

Silence is Concurrence

By Amy Corwin

Kate cranked up the air conditioner and gazed out the car windows, trying to convince herself the trip wasn't a waste of time. After a five-hour drive from Raleigh to the Outer Banks, she'd expected a more...haunting atmosphere. Patches of saltmarsh, interspersed with sinuous ribbons of water, shimmered under the burning North Carolina sun. You could see for miles. Hard to imagine a less ominous landscape or one less likely to host tales of the supernatural.

"Turn left in 300 feet," the electronic voice of a peevish woman ordered.

"Well, I could do that, but we'd end up in the driveway of," she studied the mailbox, "the wrong house." After another glance at the GPS precariously mounted on the curving edged of the dashboard, she continued forward.

"Recalculating..." the female voice complained.

Ahead, a combination gas station/convenience store baked under the late afternoon sun. Kate parked her car and got out, stretching her cramped muscles. After a quick reconnaissance, she entered the shady, cool interior of the store. Several men wearing shorts and fishing shirts browsed the refrigerated section, mostly concentrating on the plastic bottles of water and multi-colored sports drinks, ignoring the shelves of beer. Her brows rose in faint surprise. Not what she expected from the male of the species, but it made her feel marginally better. Safer.

"Can I help you?" a reed-thin young man behind the counter called. When she glanced at him, he smiled. He looked like your average high school kid, wearing an old blue T-shirt and tan shorts. No tattoos. No weird hair. No excessive jewelry. A plastic name tag emblazoned with "Ed" in bold white letters sagged a few inches below the fraying neck of his shirt.

"Yes—I'm looking for a house," she said. "This is Peyton, right?"

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded and placed a hand on the counter. A map of coastal North Carolina papered the wooden surface, topped by a sheet of plastic.

"Great—I must have missed my turn. I'm looking for 696 Elvira Lane..."

"That old place?" His blue eyes scanned her with just enough skepticism to make her defensive. "You another ghost hunter or something?"

She smiled easily. "No. I'm a folklorist. And I have an appointment with Mrs. Corley."

Well, she'd written twice and indicated in the second letter that she'd take silence for concurrence. And even if Mrs. Corley decided to object after all, Kate had a second interview later in the evening with an elderly man living just a few miles away in Atlantic. So the trip wouldn't be wasted, either way.

She hoped.

"Mrs. Corley?" He frowned down at the map and rubbed an imaginary spot off the plastic as if considering this. "I know her story—I've heard it a hundred times. You don't need to mess up your car going to that place."

"My car'll be fine."

"The road's overgrown—"

"It'll be okay. I'll drive slowly."

"I don't know." He rubbed the back of his neck and glanced nervously at the plate glass windows. "Mrs. Corley..."

She shook her head. Excitement fluttered through her when she noted the slight tremor of nervousness in him. Maybe it meant the story would be just as thrilling as she hoped.

"It'll be fine. Really," she coaxed. "It's just that I'm collecting stories directly from the sources. It's critical—the story has to be from the person who had the experience. Not second hand."

"Then there's no need to go out to that old place." His expression lightened. "I—"

"Thanks. Maybe we can talk, later? My schedule's a little tight right now." Everyone had a ghost story these days. And she had to get to Atlantic and then drive back to Raleigh tonight. She pulled a card out of her purse. "Here's my e-mail address. Maybe you can send your story to me if I don't get a chance to stop by later? In the meantime, how do I get to Elvira?"

He took the card and shoved it into his pocket with a grunt of frustration. "Go back the way you came. About a hundred yard down the road, you'll see a narrow dirt road on your right. There's an old oak and a couple of big azaleas hiding it, so it's easy to miss."

The GPS had only been off by a few hundred yards. Not bad.

"Thanks." She smiled at him, relieved.

"So...you writing a book?" He leaned over the counter toward her, obviously curious.

She flushed. If it ever got published. "Yes. Ghosts of the Outer Banks."

“Cool—”

“Well, I’d better get going. I appreciate the directions.” She escaped before his questions continued into the embarrassing territory of why he’d never heard of her.

Unpublished. Just a fancy synonym for *loser*. Kate intended to escape from the shame of that admission as quickly as possible. She couldn’t stand seeing another manuscript filed away on her computer, along with a few dozen rejections.

She hadn’t driven far when she saw a narrow lane sprouting off the main road to the left. The lane was almost overgrown by massive azaleas and overhung by oaks and pines sprouted. She’d missed it before, thinking it someone’s driveway.

Hands clenched around the steering wheel, she eased her car into the opening and allowed it to roll down the road without depressing the gas. Ed was right. It probably *would* ruin her car. Azalea branches and thorny green ropes of smilax scraped the sides of her vehicle. The green-tinged gloom felt oppressive in the early fall heat, making her grateful for the cool air swirling out of the car vents.

Finally, she saw a metal mailbox stuck on an old post that leaned drunkenly away from the road. The reflective numbers “696” sprawled across the dull gray side of the mailbox in a wavy line.

The flutters in her stomach deepened. Her chest tightened as she wiped her damp hands on her slacks and glanced around. A narrow gravel driveway swept away on her right, leading between the oak trees.

That had to be it. She turned and let the car roll forward. A hundred yards from the road, a large two story farmhouse rose, outlined against the pale gray-blue waters of the sound. The faded remains of white paint covered the walls, although the columns holding up the porch roof were more gray than white. Live oaks and pines shadowed the yard. The trees had killed off the grass and most of the weeds, leaving just a dry tangled mass of partially exposed roots and dirt in place of a front lawn.

“No mowing,” Kate thought as she grabbed her laptop and purse and got out of her car. “Smart.”

Then she took another, longer look at the house, thinking about the boy at the gas station. It didn’t look scary, just old and tired. The kind of house a nice, elderly Southern lady would live in. A lady with a really good ghost stories to tell, or so that NC paranormal group assured her.

The reaction of the gas station attendant, Ed, also seemed to confirm their claims. Kate hoped it really would be something different. Special.

The thrill of anticipation rippled through her. This was the part she loved—meeting new people and hearing their stories of the paranormal—feeling their terror vicariously as they relived their experiences.

Her stomach clenched with a sudden case of nerves, and she adjusted the strap of her shoulder bag with damp fingers. The six stories she'd already collected made the hair on the back of her neck vibrate, but they weren't enough. If she wanted to claw her way out of the pit of the unpublished, she had to have something unusual, a story so horrifying it would get her book noticed among all the hundreds of other similar manuscripts recounting tales of terror and the paranormal.

Of course her stories were real. There was that fact. And they were told by eye witnesses. That was her twist. It's what made her manuscript unique.

But unique enough to be published?

Maybe.

The thought sent a shiver of excitement coursing through her, flooding her veins with adrenaline. If this woman's story was everything the forum claimed, she could be a published author by next year. No more shame when asking for interviews—she'd have real credentials as a writer.

On the porch, there was no doorbell, but there were plenty of mosquitoes. She rapped and waited, repressing the desire to peer through the tiny, gray windows set shoulder-high in the door. The last thing she wanted was for Mrs. Corley to come to the door and find her peering through the windows like a psycho.

After a few minutes, she frowned and knocked a little harder. "Mrs. Corley? Are you there?"

A sharp pain bloomed on the nape of her neck. She slapped a mosquito and then had to pull out a tissue to wipe the blood off her palm and neck. More insects hummed around her ears and face. One bit her brow, but she managed to swipe it off before it gorged itself on her blood.

"Mrs. Corley!" Her voice rose as she swatted at the clouds of mosquitoes. The noise of their wings whined in her ears. She knocked and tried the door knob.

The brass knob turned in her hand.

"Mrs. Corley?" She pushed the door open and entered quickly, shutting it behind her to keep the insects out. "Mrs. Corley, are you here?"

The air smelled of dust and old wood, but a cool breeze swept past her from the room on her left. The windows stood open in the living room, letting in a salt-tinged breeze. A wooden bench rested against the wall on her right and a dusty, heavily carved mahogany frame surrounding a sliver of a mirror hung above the bench. Her reflection in the mirror seemed strangely insubstantial, but it was clear enough to let her see a mosquito wing sticking to her eyebrow. She wiped it off quickly and smoothed her hair before adjusting her ponytail.

Then she turned back, hesitant and unsure if she should stay, or leave. The furnishings seemed worn out and tired, as if the owner no longer cared. Even the faded peach and pink flowers in the rose-patterned wallpaper drooped under a fuzzy gray layer of dust. Afraid of intruding further, but just as nervous that Mrs. Corley might be hard of hearing, Kate called out as she stepped into the living room.

An overstuffed sofa, chair and a low table were centered in front of a brick fireplace. A series of black and white family photos in ornate pewter frames graced the mantle, but time had made the happy faces blurred and nondescript.

“Mrs. Corley, are you here? Are you all right?” Pulse increasing, Kate turned back to face the hallway.

A woman stood there, barely a yard away.

Kate jumped back, startled. Her right hand flew up to press against her pounding heart. “Jeeze! You scared me!”

The woman’s luminous, dark eyes stared into hers.

“I’m sorry,” Kate apologized hastily. “I—I knocked and called. You must not have heard me.”

She nodded, but remained silent. The hardness in her dark eyes made Kate think she was too angry to speak. She clearly expected an explanation for her intrusion.

“I’m Kate Filgrew—I’m writing a book.” Her voice shook. She stopped and cleared her throat. “I wrote you—I’m the folklorist collecting ghost stories. That is, stories about paranormal experiences. You got my letters, didn’t you?”

“I see.” Mrs. Corley clasped her hands and held them at her thin waist. Enlarged, knobby joints prevented her from interlacing her fingers. When she noticed the direction of Kate’s glance and recognized the concern in her eyes, Mrs. Corley’s face grew blank. She adjusted her hands hiding the arthritic fingers as much as possible.

The proud gesture caught at Kate's heart. She forced herself to look away though she couldn't control her curiosity. She had expected an older woman, someone in her eighties, not this self-contained forty-something.

Mrs. Corley's short-sleeved cotton blouse looked crisp in the dim light, as did the pale blue and white striped seersucker skirt. Her graying blond hair was carefully pinned up in a classic chignon, giving her a poise few women possessed. Despite the arthritis crippling her hands, she refused to let her appearance suffer.

Somehow, her deep brown eyes and air of grave confidence made Kate feel childishly immature, ruffled and overly aware of the sweat trickling down her back.

"I heard you might have had an experience..." Kate tried to get the interview back on track.

"Heard? Where?"

"The Internet—a group who explore the paranormal. They mentioned you..." For some reason she couldn't seem to complete a sentence with Mrs. Corley penetrating gaze fixed on her.

"Internet?"

Kate flipped open her computer and turned it on, cradling it awkwardly on one forearm. "Yes—I can show you." The tiny netbook booted quickly enough, but there was no wifi signal. Even the broadband seemed unable to make a connection. "Sorry, it doesn't seem to be working here." She glanced up at the woman's calm face. "I wrote you, though. You got the letters, right?"

Silence is concurrence.

Mrs. Corley nodded and raised her thin, arched brows in mild encouragement.

"So I hoped..."

"That I could tell you a...story? My story?"

"Yes." Relief flooded Kate.

Once they got started, it would be fine. And as each minute ticked away, she was more and more convinced this story would be the *one*. If something scared this composed woman, it had to be special. Different.

Her pulse raced, and she realized she was already half-scared, nervous and aware of every tiny eddy of salt air brushing over her skin. "I'd like to include your story. And I'll

mention you in the credits.” A look of distaste compressed Mrs. Corley’s mouth. Kate hurried on, “Or it can be listed as an anonymous contribution.”

“Where are my manners?” Mrs. Corley drawled in a soft, Southern voice. “Would you like something to drink? A glass of water, perhaps.”

Remembering the dusty mirror in the hallway, Kate hastily declined. The glasses were probably just as filthy. But despite her reservations about the cleanliness of the house, her desire to record Mrs. Corley’s story grew exponentially as she sensed something unsettling, controlled, in the woman.

Mrs. Corley had experienced something terrible, she was sure of it.

Kate’s glance flickered to the living room and her moist fingers slipped over the keys of her computer. Normally, she could type fast enough to keep up, but today... No. It would be better to use the recorder. She didn’t want to miss a single word, and there was a hypnotic quality in Mrs. Corley’s voice that she wanted to preserve.

“Maybe we should get started?”

“Would you care to have a seat, first?” Mrs. Corley waved a languid hand in the direction of the sofa.

“Thanks.” Kate sat and spread out her things on the low coffee table. After another glance at her hostess, she pulled out a small digital tape recorder from her purse. “Do you mind if I record this?”

“Do as you wish.” Her glance never dropped to the tiny device. She kept her eyes—so dark brown they were almost black—fixed on Kate’s face.

“Thank you. You don’t know how much I appreciate you taking time out of your day to talk to me. Anyway, we should get started. Um...where did you experience this, ah, paranormal event?”

“Where?” she echoed as she seated herself in the chair opposite the sofa. She smoothed her skirt over her knees. Then she delicately crossed her ankles and studied Kate.

As Kate caught her glance, she flushed, once again feeling that uncomfortable awareness of her youth and inexperience in the presence of a much more knowledgeable adult. Her hands fluttered nervously from her bedraggled ponytail to her laptop before she clasped her hands together in her lap. Despite the heat, her fingers felt icy and stiff.

The humid air thickened in her throat. She coughed and tried to settle back, but the more she tried to relax and pay attention, the more distracted and nervous she felt.

As Mrs. Corley considered how to start her tale, the silence grew oppressive. Kate squirmed against the overly soft cushions of the sofa, suffocated by the scents of damp wood, salt air, and dust—the omnipresent dust. Even though she knew it was a trick of the fading, late afternoon light, even Mrs. Corley’s fair hair seemed dusty.

Overhead, a door opened slowly. The long, drawn out squeak of the hinge scraped Kate’s nerves like the sound of fingernails drawn down a chalkboard.

“Is someone upstairs?” she asked. “Do you need to check on them?”

“No. There’s no one here. You asked about my story. It started a bit like that.” She waved a hand toward the ceiling.

Kate rubbed the back of her neck and glanced uneasily at the stairs. She forced an amused smile.

“Are you cold? A draft...” Mrs. Corley asked.

Kate shivered. Her smile ached, frozen in place. She was scaring herself for no reason except the anticipation of a good ghost story. “No, I’m fine.”

“We’d just move here—Jack said he’d gotten a good deal on the house because no one else wanted it. Too old and the wind ‘round here played tricks. Made people think they heard things.” As she spoke, Mrs. Corley’s accent grew more pronounced, more deeply Southern.

“Things? Like ghosts?”

Mrs. Corley shrugged. “No one ever said. Fact is, Jack had lost his job, and his cousin in Morehead City said he could work charters. So we moved.” She paused, her eyes glimmering with a faraway look as if she could see through the gray walls into the past.

“You moved here with your husband?”

“Yes. But they were right. Even that first night we heard...something. Jack said it was the wind. There’s always wind here, even with the trees around the house, protecting it.

“Anyway, when I said the noise made me nervous, Jack laughed. He said it was just a draft, but I couldn’t sleep. I lay in bed, gripping the blanket until I couldn’t stand it. I got up out of bed to check. All the doors in the hallway were shut, and Jack had locked the front and back doors. Like he said, there was nothing there. When I went back to bed, I still couldn’t sleep, though. I lay awake, listening to Jack snore and waiting to hear that creak of a door opening again. But...it was quiet, or as quiet as it ever is here.” She shrugged.

Kate’s chest deflated. “That was it?”

“Oh, no.” Mrs. Corley smiled. “That was all, that night. Next night, around midnight, that creaking noise awoke me again. I shook Jack awake, but he refused to get out of bed. ‘If you’re afraid of ghosts, tell ‘em to move on,’ he said. ‘Silence is concurrence, you know. If you don’t like it, say something.’ That was Jack. Of course, I told him I was saying something—I was saying he ought to get up and look around. His answer was to roll over and go back to sleep. After that, I learned to keep my mouth shut because it was no use complaining. Not to him.

“So Jack and I fell into our little routines, and I forgot all about them noises. And Jack, he liked them charts. We did fine for a few weeks. Then one afternoon Jack just didn’t come home. I worried myself sick while dinner dried up and burned in the oven. Finally, his cousin came by the house, after it got dark. About nine. Jack had slipped on a wet deck, he said. Hit his head when he fell over the side and drowned.”

“I’m so sorry—” Kate stiffened. A door groaned. The sound echoed through the ceiling and down the stairs, followed by the creaking of floorboards. Someone, or something, walked down the hallway, footsteps treading over a floor of bare, wooden planks.

She stared at Mrs. Corley, but the older woman appeared deaf to the sounds.

Kate rubbed her forearms. The drafts in the room intensified as her nerves tightened.

“It was a long time ago and this story ain’t about Jack,” Mrs. Corley said with a half-smile curving her pale lips. “There was a little insurance and that was about it, except to say that’s how I came to be alone here. And without my Jack snoring so loudly in my ears at night that I couldn’t hear that noise in the hall.

“I missed his snoring, I can tell you that. But whatever walked that hallway, it didn’t respect grief. It woke me up that night, even though I was that exhausted from crying. When I got up, all the doors were shut and the downstairs doors locked. I checked. Then I went upstairs and stood in the bedroom doorway and waited. I stood there and waited for hours until the sun rose, but I never heard it again. Not that night, anyway.

“The next night it woke me up again around midnight, sounding nearby, like someone had opened the door to the room next to mine. It was getting closer. Without Jack to laugh at the noises, they started to work on my nerves. I couldn’t take it—not so soon after losing Jack.

“Finally, I started sleeping during the day. At night, I’d sit in a chair with a flashlight in my lap and watch the doors.

“For a few nights, that seemed to slow that old draft down—if that’s what it was. Didn’t hear a thing except the wind in the trees. It’s hard to stay awake, though, even sitting in a chair.

“One night I nodded off, just as you’d expect. At midnight, the floorboard behind me creaked. I started up, scared out of my mind, only to have something yank my hair and pull me back into that chair. My body froze up on me. The flashlight rolled off my lap. I heard it break into bits at my feet, but I couldn’t move. My heart pounded so hard I couldn’t even scream. Then, when I thought I’d die, it felt like fingers of ice slipped up the back of my neck. I screamed—or think I did—but whatever it was didn’t let me go. Those icy fingers squeezed...”

A more violent shiver made Kate’s muscles spasm. An icy draft washed over her, as heavy as the weight of an arm pressing down on her shoulders. She couldn’t escape! Her damp shirt constricted around her, providing no protection or warmth as the flesh at the nape of her neck prickled.

She wrapped her arms around herself. “What did you do?”

“I suppose I fainted,” Mrs. Corley answered. “When I came to, I was lying on the floor. Thought I’d dreamed it until I was putting up my hair and saw the bruises.”

“Bruises!” Kate glanced over her shoulder, heart thumping so wildly the beats bruised her chest. She hadn’t realized how dark it was getting. The sun had set and only a few remaining streaks of crimson light lit the room. She could hardly see Mrs. Corley except as a dark figure with glinting eyes. “What did you do? You didn’t stay, did you?”

“Honey, where was I going to go? And in the day, it didn’t seem so bad. It’s a good house—sound—and it was paid for. I had no place else.”

“Your husband’s cousin?”

“They had four kids and one on the way. No. I was scared, but not that scared. And it was just a few bruises. By that afternoon, I’d decided it was because I tried to catch it out. It never bothered me when I stayed in bed—just a few creaks of the door and pacing down the hallway. Nothing unusual in an old house.”

The footsteps overhead grew louder, moving toward the stairs. Kate glanced beyond Mrs. Corley’s shoulder to the dark void of the hallway. Nothing moved in the shadows. Then the whispering, creeping noise changed.

Someone was coming down the stairs.

Kate swallowed back a scream. “Mrs. Corley—don’t you hear that? There’s someone...”

“Don’t worry, there’s not much more to tell. That night, it seemed I was right about it not liking me sitting in the hall. I got me some sleeping pills because I was still nervous and I settled into my own bed. Slept the night clear through. And the next night, too.

“Thought I could live with it—come to terms—if it just stayed in the hallway.”

Hurry. Just finish it, please. Kate stared into the darkness beyond Mrs. Corley.

Was that movement? The sound of a stealthy footstep moving toward them?

Dear God, what am I going to do if it touches me?

She imagined icy fingers surrounding her neck, pressing the air out, bruising her just as they bruised Mrs. Corley.

“Is that it?” Kate’s head swiveled around. She studied the open windows, smelling saltwater and rotting wood. The shadows swirled with the air pouring through the dusty screens. “It’s dark—getting late. I’m supposed to go to Atlantic—someone’s expecting me—”

“I never expected it. It never came into the bedroom before. But a few nights later, I woke up to hear the floor next to the bed creak, just like it did when Jack came to bed. I gripped the covers and kept my eyes closed, too afraid to look. ‘Please, Jack, if you ever loved me, keep it away,’ I prayed and pleaded. But the scratching, gritty noise just grew louder. Then next to me, the mattress dipped and shook, just as if Jack had come home and climbed into bed.

“I couldn’t scream—I couldn’t even move to open my eyes—though I felt the terror near-breaking my bones with freezing cold. If it touched me...I didn’t think I could stand it. I thought I’d die if it touched me...” Her voice trailed off.

Kate leaned forward, tense with terror and anticipation. Her heart pounded so hard she feared she might miss the next words—the confrontation with whatever paranormal entity dwelled there—here!

“What happened?” she asked through stiff, trembling lips.

“I imagine you already know—my story’s not that different.”

The shadows seemed to coalesce around Kate. She shrank back into the sofa, wishing the wind would stop. The incessant wind caused the noises and carried them through the house, making them all imagine something walking through the house...

The chill of the room leached her warmth away, leaving her shaking uncontrollably.

She didn’t want to hear anymore—she couldn’t stand it—and yet she had to hear the rest. “Please—finish. I—I have to know. What happened?”

Mrs. Corley sat back in her comfortable armchair. A pale curl came loose and fluttered over her cheek. Her dark eyes glowed as a slow smile pulled at her mouth.

“I died,” Mrs. Corley said.

* * * * *

When Ed got to the gas station in the morning, there was a strange car parked in his spot, by the side of the convenience store. It seemed familiar to him—he knew most of the folks around Peyton—but he couldn’t place this one.

“What is it, Ed?” Mr. Herbert called as he unlocked the front door. “Someone park in your spot?”

“Yeah.” When he pulled the door handle, the door opened. Weird. A lot of folks didn’t lock their cars, but this was a little too casual, even for Peyton. A leather purse, small computer, and a digital recorder cluttered the passenger’s seat. He glanced around but there was no one hanging around, waiting for them to open.

When Mr. Herbert slapped a meaty hand on his shoulder, Ed jumped and hit his head on the edge of the roof. “Whose car is it?”

Ed gingerly flipped open the purse. As soon as he saw the edge of the business cards sticking out of one of the pockets, he knew. “That ghost story lady. It’s her car.”

He picked up the digital record and flicked it on. Sure enough, the ghost lady’s voice came out of the tinny speaker. “Thank you,” she said. “You don’t know how much I appreciate you taking time out of your day to talk to me. Anyway, we should get started. Um...where did you experience this, ah, paranormal event?”

Silence. Then her voice picked up again. “Is someone upstairs?” she asked. “Do you need to check on them?”

The only response was a noise that sounded eerily like the wind coming in off the sound.

“Damn,” Herbert’s gaze flickered back down the road toward Elvira Lane. “Shut that thing off and call the sheriff. Maybe he’ll just impound the damn car so we don’t have to pay to have it towed away like last time.” He frowned at Ed. “Didn’t you warn her?”

Ed thought about it. “I tried, but you know how people are. The more you try to warn ‘em, the more they gotta do it.” He shrugged. “Anyway, I tried.”

“But you did say something, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. ‘Cause I wouldn’t want the sheriff to blame you for letting her go.” Herbert ran a hand through his thinning red hair. “You know what he’s always saying ‘bout that.”

“Yeah,” Ed sighed. He’d heard it a million times. “Silence is concurrence.”

THE END