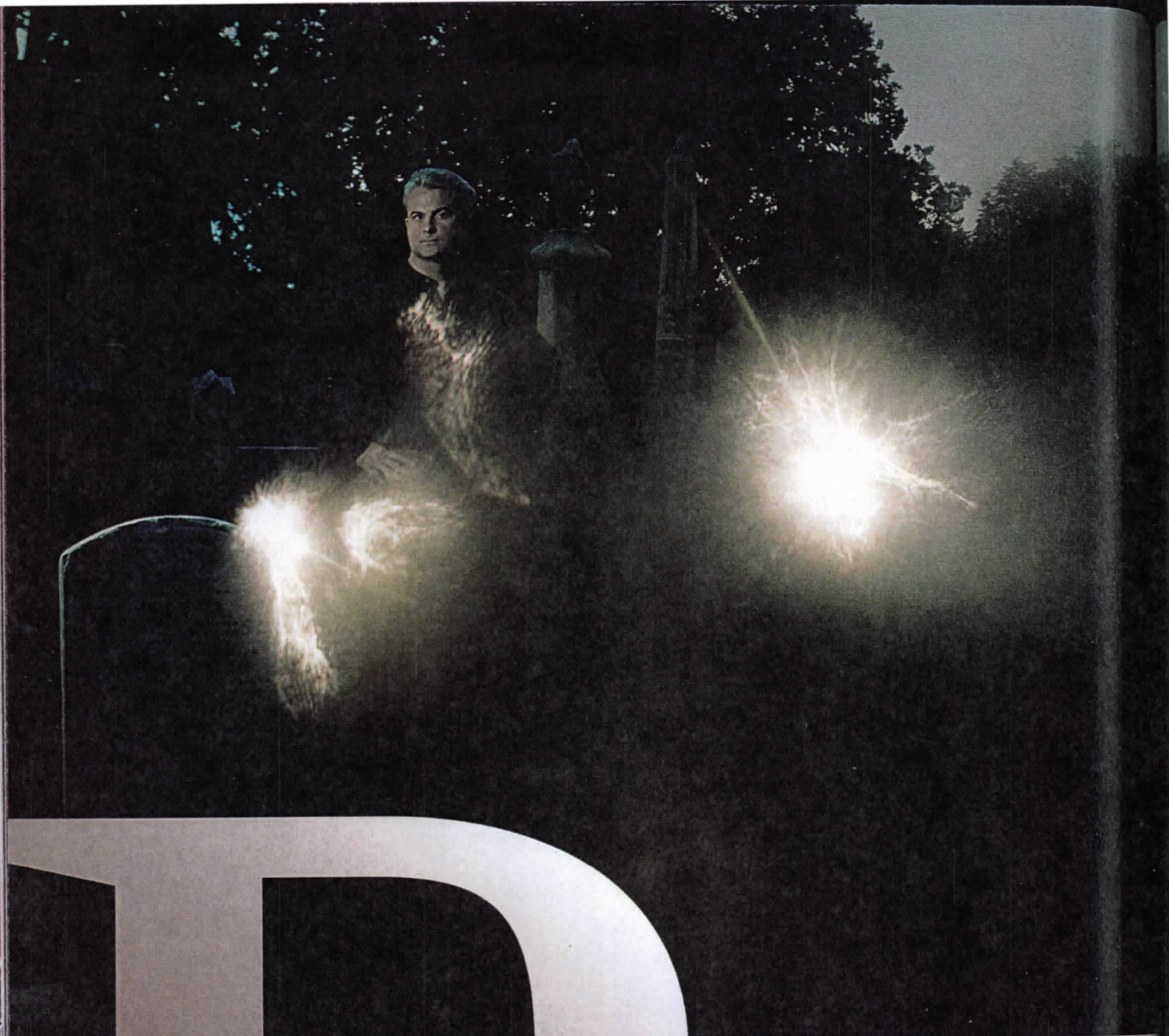


HAUNTED

Driven by personal loss, paranormal investigator and TV ghost hunter
Patrick Burns seeks the secrets of life beyond the grave.

by KIMBERLY TURNER

photographs by DAVID JOHNSON




PATRICK BURNS SITS CROSS-LEGGED ON THE HISTORIC

Savannah Theatre's red carpet, hunched over a blinking device attached to a speaker. His hands are clasped tightly enough to drain the blood from them. His voice wavers as he pleads, "Billy? Billy, are you here?"

The paranormal investigation had just begun when Atlanta psychic Reese Christian sensed a young man—about twenty-two years old, she said—standing near the aisle of the old theater. Burns pulled out the Ovilus, a device designed to communicate with the dead by translating environmental factors—such as temperature and electromagnetic activity—into speech. He placed the Ovilus on the floor near the invisible man, flipped the switch, and sank to his knees as its hollow robotic voice spit two words into the darkness: "Brother Billy."

Burns's brother Billy died in a violent car accident at the age of twenty-two. His chest was crushed on impact. His body was thrown 150 feet from the Porsche, which had been going well over 140 miles per hour when it hit a concrete lamppost anchor. Now, twenty-three years later, Burns asks, "Billy, can you affect this device? Can you speak to me?" Silence sweeps into the void where Billy's voice should be. It goes on and on. Burns implores, "Billy, do you have a message for Mother?"

"Pain," says the Ovilus, in its cold tonelessness.



"Pain? Did it hurt when you died, Billy?"

"Smell."

"Smell? Billy, do you have a message for Mom?"

"Bill. Bill."

"Billy, are you still here?"

"Music. Priest. Trust. Grief," says the Ovilus.

"Billy, I'm assuming you've just followed me here. I don't think you were ever in Savannah a day in your life. Is that true? Do you follow me? Are you the male presence that others have felt around me—people like Reese?"

"Tender . . . George. Smile. Sorry. Bill."

"George, is Billy still here?"

"Rest . . . Mother. Happy."

His brown eyes locked on the Ovilus, Burns waits a few minutes for more messages from Billy. When none come, he reaches down with a visibly shaky hand, flips the power switch off, and whispers, "Whoa. That was . . . wow. Just wow."

The encounter is over, but it has drawn the attention of the investigation team, which is composed of heavy hitters in the supernatural community, a paranormal dream team. They are gathered in Savannah for the sixth installment of Ghostock, a twice-annual convention hosted by Burns, who costars—along with psychics John J. Oliver and Carla Baron—on TruTV's *Haunting Evidence*.

While SCAD students in short shorts sip frozen drinks down on River Street and tourists snap photos of Savannah's town squares, dozens of the city's more

mysterious guests have gathered in a curtained ballroom for two days to hear presentations with titles such as "Policing the Paranormal Community and Its Members," "Common Sense Approach to Ghost Hunting and Evidence Review," and "Spectrophilia" (even stranger than it sounds). They've sobbed as mediums sketched drawings of their deceased relatives. They've eagerly accepted messages from long-dead loved ones and listened attentively to mysterious taped voices allegedly whispering from the other side. They've collected the autographs of presenters from Sci Fi Channel's *Proof Positive* and *Spooked*, Discovery Channel's *A Haunting*, and A&E's *Paranormal State*, as well as a variety of radio-show hosts and authors.

But the highlight of the convention for most is getting hands-on experience with fellow investigators. On the second night, Ghostock attendees split into fifteen groups to investigate some

of Savannah's most haunted locations. Across the city, they set up strategically placed video cameras, electromagnetic field detectors, and digital audio recorders. They walk the lightless halls of residences, restaurants, and theaters with eyes and ears strained for any sign of the afterlife.

Most of the time, there is no audible sound, only the hum of anticipation. In the Savannah Theatre, the silence is occasionally torn by a member of Burns's team announcing an anomalous event. "The door up here just opened on its own," one investigator yells from the balcony. "My arm went numb, then something pulled on it," reports another.

Burns spots a dark shadow on the wall of the auditorium. "Now another one! Another one!" His dark eyebrows shoot up to meet his silver hairline. I spin around, camera in hand, staring at an ordinary-looking wall as Burns exclaims, "I'm still seeing stuff up there." Despite my efforts, I am not. It's possible that I am, as Burns puts it, "ghost intolerant," in the same way that some are lactose intolerant. "Perhaps some people are more attuned to experience this stuff than other people," he says. "Everybody can dribble a basketball, but not everybody can slam-dunk like Michael Jordan."

Minutes later, *Haunting Evidence* costar John J. Oliver sticks his head into the stairwell and states, "Pat's got a child on the floor over here." He says it with the matter-of-fact tone you might use to say, "I've prepared a cheese sandwich for you."

A woman holding a blue stone that swings back and forth on a silver chain walks up and down a row of seats. Keith Age, host of *Spooked*, sees the backs of the chairs moving as Pat follows the ghost child.

"I see it!" says Burns, eyebrows still hovering around his hairline. "Poltergeist activity!" Soon everyone is watching the spirit child push the furniture around. Everyone but me. For a split second, I think I see one of the plush red chair-backs move, maybe just a little. Adrenaline surges. I blink, and in that brief blink, I think of the power of suggestion, of mass hysteria, of groupthink. When I open my eyes, the chair is still.

MOST OF US ARE ENCOURAGED TO BE SKEPTICS.

From the time we can understand the concept of spooks and ghouls, we are told that there's no such thing. They are, we're told, the stuff of nightmares, overactive imaginations, and spooky campfire tales, but they are certainly not hiding under your bed or inside your closet.

Somewhere along the line, some people change their minds. For Patrick Burns, the turnaround began when his deceased grandmother showed up. He wasn't actually there to see it, but the news came from his mother, the very person who, when he woke up from bad dreams or heard a sinister sound in the night, had assured him that ghosts did not exist. She had received a phone call from Mrs. Darlington, a neighbor who had moved into Patrick's grandmother's house after her death. The woman insisted that she'd seen his

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grandmother, and before his mother could advise her to lay off the mid-morning martini, Mrs. Darlington described the lavender housecoat the spirit had been wearing when it appeared in her kitchen. It was the robe his grandmother would wear around the house on holidays. Stunned, his mother was forced to reexamine her belief system. So, too, was ten-year-old Patrick.

After learning about his grandmother, he read everything he could find on the supernatural, but didn't have an experience of his own until age twenty-one. A year after Billy's shocking death, Burns woke to the sound of Billy's voice in the next room. His older brother was chatting idly with his uncle, who'd died of cancer a few months earlier. "I couldn't for the life of me tell you what they were talking about," says Burns. "It was something completely trivial. It could've been sports. It could have been fishing. Just a couple of guys sitting there talking with each other."

Terrified, Burns closed his eyes and waited. When the conversation stopped, he could sense their attention being drawn to him. He squeezed his eyes closed tightly, feeling Billy right next to him. "I wanted to find some reassurance that Billy was in a good place," explains Burns. "I wasn't ready to see him or experience him." That night, Billy was gone before Burns found the courage to open his eyes.

Now forty, Burns, who worked in the IT and laser-light-show industries before becoming a full-time seeker of the supernatural, has been formally investigating the paranormal for ten years. He has spent seven of those with Ghost Hounds, the Atlanta-based network of ghost enthusiasts he founded in 2001.

During his tenure as a ghost hunter, he has been attacked in a Marietta cemetery by an unseen entity that scratched him across his chest and arms, almost to the point of breaking the skin. He has been tripped on the stairs at the Stanley Hotel in Colorado (the hotel that inspired Stephen King's *The Shining*). He has been poked and touched by things he could not see. Yet he continues to place himself in allegedly haunted locations because his curiosity and fascination with the afterlife are stronger than his fear.

"I'm probably 95 percent convinced at the existence of ghosts," he says. "Being scientifically minded, I force myself to keep the door ajar to other possibilities. I have personally experienced things. I have seen the effects of what we perceive to be hauntings affect our instruments in ways that we are unable to find a logical explanation for. Does that mean there is no logical explanation? Of course not."

Reese Christian, the medium who stumbled across Burns's deceased brother in the Savannah Theatre, thinks desire, when paired with strong belief, can be enough. "It's almost like if I tell you you're sick," says Christian, who works regularly with Burns and Ghost Hounds. "I say it over and over. You start believing you're sick, and then you're going to become sick. It's not that I cursed you, it's that I made you

When fueled by primal desire, almost any belief can be rationalized. So while it's tough for many to believe in ghosts and messages from long-dead loved ones, it's even tougher for others not to believe.

Other times, that logical explanation taps you on the shoulder and waves its arms around. Such was the case in the home of an Augusta family who phoned Ghost Hounds last year to report dark apparitions moving through the house and a monster that awoke their child in the night. (If you're in Georgia, the answer to the question "Who ya gonna call?" is Ghost Hounds.)

As Burns walked through the home with an electromagnetic field detector, he immediately found a field so strong it buried the device's needle in the red. Further investigation uncovered a large-gauge piece of unshielded wiring suspended in the crawlspace. Burns told the client that their "ghosts" may actually have been caused by the faulty wiring. He explained that people who are extremely sensitive to electromagnetic activity can experience symptoms consistent with a haunting, to the point of causing the brain synapse to misfire and disrupting the optic nerve, leading to perceived shadows and apparitions. The family dismissed his theory, and claims that it continues to experience ghost activity today.

"This is one of the problems we run into," says Burns. "There is a very strong desire for people to be able to believe or have evidence that we survive, that we live on. A lot of people desperately want their house to be haunted. They don't want a mundane explanation such as poorly shielded wiring or a medical condition. This has become almost a status symbol to some people. People want to say, 'My house is haunted.'"

believe it. People can do that with their home. They can believe it's haunted even if there was never any reason to think so. Then they create their own haunting." In Tibetan mysticism, these homemade ghosts, beings brought from imagination to reality through sheer willpower and belief, are known as tulpas.

IF REESE CHRISTIAN IS RIGHT

and belief is enough to conjure manifestations from beyond the grave, the world is about to be a very haunted place. We're talking tulpas out the wazoo. The latest Gallup Poll to ask Americans whether they believe in ghosts, in 2005, found that 22 percent of those aged sixty-five and older said yes. The percentage of believers rose to 27 percent in the fifty to sixty-four range, 35 percent in the thirty to forty-nine range, and 45 percent among eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds. Burns says the number, in his experience, is much higher—70 to 80 percent of people he talks with have some sort of spooktacular story to tell, particularly in the South where folklore and gothic tales have a long history, and the number is growing. "Suddenly people realize this is no longer taboo," he says. "It's almost kind of become sexy in a way, I suppose, to be a paranormal investigator."

The increased acceptance and appeal of the hobby has led to a growing number of paranormal-themed television shows in recent years: *Ghost Hunters* and *Ghost Hunters International*, *Celebrity Paranormal Proj-*

ect, *Supernatural*, *Ghost Whisperer*, and, of course, Burns's project, *Haunting Evidence*, to name a few.

His journey into paranormal programming-obsessed pop culture was rapid. Burns had just dropped the babysitter off in Conyers in June 2005 when his cell phone chirped. He glanced down, area code 212. The Lawrenceville resident had never been to Manhattan, but he knew where 212 was, so he pulled his minivan over and answered the call.

"I'm Matt Levine with Departure Films in New York City. Is this Patrick Burns?" asked the voice, who went on to explain he was putting together a new show to pitch to Court TV. It would be called *Haunting Evidence* and would involve working with psychics to investigate cold case homicide and missing-persons cases. "We have our two psychics, but we're looking for a technically minded ghost hunter to round out the cast. We'd like to put your name in the hat."

Burns, whose eyes light up anytime a camera is pointed in his direction, was discovered online, based only on a few clips from shows such as WTBS's *Interact Atlanta*

that he had posted on the Ghost Hounds website. As he hit END on his cell phone and pulled onto the street, he felt sure he'd never hear from Levine again.

Four weeks later, the paranormal investigator from Atlanta was in a fifteen-passenger van with producers, cameramen, and his costars from L.A. and NYC. They were taken to a park on the north side of Manhattan where a body had been discovered a few years prior and asked to do their thing for the screen test. It was ninety-five degrees, the kind of muggy heat that does nothing for thick stage makeup or Burns's trademark fluffy hair. As the day went on, he was increasingly nervous, increasingly sweaty, and increasingly sure he'd blown the whole thing. Yet when Court TV reviewed the tapes, they felt chemistry between Burns, Carla Baron, and John J. Oliver and green-lighted two pilot episodes, filmed in October and November 2005, then nine more for season one, and fourteen more for season two. Court TV has since become TruTV, and four one-hour specials are set to air on that network every Saturday at 10 p.m. throughout the month of October.

Filming typically requires Burns to fly out of Atlanta on a Monday. Standing in the check-in line at Hartsfield-Jackson, he could be any business traveler. It's not as if his boarding pass reveals his true destination: a world of inconsolable family members, violent imagery, and ruined lives.

For one episode, he traveled first to an unassuming split-level brick Alabama home to meet with the mother of Natalee Holloway. The pretty, popular blonde girl's story garnered extensive—many say excessive—media attention after she left for a high school graduation trip to Aruba and never returned. Her grieving mother opened the box where she'd lovingly folded and stored her daughter's unwashed clothing, and put two T-shirts into Burns's hands.

Later, at the end of the second long day of filming in Aruba, the *Haunting Evidence* team gathers on a dark beach where they believe Natalee was killed. Hoping the personal items will help them better connect with the victim, Burns shares the high schooler's shirts with his psychic costars, who stand in the false sunshine of the floodlights and begin talking their way through

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the girl's last moments.

"I think she was raped," says Oliver quietly, his eyes rolled back in his head.

"He left you there to die by yourself, is that true?" asks Baron.

Seated at a nearby table, monitoring his instruments and multiple computer screens of data, Burns starts seeing spikes on his tri-field meter.

"Keep talking to me," says Baron. "'They wrapped me up in something and carried me out,' she said."

Burns's data continues to show irregularities. "If this isn't a paranormal event, it's a heck of a coincidence," he says. "I believe my instruments, what they pick up, more than my own senses. My instruments aren't going out expecting to find a ghost. They're not caught up in the excitement of the hunt."

After just two days of filming, Burns is on his way back to Georgia. Atlanta has been his home since he moved from Wisconsin in 1996 to volunteer for the Olympic Games. Rather than the brief trip he'd anticipated, Burns's stay has lasted twelve years and counting. He fell in love twice within a few weeks of his arrival, once with the city and once with a woman named Pam, who shared his interest in the paranormal and later became his wife.

Today, they have two sons, aged seven and nine, who react to their father's profession not with fear but with curiosity. "They've each asked, 'When can we go ghost hunting with you, Dad?'" says Burns. "And I said, 'Not for a long time.' I think my criteria is going to be when they are old enough to give me an in-depth description of what they think a ghost is and, more importantly, what death is, what it means to die." Heavy stuff for kids with single-digit ages, but that's why Burns downplays the spookiness of his job and in particular the show, with its talk of rape, strangulation, and grief. And it's not going to get any prettier with the new episodes.

On the shows airing this month, the *Haunting Evidence* team investigates four high-profile cases: Madeleine McCann, the almost-four-year-old British girl who disappeared while on vacation with her parents in Portugal; George Allen Smith, the Connecticut man who disappeared from a cruise ship during his honeymoon in 2005; Northern California's Zodiac Killer; and six-year-old Atlanta-born beauty queen JonBenét Ramsey, who was buried in Marietta

after she was killed in 1996.

Anguished parents may not be immediately sold on the idea of having psychics and ghost hunters searching for their lost loved one, but most eventually concede. Maybe it's the hope that getting publicity of any kind might stir up additional clues. Maybe it's simple curiosity. But probably it's the unbearable weight of their desperation to communicate with their baby just one last time. No matter how unlikely they believe it is, most eventually succumb because they have nothing more to lose. JonBenét's mother, Patsy, died of cancer in 2006 before she had the satisfaction of seeing her family officially and publicly cleared of suspicion this July with DNA evidence. The girl's father, John, put *Haunting Evidence* producers off for years before finally allowing an investigation—if only to see what came of it.

WHAT COMES OF MOST PARANORMAL investigations is nada. Some photos of orb-shaped dust particles. Hours of silent digital recordings. A few seemingly random blips on an electromagnetic field detector. It's not like the edited versions of TV shows, where full-body apparitions lurk around every corner and ghostly voices murmur constant threats.

On June 24, just a few days before the 100th anniversary of *Uncle Remus* scribe Joel Chandler Harris's death, Patrick Burns sits in the front parlor of the Wren's Nest—Harris's Atlanta home. He wears a brown button-up shirt, jeans, and bulky headphones hooked into a digital recorder on the floor.

EVPs—electronic voice phenomena, or inexplicable voices that can be heard when digital recordings are played back, even though no speech was audible at the time of recording—have been captured at the Wren's Nest before. Lain Shakespeare, director of the Wren's Nest and great-great-great-grandson of Harris himself, plays some that he has saved on the museum's website. It's impossible to deny that a whispered voice says, "Come here," but also impossible to say whether it was a spirit or an investigator in need of a throat lozenge. Therein lies the problem with ghost hunting. "We call what we do paranormal investigation," says Burns. "But it's by no means an exact science. I mean, it's not really even science. It doesn't apply as a science because of the lack of repeatability. Paranormal events, by definition, do not repeat

Atlanta's Most Haunted

PSYCHIC AND GHOST HOUND REESE CHRISTIAN'S BOOK, *GHOSTS OF ATLANTA: PHANTOMS OF THE PHOENIX CITY*, IS AVAILABLE THIS MONTH. SHE AND PATRICK BURNS COUNT DOWN ATLANTA'S CREEPIEST SPOTS:

- 1 OLD LAWRENCEVILLE CEMETERY** Legend has it that a tornado in the 1920s knocked down a gigantic oak tree in the cemetery. Its roots were exposed, and intertwined within the roots were human remains. People came from miles around to gawk, and a shopkeeper on the square thought a skull would make an interesting souvenir. He removed it from the cemetery at night and displayed it on a shelf in his shop for many years until its true origin came to light.
- 2 ANTHONY'S RESTAURANT IN BUCKHEAD** This antebellum house was built in Washington, Georgia, in 1797 and moved, brick by brick with painstaking attention to detail, to Atlanta, 117 miles away, in 1964. Some say when the home moved to Atlanta so did the spirit of Annie Barnett, who died during childbirth in the house. Children can be heard singing. Lights regularly go on and off by themselves. Voices have been recorded on audio recorders. Ghost Hounds has communicated with a spirit via birdsong.
- 3 BARNESLEY GARDENS IN ADAIRSVILLE** In the center of this posh golf resort is Woodland Manor, said to be cursed by a Cherokee Indian who once lived there. It has since been the site of many mysterious deaths and murders.
- 4 KENNESAW MOUNTAIN NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD PARK** Cannon fire and full-body apparitions of soldiers have been reported at this Civil War battlefield.
- 5 SIX FLAGS** The spirit of a lost little girl is said to lead parkgoers into the woods, and the Crystal Pistol Music Hall is haunted by a dancer who was killed in a car wreck before he'd had a chance to perform his part in front of an audience.

on command, so it becomes extremely difficult to substantiate using the traditional scientific models."

For now, we'll settle for something happening once. Anything. "We are trying this evening to communicate with the spirits of the Wren's Nest," says Burns. "Do you have anything you'd like to say tonight? I want you to talk very loudly and clearly into this device in front of me."

Then we sit. And sit. And sit. The only sound is the faint whooshing of the air conditioner and the occasional revving of an engine out on Ralph David Abernathy Boulevard. I start taking photos just to feel like I'm doing something, checking each one on my camera's little screen in hopes of seeing Joel Chandler Harris sitting in the rocking chair across from me.

"What was that?" asks Burns. I shrug. Will Aymerich, a Ghost Hounds member who is filming the Wren's Nest investigation for a planned web program, looks confused. "All right, we have a possible EVP at 1:10 into the recording," says Burns. "That was interesting."

He loads the audio onto his computer and

runs it through a filter to remove noise. The playback reveals absolutely nothing. Expectation plays tricks on the mind. Experiments have been done in which participants are told to transcribe a faint, poor-quality recorded lecture. They are able to make out words, phrases, sometimes entire sentences, even though they had been listening to nothing but white noise.

Subjects simply preferred to believe that the lecture was difficult to hear rather than that they'd been deceived. The human mind has the capacity to find order in chaos, make colossal leaps of faith when it's beneficial, and validate our viewpoints. When fueled by primal desire, almost any belief can be rationalized. So while it's tough for many to believe in ghosts and messages from long-dead loved ones, it's even tougher for others not to believe.

The light you saw out of the corner of your eye might have been the reflection of headlights. Or it might have been your deceased grandfather, coming by to tell you that he loves you and that everything's all right on the other side. One option is logical, scientific. The other option offers comfort,

hope, and meaning. It brings excitement and intrigue to an otherwise ordinary existence. Which would you prefer to believe?

"None of us want to think that when we die, it's like being snuffed out like a candle flame, that we cease to exist," says Burns. "And scientifically, something does survive physical death. The law of conservation says that matter and energy are never created, never destroyed, only converted from one form to another. So by definition, yes, something survives physical death. The question is: Do we retain our intellect? Do we retain our memories, our emotions? Would this energy that's left over be recognizable as the person it once was? I would like to think so."

Burns restarts the audio recorder and asks again, "Is there anyone here who wants to speak with us?" And apparently we do not seem interesting enough to speak with, because although all the equipment in the room—my camera and video camera included—are nearly sucked dry of power during the next ten minutes, the EVP recordings reveal no words. In the next room, our batteries are full again. Supernatural? Perhaps. Perhaps not. ■

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