

We Warned You It Wasn't For Kids

Nothing, supposedly, occupied Aunt Elisabeth's house for some time (that is, apart from Aunt Elisabeth herself). From the outside, the house measured seven middle-sized rooms wide, and two lengthy rooms tall, and five little rooms long. With Aunt Elisabeth the only person living in it, that made a great deal of nothing. Nothing to attend, nothing to feed, nothing to fear.

But nothing was *something*. And something worth documenting was bound to happen.

Such were the thoughts of Regan Lowres, the nine-year-old niece who consistently videotaped family gossip and gone-awry outings, upon arriving at the house. By the sound of the old Aunt's summons, remodeled in the words of her parents, there had been some sort of mysterious incident—likely induced by her recently established solitude—that was causing her to imagine other people living with her. To Regan, this could only mean that a ghost was lurking on the premises.

She had to evade a few boys who made a grab for her camera, led by a formidable bison named Guyson Bredthrust. Her parents quickly merged with the rest of the adults in the lounge, where the largest congregation of adults ever to crowd under a single domestic roof sat staring at Aunt Elisabeth. It looked like a waste of time, so Regan passed the door after a quickly forgotten viewing.

Adjacent to the hallway that separated the dining room from the kitchen was a spiral staircase. Regan was about to climb it when a small crowd of boys, led by Guyson, pushed their way into the lounge and started complaining loudly and unintelligibly. They were presently ushered out by Regan's least favorite cousin, Guyson's papa, Angus. "Don't even think about unnerving Aunt Ellie, now get lost!" Contrary to her expectations, Aunt Elisabeth might be more worthwhile than she at first appeared. With her camera at the ready, Regan peered into the lounge.

Regan wondered what it was about the woman that let her control so much attention. Those who sat nearest to Aunt Elisabeth were consoling her, it seemed. Their brows arched in apologetic fashion, and their skulls bobbed semi-controllably. The woman they watched became a fantasy. Everyone in the room was captive to her. The tedium apparent from the outside of the lounge was not characteristic of Aunt Elisabeth's testimony.

"Weren't nothing I gave a mind to, kindly, in the 'yond back days. The crits I see everyday aren't the half of it. Back when Eds took me to that ashy woods, I could hardly sleep none, with the crits squawking like nothing at all. Except now, there's not the same creatures as was prowling the woods. I has seen 'em at night, just 'fore I waken, they is watching me, as they is walking by my door..."

While covering the blinking "on" signal with her finger, Regan lifted the camera to let it peer through the space of two aunts in front of her. She pushed the record button. The grizzled aunt alone made a portrait worthy of the moving screen. It was a shame, really, that she wouldn't be able to see herself; she appeared to be a woman with very poor vision. Her eyes were sunken into a valley of wrinkles. The eyeglasses didn't look like anything that would well enhance her eyesight. She wore a dreadful—yet curiously fitting—grey-green dress jacket with an ill-matched tan skirt. The room had the reminiscent breath of a campfire. The greatest inadequacy of film was that it couldn't capture odor.

Regan's least favorite grown cousin intruded into the scope of her lens with a newspaper.

“I can’t figure what you’re fussed up about, Aunt Ellie,” he blurted, “They nabbed a really big herd of burglars yesterday noon—”

The hypnotic concentration was cut, thanks to Angus Bredthrust. His inane observation merited an elbow-stab from his wife. A drone of disapproval stirred among the rest of the adults. The broken spell gave Miranda Bredthrust recourse to sight Regan and raise an eyebrow, as though exacting a way to remove a fly from a soup. At any rate, it was time to desert her watch. As she left the lounge, Regan turned to check the direction of Miranda’s focus. It followed her all the way out of the room, until it had reached its range, when Regan turned a corner into the pantry. *I hope she wasn’t looking at my camera*, she thought.

Now the camera was in jeopardy. The boys were more interested in violence and sloppy eating than solving the mystery of the house. Guyson would wrest it from her, and sport would be made of the assault when the other boys joined in, thus fulfilling the violent part of the festivities. No, it mustn’t be allowed. Somewhere, there ought to have been a place that promised a long, sturdy rope of tedium, other than among the people who reverently keep their name-tags taped to their hearts.

Her escape route from Miranda’s watch had led her into the kitchen, where the only other girls, Chloe, Teresa, and Sally, clucked and gossiped. The kitchen was flooded with an opaque vinegar smell, known ferociously among the clan as “Roman Tomato Pie.” Tediously, the topic of their clucking was some frivolous school problem involving other teenagers, and Regan was not invited to join in.

Next to the kitchen was the pantry, which led directly to the ashy forest in the backyard. Regan looked through the window, which had a slab of cardboard dangling from it by a few strips of tape. All of the boy-youths—supervised by two bickering uncles—hopped upon one another in the spirit of making childhood games worthwhile. Guyson, having happily inserted his knee into another boy’s eye socket while trying to climb on his back, rested his combat, and ambled toward the door.

Regan fled back to the kitchen, but halted when she noticed an outlandish abnormality with the water faucet. *Aunt Elisabeth must never use this sink*, she thought. *Why else would she tape it up so tightly?*

The aged woman made unmovable certainty that no one would ever use it again by sticking a piece of cardboard to the facet spout and wrapping what looked like entire roll of duck tape around it. Had she done the same with the kitchen sink?

But Guyson neared the door.

There was no quick cavity to slip into.

Wait, the broom closet might have been roomy enough.

She threw herself in and knocked over a broom. She left barely enough space to watch the activity of Guyson.

He didn’t bother to worry himself with the dirt or ash on his hands. Instead, he walked to a big green bag with a picture of an athletic Doberman next to the refrigerator. Then he seized and devoured a dog biscuit.

Regan carefully zoomed between the interval of the pantry doors, as more boys arrived to garrison the bag.

“What’s Aunt Ellie got cooking?” said one of the boys. There were now five of them.

“Roman Tomato Pie,” said Guyson. “That’s why I’m having supper now.”

“Ewga! Isn’t that the pie with stuff that looks like pizza sauce—”

“Yeah, but it isn’t, and she puts whole onions in it, and bell peppers—”

“I agree, I’m eating now.”

“Why does she—”

“Put that stuff in there? ‘Cause she’s nuts.”

“No, why does she keep dog biscuits around? She doesn’t have a dog.”

“Same reason.”

Somebody slammed a door open, and Regan almost kicked the door open as she fell backward.

“Supper’s ready, you boys... What are you eating? You know you’re not supposed to be eating before supper!”

It was the voice of Miranda Bredthrust, who apparently thought that Regan could only be up to no good while she held a camera. There was hardly any doubt that Miranda was the type of adult to promote unequivocal sharing.

“What’s that you got into?”

“Want some?”

The film still rolled. Whatever happened next would be solid gold cinema, so Regan couldn’t afford to lose her balance.

“Are those... *what are you eating?*”

After an angry “No, Mom!” from Guyson, the boys began to shove one another from Miranda’s wrath. The woman purloined a broom and began to smack a hypothetical boy on the floor. Vertically swung, the broom was a warning. Horizontally, it became a threat. The boys, in effort to evade Miranda, either darted out the door, slipped into the dinner table, or shielded themselves with another boy. The ensuing bacchanalia summoned Angus Bredthrust, who ceased the weapon and dragged his wife out of the pantry with the words, “Do you *want* my aunt to crack down, woman?”

“But they were eating dog biscuits! Are you going to let—”

“Yeah, let ‘em.”

The two boys left in the room honored Angus’s rescue with a few more biscuits.

“I’d rather have these than Roman Tomato Pie any day.”

Compared with the food being served, the dog biscuits *did* sound delectable. The two boys stuffed their pockets with a charity batch, and left the pantry. Regan removed herself from the closet and snatched two for herself, now on the lookout for evidence in support of Aunt Elisabeth’s unnamed horror.

She often practiced the elusive qualities of a wraith, especially among most grown folk. To whatever degree lurking in doorways with a video camera might be against household ordinance, forbidding the security bond between a child and her Mama or Papa was to a much deeper one. To her convenience, a slight interval between the two of them allowed for one extra person at the table. “Make way for me,” whispered Regan as she placed a stool into the beckoning space. If fate was in her favor, the camera, which she held under the table, would pick up the clues that described by Aunt Elisabeth:

“I have been seeing some of my things gone missing, and that much I swear to. Things keep on disappearing, going every-which-way from outside the house to the pantry, and it’s even worse upstairs...”

How grievous it was that Regan should have to conceal her camera, not only because of Aunt Elisabeth’s account of her plight, but because of the pattern of twitchiness the other adults displayed. Uncle Charles, the youngest of her uncles, began stretching the collar of his sweater with his index finger. Miles continually tossed incredulous glances to his wife. Aunt Olivia smeared her own eye shadow resting her head on the palm of her hand and began drumming the table. Miranda buried her face in her hands. Uncle Stevie and Stan, the two who had been chaperoning the boys, mouthed threats and insults at one another. Even Papa couldn’t suppress a condescending grunt. All of these children, all nephews and nieces to Elisabeth Lorne, were clearly due for a diagnosis of cabin fever.

“...I’m telling it so, I know when I twist them faucets off, I know when I see ‘em giving up their drips, and yet somehow, they just keeps dripping out, like they was afraid they’s going to dry up if they ain’t working. I’ve been seeing them footprints upstairs all over...”

This was all that Regan needed to know: upstairs. She flitted away, quietly and unnoticed as she arrived.

* * *

The spiral staircase must have been old, but it was a minor obstacle compared with Aunt Elisabeth’s struggle to keep the trust and confidence of her own family.

The door to the second floor opened into a hallway, along which three open windows were aligned. Orange light seethed into the hallway. Regan appreciated the autumnal atmosphere it interpreted, and she filmed it. This floor, like the first, risked nothing in the way of visual decoration. Its ascetic charm was betrayed only by a pinewood perfume.

Something stirred nearby; in an instant, Regan knew that the house was not as widely believed, occupied by nothing. The stirring brought about the rattling notion that Miranda would locate her and drag her to the boys’ table. But Miranda had no distinct smell, and this unexplainable existence wasn’t marked by sound, but by smell. Something smelled wrong. Across the hallway, Regan spotted the source of the smell. In a darkened bathroom, an unnatural silhouette writhed. Instinctively, Regan attributed it to Aunt Elisabeth’s unnamed troubler.

Regan slipped under the bed. She hid the blinking light with her finger, and observed the manifestation as it moved. That’s all she could discern: movement. Thereupon, leaving the room, holding a long wad of duck tape and a dripping wet piece of cardboard. He—Yes, the specter was human enough to have a gender identity—He was a man fresh from the downtrodden path. He did not quite fit the space his clothing allowed. His chin was dotted with unbecoming stumps of whiskers. His hair was grey and dirty. He was a ghost, a humanoid ghost.

What ghost would haunt this house? Unless it was Aunt Elisabeth’s late husband, nothing should crawl the pipes of the house like such. She rewound the tape and replayed it, just to be sure that

man-made machinery could detect the very apparitions available to the human eye. It could. Whoever this disgruntled man was, he was not any known relation. Perhaps her mama would know.

No one was at the foot of the staircase. She was sure that nobody would know she had gone upstairs, unless they were a professional guesser.

“And I is certain I board up the window as best I can, I still wake to haunts trailing by my door,” said Aunt Elisabeth. Regan poked at her papa’s forearm. He glanced at her, muttered, “Not now,” and waved her away. The room was visibly divided between those who were willing to humor Aunt Elisabeth and those who had given up. Papa typified the former set of adults (who were mostly Bredthrust husbands and the Lovers clan) with his fingers curled under his chin, his mouth stretched in such a way that condoned feigned interest. Mama was a part of the group who had completely given up trying to listen. Miranda was also a part of this group. These were people who had retreated to the kitchen, apparently to clean the mess of uneaten pie left by the children. She was more successful at drawing her mother away.

“Look at this,” Regan showed her the video. “Do you know who this is?”

“No,” she said. “I don’t think so. Where did you film it? I might know him if I knew where this was.”

Dare she admit to her upstairs espionage?

‘It’s from... an old building...’

“What old building? Have you been loitering in front of the Chaisly place, filming strangers? Really, Regan, you ought to mind your own business.”

Mother walked primly back into the kitchen. Regan replayed the film to herself. She wished that she could be more convincing, when Miranda slid by her, glancing back at the girl as she crossed the dining room.

“Aunt Ellie, honey,” said Miranda.

A dire cloud shadowed Angus’s face. Aunt Elisabeth finally stopped her spasmodic alieniloquy that had so alienated the other in-laws.

“Why don’t you show us this mysterious phenomena on the second floor? I’d really like to see it myself—”

* * *

A sort of jiffy game had erupted among the boys, and by the look of it, Teresa, Chloe, and Sally had thrown themselves into the fray. This was evident from a chase between Tyler, Chloe, and Clancy that had popped into the kitchen. Sally for the first time in her life, addressed the existence of Regan. “We’re going on a scavenger hunt!” she cried, “come along!”

Naturally, coming along was the last thing that Regan wanted to do, but perhaps here female cousins were not as erratic as they seemed. The advantage, though only probably, was that there might be more to learn about Aunt Elisabeth and her plight and fright.

When went back to the dining room, the adults had abandoned it, clearly falling victim to the dictates of Miranda. The platters were barren, and there was not even the most basic evidence of a

meal on the silverware. Whether or not the older girls were the kind to tattle, they not interrupt Aunt Elisabeth.

In search of Chloe, Regan encountered Teresa on the landing. At once, Teresa dropped the—Regan waylaid her—cheeriness so often Flaunted, more the evident that it was artificial. She folded her arms and permitted her lip to leak. “What?”

“I’ll join your party game, whatever it is, if I can tell you where I’ve been while you keep it a secret.”

“Go away, I don’t really care...” She was about to pursue chase to Sally and Mason, but she turned around. “You want to know where *I’ve* been?”

If this was a scavenger hunt, then it was a very poorly arranged one. Beyond the average chaotic romp, which was limited to damage done to other people, the boys—maybe even the girls—were ransacking the house for whatever object they were racing to find, or else, trying to hide.

“Has someone been killed?” said Regan.

“You mean, since we’ve been here? Maybe. After all, nobody ever heard from Arnold again, after he left.”

She winked, then hopped away.

She hadn’t thought of Arnold. If she only knew what he looked like, she’d have to take up her own scavenger hunt. A photograph, a sketch, anything of that nature could hardly expect to be found on these surroundings. Aunt Elisabeth’s walls were naked, The brood that had started their own hunt had raided everything, including the walls. There might be only one place to look: the basement.

Regan went outside through the pantry door to find the stairwell that led to the basement. There were no doors—they had probably been broken off—and a dim light flickered from the back of the room. As she descended, she approached an unforgivable smell. Forgiveness was a verb rarely encouraged within the family. How much less so could this odor, who could not avenge a grudge, deserve a place in any of the family’s home? The smell brought about memories about such things that were deemed unacceptable by the Lowres and the Bredthrusts; foremost among these things were other people, specifically, people who were or might have been part of the family at one time, but were now for certain not. Arnold Lorne, Aunt Elisabeth’s son, was one of these people.

All that Regan had ever known about Arnold she had learned through the unfavorable gossip of her adult relatives. She understood very little, only that he was last heard from years before she was born, and that he was widely disliked by his cousins and uncles.

Could this be his ghost? If Arnold had come to mend fences with the rest of the family, in what manner did he mean to do it?

And what was this smell?

Regan left the last stair, and entered the basement. There was hardly anything in here save for a table, a refrigerator, and a trio of shelves as vacant as the rest of Aunt Elisabeth’s house. *It can’t be coming from under the floorboards, can it?* She walked in a little ways, but after the smell had assaulted her senses, she began to fear for her camera. On the one hand, if the source of the smell was a hideous abomination, it might devour her, and she might at least leave to the world the knowledge of what

they were looking for. On the other hand, it might eat her camera. It would be best to leave it, she decided, on the table. And with that, she jerked open the refrigerator door.

A pot, one for growing plants. It even had dirt in it. The smell was unbearably unnatural, though. Nothing could possibly smell so putrid. With a courage very uncommon of a girl her age, she reached for the pot and overturned it. Things that shouldn't be there rolled out, things that should be underground.

But they are underground, twice, said a voice.

They were in an underground basement, in a pot of dirt.

The skull of a rat-terrier, mounted above the rest of the divided animal parts, rolled out of the pot first, followed by two limbs, the tail, and the torso.

Her senses were still muted by the smell of the thing, but she could hear some footsteps. She backed away from the refrigerator door. The newcomer picked up her camera. "May I have this for a second? I would like for Aunt Elisabeth to see it. I'll give it back once she has seen it." Regan nodded, still focused on the disassembled animal in the refrigerator. She stood staring at the thing for many seconds, then slammed the door shut. She began to wonder who had just taken her camera. Maybe it was her mother. She wanted it back to chronicle the pitiable thing she had found, in case someone else decided to come along and steal it.

She clambered over the debris lying around the house. What a shock it would be to the adults. Up the stairs, the adults were, as usual, all gathered around Aunt Elisabeth. Regan was safe, since they all faced Aunt Elisabeth. Where was Mama? Regan edged along the wall to keep out of Miranda's vision. She couldn't spot see either woman in the crowd's membrane.

Then she spotted Miranda, and she had Regan's camera. It was unclear what she was doing with it, but it was definitely that of Regan's.

A new disdain for Miranda leaked into Regan's soul. Miranda did not have to watch her all the time, she simply knew what her activities were. There was no other explanation for it. Her first plan was to march straight through and demand it back, for there was no worse crime in the Lowres family than to take away a child's belongings. But Regan paused in mid-step.

There was always a possibility that to assert herself to another adult might topple Aunt Elisabeth into imbalance. By the look of things, Arnold had not yet apologized. He wouldn't communicate very well while she was in hysterics.

Behind this crowd was a closet door. With their attention screwed into Aunt Elisabeth and her tales of horror, the adults would likely have ignored the fact that it was closed. Regan slipped into it. She could see through the crack in the door Aunt Elisabeth, and those nearby. The closet itself had the aura of a forest; light seeped across her face in long, thick rows. When the adults were all done listening, Uncle Charlie stepped up.

"Well, I'm sorry, Aunt Ellie, but there's just no one up here. Why don't—"

Uncle Charlie made an "oof" noise. A stream of aunts and uncles walked by the door. She couldn't understand their murmurs, but she was almost certain that they almost all disparaged the witness of Aunt Elisabeth. At last, only one person was left with Aunt Elisabeth, and her unwillingness to join the crowd attracted the attention of another person.

"Come along, Miranda," The clenched teeth strained the words.

“No, Angus. I need to show her this,” said Miranda. Where exactly was this woman placing her allegiance? The camera, to an adult—or at least the Miranda kind of adult—was only a plaything; something which could be used as an object lesson in sharing. True, she hadn’t gone directly to Guyson with it, but where her plans *after* showing Aunt Elisabeth the ghost of Arnold?

“Do you know this man?” said Miranda.

Aunt Elisabeth didn’t say anything at first. She squinted at the screen and shook her head.

“Look closely—“

“Miranda, I’m warning you...”

The other adults, as far as Regan could see, had not left the room.

“Hush. I’m having my say.”

Miranda held the camera closer to Aunt Elisabeth. Again, the old woman denied any possible knowledge of the ghost.

It is her own son, thought Regan. She has to recognize him!

Angus placed his hand on Miranda’s shoulder, but she shrugged it away.

“Are you sure? You don’t know who he is? Let me pause it. Take long look at him. I’m sure you will change your mind. You’ve seen him, in your sleep, right before you awaken, before you can call the police.”

Their beloved aunt looked indifferent. She hadn’t taken a look at the paused screen, but—“Gimme that!”—Angus saw to it that she would not have the chance; he yanked the camera out of Miranda’s hand, and threw it toward Regan. The object cracked at the door, and Regan released a yelp and flinch; she was almost certain that she had kicked the door when she fell.

For a moment, Regan’s sight and hearing went numb. Maybe Angus was dragging Miranda away while chastising her. Maybe her father opened the closet door and stared at her, agape that she would spy on her paranoid Aunt. Maybe one of her cousins had burst into the room with fatal news about someone’s pet. Maybe the ghost of Arnold had flown from the camera, and that was why Aunt Elisabeth started screaming, “I am well! I am well! Why are you haunting me!” Maybe black ropes sprouted from the ceiling, and were now dragging all of the adults into the interior of the walls, or maybe Aunt Elisabeth fainted, and had to be lifted onto the bed.

All that she knew was that someone had shouted something about a dead animal, and the thunderous clumping of a stampede drained the upper floor of people.

Eventually, she recovered from her surprise, but not from her fear. She knew a deep unhappiness awaited her outside.

Her camera, when she found it, lay on the floor in front of the closet door. Basically, the door was broken off, and the lens was cracked. At first, the video tape did not look damaged, but when Regan pulled it out, it was sticky with something dripping, she couldn't tell what. Battery acid, maybe? It would only play in the camera, anyway. She might never find the means to recover the tape inside.

Regan did not follow the adults into the basement afterward. She looked out the window without reason, perhaps desirous of time-reversal. Seconds later, she walked downstairs, one step more, one step more, correlating surprisingly well with the slope of her morale.

All for the sake of ill-distributed freedom between the young and the old. Miranda could never allow for one person the right to associate with both the adults and the children, or even to choose not to associate at all. Regan walked out the front door and sat on the porch step. She watched the construction of an ant hill. Her camera, it seemed, had done what it was supposed to, and that is why it ended up breaking. There would never be anything worth recording ever again. Except, that is, for these ants, and the next time she saw a haunted house. A chain of likely occurrences worth when she heard the retreat some unwelcome entity marked by a rustle along the bushes.

She looked up to see the ghost of Arnold. He fled quickly from the yard. Nothing could possibly worry him now; He had fulfilled his purpose. Having shown himself to Aunt Elisabeth for the last time, he was off to join the many things that had once been a part of the family, but were never to be understood or even remembered. Regan watched him until his silhouette faded into the wood.