to face her.

"Yes?"

"How did you get inside? We locked the door when we came in."

"Well it wasn't locked. I don't know. Can you please go find him? I'd love to get out of here." Max could feel a strong dose of venom in Melissa's voice.

"Yeah, of course. Sorry." Max replayed the moment in his head. He was sure Ryan had locked the door. He could still hear the click. Was it possible that Ryan just took off? Would he do that? Max tried to ignore the possibility as he made his way through the kitchen. Immediately he detected a new scent. It

smelled like sage and some kind of incense. He used his phone to cast light. There was a fine mist of smoke drifting through the house. "Ryan?" he called out. No response.

The house was terrifying on his own. Everything in the house reeked of death and rot. As he reached the stairs, he noticed dark stains that he somehow missed on the way in. He told himself there was too much and that it was too dark for it to be blood. He hoped he was right. Max checked the entire bottom floor of the house before accepting that he needed to go upstairs. As he ascended, he noticed the smoke - and the smell - getting heavier. At the top was a small landing with a door on either side; both were closed. He tried the door on his left first, gently turning the knob to be as quiet as possible. The old rusted mechanism jerked little by little until finally, he heard the lock click open. The door gave an obnoxious creak as he pushed it open, and as soon as there was space, something charged into him.

Max's phone flew out of his hand as he crashed to the ground with the full weight of Ryan on top of him.

"Révélez votre forme! Je te commande!"

"Get off of me!"

"Révélez-vous et rentrez chez vous!"

"Ryan it's me! It's Max!"

"Cet endroit ne vous appartient pas!" Max coughed as Ryan pressed a burning bundle of herbs into his face. Vous n'avez aucun droit ici!"

"Ryan, Stop!" Max rocked to the side and used all the force he could muster to toss Ryan aside, sending him tumbling down the stairs. Max scrambled to his feet, collected his phone, and cast his light down the stairs in time to see Ryan picking himself up. Quickly, he cast his light through the door he had opened. The room was a dead end. With his other hand, he checked the door to his left. It was locked.

"Don't come at me again. I'm warning you." Max said with all the confidence he could muster.

At the bottom of the stairs Ryan struggled to catch his breath. Judging by the way he was holding his gut, the fall had knocked the wind out of him. Max had no idea what to do. Should he try to charge down the stairs? Knock him over, grab Melissa and run? Maybe this was some misunderstanding.

"Are you like, possessed or something?" Max asked.

"Vous... n'êtes.... pas... Max." Ryan managed to say.

"What?"

"You're not Max."

"What are you talking about? It's me!"

"I told Max not to leave that room, I know where Max is." Ryan began ascending the stairs as he spoke, digging into his back pocket, muttering something that Max couldn't hear.

"No, listen - you don't understand. Melissa's here. she got in somehow. She's in the other room, I gave her the Gris-Gris thing, and she's keeping the seal. She is staying in it. She's safe."

The tour guide stopped.

"You're really Max?"

"Yes!" Max smiled, relieved that the guide finally believed him, but it was short-lived.

"No, no no no." The tour guide rushed back down the stairs. Max ran after him, chasing him all the way to the front door. He jiggled the door to make sure it was still locked, and then spit on the filthy window and wiped away the layers of dirt and dust so he could see outside. "Max, come over here. I need you to see something."

Max approached the door and looked through the filthy glass. At the bottom of the stairs was Melissa, taking what looked to be the last swig of her bottle of wine. He couldn't breathe, and he couldn't look away. His brain felt like it was short-circuiting, trying to understand what this all meant.

"Max. I know that whatever came into that room looked and sounded like her. But it wasn't Melissa."

"What was it?"

"I'm not sure. A, uh, fantôme sans visage, I think."

"What?"

"Like a faceless ghost. They don't have their own identity. Instead they appear as people you know. I thought that's what you were."

"Are they bad?"

"You could say that. But look. We're still okay. If that had been Melissa, you'd be in trouble right now. That Gris-Gris was protection for you. It wouldn't have worked for her."

"Okay, so what now?"

"Well, the bad news is we have to get your Gris-Gris back. If we leave now that thing is going to follow you. It's going to attach to you. I cleansed the rest of the house, so once we burn our Gris-Gris in the altar we can get the hell out of here." Ryan threw open the lock on the front door. "We need to move fast. Follow my lead." Ryan led Max back through the kitchen, his flashlight illuminating the thick smoke that now filled the house. The door to the far room was closed, though Max distinctly remembered leaving it open.

"Fantôme!" Ryan yelled into the void, "Vous avez quelque chose qui nous appartient. Nous allons venir le prendre, mais nous n'avons pas l'intention de vous déranger!" He waited for some kind of response, but nothing happened. "Okay, lets go." Ryan eased the door open, and they entered together. The candles had been extinguished, and the room was pitch black, except for Ryan's flashlight. The chilly air oppressed the smoke from entering with them. In the middle of the room stood Melissa.

"Remember, Max." Ryan whispered. "That isn't her."

Melissa's eyes shot up and locked with Max's. "What is he talking about, Max? I'm really scared."

"Fantôme, donne-moi le Gris-Gris." Ryan took slow, careful steps towards Melissa, careful not to disturb the Pentagram.

"Max, you told me I couldn't let go. What's happening?"

"Melissa, please - "Max was surprised at the cold rattle of his voice.

"Max, don't call her that! FANTOME, JE LE DEMANDE!"

Tears swelled in Melissa's eyes. It took every ounce of strength for Max to resist his urge to comfort her. He clenched his eyes closed and turned towards the door.

"Max? What did you do?" He heard the tour guide ask - but his voice was coming from the wrong direction.

Max opened his eyes and standing in the middle of the kitchen was Ryan. Max turned back around, looking into the ritual room. Melissa and Ryan were still there. There were two of him.

"He's tricking you Max. That's not me. I told you to hold onto that Gris-Gris. You have to listen to me." Ryan said to him from behind.

"Max, don't listen to him." The man in the room shot back. "He's not real. We need to get out of here."

Max felt dizzy and began hyperventilating. He looked back and forth at the two guides. They were identical. Melissa stood in the middle of the room, terrified. "No, Melissa is still outside." Max said, turning to the Ryan that was standing behind him. "I saw her myself."

"An illusion. It was a trick." One of the guides said, but Max couldn't place the voice.

"I warned you about all of this, Max." The other shot back.

"Max!" Another voice, distant, yelled out to him. Another Melissa approached from the other side of the kitchen. "Max what is happening?"

"I-I don't know." He turned back to the room. Another tour guide and two more Melissa's stood in the Pentagram. Everyone was staring at him. The Melissa in the center of the room extended her hand, offering Max the Gris-Gris. "Take it and go."

"Max, no! don't touch her!"

"Don't listen to him!"

"She's lying to you!"

"You have to believe me!"

"We can't leave yet!"

"Max, please help me!"

Every figure in the room was shouting at once, louder and louder until Max could no longer make out any words. Their voices bled together into a shapeless, endless shriek. Max covered his ears and screamed.

It had been over an hour since they went inside, and Melissa was starting to get worried. She considered, not for the first time, knocking on the door to see if they were almost finished. It was

getting cold, and her bottle of wine had run dry a half-hour ago. Just as she began to text Max, she heard the door open and close behind her. She stood up and brushed the dirt from her pants. "What took you so long?" She asked.

"I'm so sorry, baby." Max replied with an electric smile. She felt safer now that he was here, but the whole place still creeped her out and made her feel anxious.

"Where's the tour guide?" she asked.

"Oh, he's going to stay here. I guess he has some unfinished business with the ghosts."

Melissa shrugged and grabbed Max's hand. She lifted her empty bottle and shook it, giving Max a coy smile. "You owe me another. You promised." Max laughed.

"So I do! Maybe we can polish off a couple more before the night's over."

"Yeah? You're in a good mood. I take it you had a good time in there?"

Max looked back at the house, and then into Melissa's eyes and said, "You know, I think I'm just really happy to be back out here. With you."

She pulled Max close and leaned her head into his chest. She took a deep breath to soak in his familiar scent, but all she could smell was old rot and dust.

The end

*Formatted version can be found here:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1KQwsjNtww5R7SDz7eXtOnSpD5Ihf4Jtc7QYNxDDmoW0/edit?usp=sharing>