

A Night with the Dead



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A road trip to the scariest place in Australia reveals that Adelaide might just have more going on than some people think.

“Look, I can’t come round tonight,” I tell her. There’s silence at her end. “I’m going to Kapunda,” I encourage. Still silence. “I’m going to see some ghosts.” She hangs up.

My destination in Kapunda is a cemetery that I’ve been tipped off is the most haunted place in all of Australia. As I watch the flat, brown landscape unfold ahead of me, I recall all sorts of strange rumours that I’ve heard about the graveyard: stories of

sinister disembodied voices, weird apparitions, and things appearing where they shouldn’t. Not that I believe that there’s any convincing evidence for the existence of ghosts, just that – like most people – I do enjoy the odd scary story.

Like the one about Ruby Bland, a young girl who was an inmate of the Kapunda Reformatory back in 1909. After being raped by the Reformatory’s priest, Ruby became pregnant – and, not wanting the scandal





to leak, the mad Father attempted to give her an abortion but murdered her in the process. Though the Reformatory's since been demolished, there are stories that something still lingers on in the graveyard – the pale figure of a young girl, whose footsteps echo across the lonely plains at night.

Maybe that's all a bit unlikely. Throwing my mobile into the back seat, I wind down my window and let the dusk air blow through the car. A blowfly whizzes passed my face. It will be dark soon and there's a lot of road to pound before I hit Kapunda – and whatever waits for me there.

The road to the cemetery had begun one week ago over coffee with Alison Oborn, co-founder and team leader of the Adelaide-based Paranormal Field Investigators team. Formed in 2002, PFI's mandate is simple: to look into reports of paranormal activity in the most technically sound way possible. "We keep clear of clairvoyants," Alison explained, sipping her flat white, "and do it more in a technical, equipment-based way – with a slight scepticism".

PFI are, in short, who you gonna call if you believe you might be share-housing with a ghost. "Our job is to go in and put people's minds at rest," Alison said. "Because a lot of these people are scared, for a start. They don't know what they're dealing with, and they think they've gone mad. So we go in and we try to

find a natural explanation first... But if we are getting results, and we are picking up on activity that could be paranormal, we'll talk through what they can do, and what's worked for another people".

Alison's fascination with ghosts began at a very early age. "My earliest recollection is when I was in the cot," she said. "I can still remember to this day standing up to the bars, crying – because I could hear this very raspy male breathing in the room. And there was nobody else in there with me."

Since then, she's experienced more than a few strange things. Although she could never place why, Alison was always terrified by her childhood home – even just walking past would sent chills down her spine like a cold shower. It was only when she was older that her parents revealed that there had been many strange sightings inside the house. "My sisters had a really bad time in there. They were seeing disembodied eyes floating in the rooms." *Disembodied eyes?* I asked, brow slightly furrowed.

"Well," she explained, "the guy who lived in the house before – He'd been to the pub one New Years Eve, came out and got mugged. He ended up in hospital with head injuries, and died a few days later... And he'd had a condition that made his eyes bulge out – which is maybe why the eyeballs were seen floating around".

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As a product of a youth spent dealing with strange phenomenon, it was only natural that Alison developed an interest in investigating the ostensibly paranormal. After forming PFI with co-founder Jeff Fausch, she approached the Old Adelaide Gaol with an offer to rigorously investigate the spectres that are famously said to stalk the grounds. The manager of the Gaol at the time was very receptive to the idea, and what was to be a short three month study eventually grew out into six years of careful research.

The PFI team quickly discovered there were a lot of peculiar goings-on at the Gaol. They managed to record what appear to be voices on tape and video footage of weird happenings in dark corners. It was in the Gaol that Alison experienced a strange sensation – almost as if something had passed through her. "It was a very violent and very, very disgusting feeling – like I needed a shower afterward," she said.

Setting my empty coffee mug down, I hesitantly asked where I should head if I wanted to see a ghost. There was no pause before Alison's reply. "A night in Kapunda. On your own. *Dare you.*" She laughed, finishing off her coffee. "If it's going to turn nasty, that's where it's going to turn nasty."

When I asked about legends from the area, she told me the stories about Ruby Bland. "But," she said, "through our research of records we've found that – Yes, there was a priest up there who was mentally sick – we have all the letters of the nuns who were concerned about his mental health – but he wasn't killing girls; they're all accounted for.

"One of the girls *did* die – Ruby Bland – but she wasn't pregnant; we have her death record. But we do believe that if there is anything up there it is the Father – Reverend Martin – because we recorded a voice there that is very insane sounding. It puts the hairs up on the back of your neck. It does seem

to be saying “sinner” – you just hear this raspy voice saying ‘siiinnnnneeee!’.”

And if I do see a ghost at Kapunda? Alison thought for a moment before she replied. “*Don’t run.*”

The bitumen continues to roll through under my tyres. The sun has now sunken well beneath the horizon, and the dark clouds above blot out any lingering twilight. The spooky music mix I’d been playing on my iPod ends, so I thumb through for something else appropriately atmospheric. I settle on Belle & Sebastian. *Close enough.*

I think about the graveyard at the end of the road. Unlike Alison, I’ve never had anything remotely spooky happen to me. I wonder if I would be able to stand still if I hear the disembodied voice of an insane holy man screeching *SINNER!!* in my ear. I frown: it’s doubtful.

A few days ago, I’d caught up with someone who might have stood a chance against the murderous Father – someone who’d been putting up with weird goings-on in his house for nearly fifteen years. I’d gone to meet up with ‘J’ for a few tips on how I should handle a potential supernatural encounter.

J had been encountering the supernatural at his CBD home since he was ten. “I’d wake up in bed and see this dark silhouette standing there, staring at me,” he said. “I used to shit myself – I’d jump up and switch on the lights straight away.” The strange shadow figures would always remain unmoving at the foot of his bed, peering at J until he managed to summon up the courage to race over and flick on the light switch.

Since then, the silhouettes began to appear regularly. Although they were never aggressive, their presence

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always gave J a bizarre, unsettling feeling. “There are six of them, all identical. Sometimes they’d appear lying down near the bed,” he told me. “My mum would walk in and I’d be screaming and scratching at the walls.”

One night recently, J’s girlfriend B was sleeping over. They went to bed as normal – but later that night, B awoke in mid-air to find that J was lifting her up. He was screaming at her not to get off the bed. When she asked why, he said: “Because they’re all around us!”

With his girlfriend slightly freaking out and the silhouettes showing no sign of vanishing, J did what anyone would do: called his mum, who now lives interstate. “She told me that the house used to be a druggie den. There were drive-bys, ODS – all sorts of bad things going down.” J paused for a moment. “I’m not saying there’s any connection there. I’m definitely not saying it’s ghosts. I’m probably dreaming it all.” He frowned. “But the point is, I definitely *am* seeing them. Whatever they are, *they exist.*”

My car rolls to a stop on an empty road, gravel crackling underneath. The high beams illuminate a simple white sign post reading CEMETARY, jutting out behind a low wire fence. I hesitate before taking off my seatbelt. The steering wheel is damp with sweat from my hands. Things are getting a bit ominous. *Should I leave the engine running?* I breathe in deeply.

Pulling the keys out of the ignition, I undo my belt and slide out the door. The Kapunda graveyard is small, and cheaply fenced in on all sides. I hop over


the perimeter easily, the dry dirt crunching under my sneakers. All around me stone markers jut out from the dirt like neatly arranged rows of teeth. In the background are the heavy silhouettes of trees. Under my feet are the bones of the dead.

The air feels heavy all around me, like if I keep my back turned for long enough I’ll be swallowed whole. I wonder where the girls’ Reformatory used to stand. I wonder where Ruby is buried. I’m freaking the fuck out.

It takes a few minutes before I’m able to properly move. With every single step, I’m expecting to see a dim silhouette crouched down near a grave, or hear the muffled screams of a girl long since dead. All the scepticism in the world couldn’t drown my fear right now.

In the end, I spend about fifteen minutes sheepishly wandering around the cemetery – but I don’t see or hear anything besides my own comically-loud heartbeat thumping through my hoodie. The wind picks up, whipping across the dry grass and seeping into my bones. I shiver. It’s time to go.

Sliding back into my car, I grab my phone from the back seat and call her back. She picks up right away and sleepily asks how Kapunda is. “Rubbish,” I say. “I didn’t even see any ghosts.” She laughs softly. “Yeah,” I continue, “A five hour drive for *nothing!*”

I wonder if she can tell how relieved I am. 

If there’s something strange in your neighbourhood, Alison from Paranormal Field Investigators can be contacted at moborn@adam.com.au. Ghost tours of the Old Adelaide Gaol take place by appointment.