

The Empty Lot Next Door

The Empty Lot
Next Door



Arthur M. Mills, Jr.

Copyright © 2010 by Arthur M. Mills, Jr.

Editor: Shirley Kennedy

Artist: Seshadri Roy

Cover photo: Dave Bonta

Library of Congress Control Number: 2010904422

ISBN:	Hardcover	978-1-4500-7222-9
	Softcover	978-1-4500-7221-2
	Ebook	978-1-4500-7223-6

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

This book was printed in the United States of America.

To order additional copies of this book, contact:

Xlibris Corporation

1-888-795-4274

www.Xlibris.com

Orders@Xlibris.com

72091

The Empty Lot Next Door

*“To the dream undreamt
To the tune unheard
To the mystery unsolved
To my kaleidoscopic past”*

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wife and to our two children. Many people have told me that my past would make a great book but it was my wife Yonsun (name changed to Jean in the book) who finally convinced me to start typing. For over a year I spent every waking hour either at work or in front of my computer typing away. My wife never complained and neither did my sons, Arthur and Allen. Without their support, this book would not have been possible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I originally believed I could write *The Empty Lot Next Door* from cover to cover completely on my own. Boy was I wrong. I needed a lot of assistance. I have told the story to many people throughout the years. Countless people told me I should write a book about my ordeal. I attempted to write it down many times but I gave up after just a few pages. I just didn't know how to write. But in April 2009, while stationed in Korea, I finally started to write my story. I completed my first draft completely on my own just by reminiscing in the past. But I still needed some help putting my story into a novel format. After a simple Amazon.com search, I found the answer. *How to Write A Damn Good Novel I* and its sequel, *How to Write A Damn Good Novel II*, by James N. Frey. After studying his books for several months, I finally had the basic acknowledge to start my second draft. Thank you Mr. Frey for not just giving me the instruction but the motivation too! After months of rewriting, I gave my manuscript to a co-worker of mine, Brandon Baila. I asked him to read my manuscript and search out areas that could be improved. At first, I didn't think a co-worker was the best person to ask to read my manuscript and provide feedback. However, Brandon took my manuscript and completely dissected and afforded many suggestions. Thanks, Brandon, for your immeasurable help. Next, I needed an editor to help me find the right words. Who did I find to help me with my ghost story? Shirley Kennedy (www.shirleykennedy.com), a professional romance writer. That's right-a romance writer was going to edit my ghost story. I was skeptical too. I quickly felt at ease when she provided me with a rock solid manuscript. Thank you, Mrs. Kennedy, for helping me find the right words and for

your coaching. You helped me immensely. I also needed an artist to draw sketches for the book. After surfing the internet, I came across Seshadri Roy (www.portraitnpainting.com). I took a gamble and hired him to draw one sketch. He hit a home run and I hired him to draw all the sketches for 4extremely accurate sketches. If I didn't know better, I would believe Seshadri jumped in a time machine and travelled to 1984 in Austin, Texas, and drew the sketches. Thanks, Seshadri, for bringing my story to life. I would like to thank Robert Ferguson for providing me valuable research assistance as I wrote my story. Robert really brought truth to the story. Thanks, Robert, for all your help. Lastly, I would like to thank my third grade teacher, Mrs. Haddock, from Mollie Dawson Elementary School. It must have been 1983 when she read the class a book and had us students write a one-page sequel to the book. As we wrote our stories, Mrs. Haddock walked from student to student and read over their shoulders. One by one, she praised each student for a job well done. She approached me and read over my shoulder. I just knew she would grab my paper, crumble it, and toss it in the trash. Instead, she took it and read it aloud to the whole class. She made me feel like a million bucks. I knew I would be a writer some day. Thank you, Mrs. Haddock, and all past, present, and future teachers at Mollie Dawson Elementary School.

FOREWORD

“Are ghosts real?” Many people ask that question. Some want to hear, “Yes, they are,” to assure themselves that they’re not crazy. Others want to hear, “No, they’re not,” to calm their own fears or concerns.

However, as this book reveals, the question, “Are ghosts real?” is far too simple. The greater adventure is finding the truth behind the ghost stories.

Like many children, anything eerie fascinated me, especially ghosts. I think Arthur Mills’ novel will ring true for most readers. We can recall the chills of discovering a ghost story next door or a few blocks from home. As children, many of us crossed the street as we walked home from school, avoiding the sidewalk in front of the town’s “haunted” house.

As we grow up, people often put away those stories along with nursery rhymes and tricycles. We’re more comfortable thinking that ghosts and “things that go bump in the night” are just make-believe.

Then, something happens to remind us of a particularly chilling tale or encounter from childhood.

As this book demonstrates, the truth behind that experience can be as rich and exciting as the original encounter.

“The Empty Lot Next Door” is both engrossing and entertaining. However, I hope readers will be inspired by it as well.

“Are ghosts real?” Every person will answer that question differently.

Finding the truth behind your own childhood questions about your neighborhood’s “ghost stories” or something odd that happened to you . . . that can be an unforgettable adventure, and one that changes your life for the better.

Fiona Broome
HollowHill.com

CHAPTER 1

I have made many mistakes in my life but will never forget two of the biggest. I committed one just hours prior to leaving my family in Hanau, Germany, as I left for a six month deployment to war-torn Kosovo. That's when I told my wife about my ghostly past, revealing a deeply repressed memory about a family of four, including a little girl, that was killed in a house fire next to my childhood home.

The neighborhood kids believed the family turned into ghosts and haunted the neighborhood at night. At first I didn't believe in ghosts but soon became a believer when I made another mistake, perhaps the biggest of my life: I challenged the ghosts to appear if they were real. Candle Face, the name I gave the little girl who died in the fire, took me up on my challenge. To make matters even worse, I told my wife the truth about the circumstances of my brother's suicide and the dreams of torment (if they were dreams) he and Candle Face bestowed upon me.

A few hours prior to my shocking revelation to my wife, my unit's First Sergeant had a shocking revelation of his own. He informed me I would not be deploying to Kosovo with the unit in two weeks. Instead, I would be deploying at the crack of dawn the next morning.

I finally managed to get home from work well after darkness fell. I wasn't looking forward to telling my wife I was leaving in a few hours instead of a few weeks. After all, this would be our first major separation in our short five year marriage. My wife, Jean, and my two young sons greeted me at the door as they had always done when I came home from work.

“Welcome home, honey,” Jean said cheerfully as she kissed me on the cheek.

Words stuck in my throat. I could not look into her eyes. She knew instinctively something was amiss and her demeanor quickly changed from cheerful to gloomy as she asked me what was wrong.

Not having time to beat around the bush, I chose the words my First Sergeant had used. “I’ve been chosen to leave for Kosovo two weeks early.”

“Two weeks early! But you leave in two weeks,” she said. She hadn’t understood what I was trying to tell her.

My blue eyes gazed down into her brown ones. “You were always good at math,” I said in a bad attempt at comic relief. When she didn’t answer, I blurted, “My First Sergeant has just informed me I’m leaving for Kosovo early tomorrow morning.”

Jean examined my face carefully. She did not blink. I knew she was hoping this was some kind of a sick joke.

I reached out and took her right hand. “I’m serious. I need to hurry and pack my gear.”

A silent cry escaped her lips. I could see her eyes were watering. I let go of her hand and turned towards my five-year-old son, Arthur. I picked him up and placed him on the floor next to Allen. “You two go play now. Mommy and I have to talk.”

I turned around to face my wife and instinctively raised my arms to catch her as she began to go limp. I held her up and guided her to the couch. We sat there with our arms around each other for what seemed like ages. I had told Arthur that Jean and I were going to talk, but we just sat there without speaking. Arthur looked over at us questioningly, but he somehow knew not to say anything. Now that the crunch had come, I settled my dilemma by telling myself we didn’t need to speak. We understood each other perfectly, including what had remained unsaid.

What could a soldier say to his wife hours before his deployment to a war zone, knowing he would not be back for six months, or worse, not at all?

I eventually told my wife I needed to start packing my gear. I went to our bedroom, selected all that I would need over six months, and piled everything on the living room floor. Playing around the living room, my children were keenly interested. Arthur searched through

everything till he came across my Kevlar helmet. It seemed as big as he was. Fascinated, he put it on his head.

“Look Mommy, I’m a soldier,” he said.

I hope not, I thought to myself. I would be proud of my son if he were to follow me into my profession, but I hoped he would never have to be in the same predicament I was in right now.

When Arthur finished playing with my helmet, he set it aside and got up to play with his younger brother. I sat down in the middle of all the scattered gear and began to sort and pack it into several large duffel bags. My wife sat by my side, quiet and contemplative, but not for long. “If I break my leg, would you have to go?” she asked.

I laughed and replied, “Yes, I would still have to go. You really want to break your leg?”

She nodded emphatically, her long, silky black hair falling around her pretty face. “If I knew that would stop you from going.”

I believed her, knowing she’d do just about anything to prevent me from going to Kosovo. Like most military wives, she didn’t want her husband going into harm’s way.

Meanwhile, Arthur and Allen were unaware of the emotional drama going on between their father and mother. They began to play their favorite game, which I had christened ‘the windowsill challenge.’ Our living room windowsill was about five inches wide and about 18 inches off the floor. It spanned the entire length of the room. Its height was just right for two active boys to want to clamber on. Their sole objective was to hang onto the window frame while they scooted along the windowsill to the other end. They clung to the window but often fell off. When that happened, they would get up, dust themselves off, and climb back onto the windowsill all over again.

I had seen them scoot along this windowsill many a time. But this evening something on the panes caught my attention. I was looking at the handprints my boys had left on the window pane when all of a sudden a strange feeling came over me. My eyes widened. My heart began to thump against my chest so hard that I could actually hear it. Something in my memory was stirring, slowly.

I was about the same age as Arthur when I moved with my family into a house in Austin, Texas. My time there was blessed with good friends, but at the same time it was filled with immeasurable fear.

Fear of a little girl and her little handprints.



My wife looked at me curiously. “What are you looking at?”

I could not answer. Feeling my face flush, I stood, hoping my odd feeling would pass. It didn’t, and I began to feel faint and sway on my feet. This time it was my petite wife who instinctively raised her arms to embrace me. She’s only five feet three compared to my five feet eleven, so she had to use all her strength to hold me upright.

“Hello, are you there?” she asked as she struggled to keep her balance.

I still couldn’t answer. If I could have, my answer would have been no. The feeling lingered. Other images streamed through my mind from a place far away. I felt as if I were not really there, that I was elsewhere in a dreamlike state revisiting a time long past, a time when I was a prisoner of fear and torment. My eyes remained fixed on those fresh handprints on the window panes. And then, coming back to me out of the mists of time: a horribly familiar burning smell.

I found my voice. “This can’t be happening,” I said faintly, but loud enough for my wife to hear.

She asked, “What can’t be happening?”

I had to come up with something. The burning smell was stronger now. It took both of us the next few seconds to identify that the strong

burning smell in our apartment was from something Jean had left in the oven and totally forgotten.

She darted into the kitchen yelling, “With all the excitement, I forgot your dinner.” She yanked open the oven door and the smoke alarm took off. Arthur and Allen ran to their bedrooms to escape the loud buzz of the smoke alarm. Jean took care of the crisis and came back to the living room. She knelt next to me, wanting to be near. Despite the kitchen crisis, I was mentally far away and contemplating those long ago terrors I thought I had buried.

“Can’t you tell me what’s wrong?” she asked. She stared at the window trying to understand why I had looked at it the way I did. She tilted her head in all directions trying to see what I saw.

“Those handprints on the windows remind me of a story,” I said.

She went to the window and pointed at the handprints. “Everything reminds you of a story.”

I asked, “You remember the story about my brother Richard and how he died?”

“Yes,” she responded but didn’t seem too happy about me bringing up the topic just now.

“One thing I never told you about is the story of me and Candle Face.”

She laughed and asked, “Candle Face? Who or what is Candle Face?”

“Candle Face is the name I gave to a little girl who haunted my dreams when I was a child.”

Her amused expression faded, replaced by concern. “You never told me.”

“It’s not something I’ve ever wanted to talk about.”

“Well, you had better tell me now.”

For the first time I let it all come out. I told Jean about the house in the South Austin neighborhood where I’d moved as a little boy. About the vacant lot next door where a house once stood, and how I discovered the house had burned down years before and a little girl had died in the fire. “Don’t laugh, but I came to call her Candle Face. She would visit me after everyone else had gone to sleep. I would have nightmares about her torturing me. Or were they nightmares? I still don’t know if those were dreams or whether they actually happened. Candle Face seemed real to me.”

Jean was listening patiently. When I collected my thoughts I continued, “I didn’t tell anyone, but I saw signs of her everywhere. I saw her childish handprints on my windows at home in Austin on several occasions. I could see her charred face and I could even feel her touch me with her skeleton-like fingers. I even smelled her nauseating burnt flesh odor, she was that real.”

“Stop,” my wife interrupted. She was looking at me, but now it was a look of new discovery, of wanting to share any dark unknown facts from that part of my life, from my past. “Why didn’t you ever tell me about this?”

“I think I just wanted to forget about that time and those memories. I haven’t thought about them in years.”

A small voice interrupted us. “Mommy, I’m tired.” Allen spoke in his usual soft voice.

“Hold that thought, honey,” My wife said to me as she picked up Allen and took him to his room. Arthur toddled behind her. She put both of them to bed. It was quite late now and way past our children’s bedtime. I thought about the nightmares I’d had in my own childhood and how lucky I was that my kids didn’t have the same fate. They slept the sleep of the innocent.

Jean came back to sit on the couch next to me. She still didn’t know what to think of my dark secret. “I can’t believe you never mentioned anything about Candle Face to me before.”

We were so much part of each other’s lives that she was amazed she had no inkling of this part of my childhood. “I never said anything about it before because I haven’t thought about it for years. The last time I saw Candle Face was soon after Richard died. The last time I thought about it was on the night of my high school prom seven years ago when I was taking my prom date home. The prom was some time before you and I met.”

“So what happened?” she asked.

“You really want to know?”

“I want to know everything about your life.” She sat expectantly, her knees pulled up to her chest, her chin pressing down on her knees as in a sitting fetal position.

I had more or less finished packing by now. I piled my gear near the entrance and looked at my watch. I had a few hours left before I would have to leave. I wanted to tell her that particular story about my childhood. I needed to unburden myself. She was ready for a story and so was I.