

Spooky Little Girl Like You: Haunted Hinman and Other Tales of the Supernatural
By Brent Gotsch

...Having become specters with long memories and a strong sense of compassion, they communicate without speaking; their presence says more than words could say.

*-Professor Libby Tucker, Binghamton University, Department of English
"Spectral Indians, Desecrated Burial Grounds"*

Ghost stories have been around for ages and every institution seems to have them in some form or another.¹ Hinman College is no exception. However, stories of strange and supernatural happenings within the boundaries of Hinman seem to be a relatively recent phenomenon with most of the stories originating around the year 2000 or thereabouts. While to the casual observer, most of the stories seem as though they can be explained away as either overactive imaginations of college students or by simple natural phenomena, to those who experienced these events first hand, they are all too real and oftentimes very frightening.

One event of a paranormal nature occurred in Smith Hall in August 2005. Suzy Chhim, an RA on the 3rd floor of the "A" side of the building, was up late at night working on her door tags like any good RA would do during the latter stages of summer RA training. Suzy had been quite busy, going all day long with training and staff development exercises, and this was the only time she had available to create her door tags before new residents moved into the building. Seemingly nothing was out of the ordinary, and it appeared that this would be just like any other night. That assumption was completely wrong.²

Any RA will tell you that during the weeks of summer RA training before residents return to the building, the halls have a somewhat creepy atmosphere about them. It is a very disconcerting feeling to be inside a building that houses approximately two hundred people and to be one of only eight people residing within it. This is compounded by the fact that during this time you are the only one on your floor, creating feelings of loneliness and isolation. This

author, having lived through this period himself as both a DA and an RA, can certainly relate and acknowledge that the building, which during the rest of the year is a bustling place full of sound, people and activity, is eerily quiet and every little creak of the aging structure has the potential to send chills down one's spine. If it were not for the daily training sessions and the presence of a few other people inside, there would not be much separating this experience from that of the characters in Stephen King's *The Shining*, the isolated and haunted Overlook Hotel replaced by a Hinman residence hall. Granted nothing nearly as malign is associated with the residence halls and they certainly are not the settings of gothic horror stories. Still, the pervading atmosphere at this time of year can certainly put one ill at ease, even within a familiar and normally welcoming and comfortable environment. Perhaps it is this duality which makes that time of year so strange for the returning staff.

However, that is all a digression. We now must return to the story of Suzy Chhim and her paranormal experience on the third floor of Smith Hall. Suzy had been working on her door tags late into the night. The time was approximately 1:00 a.m. and she was multitasking, speaking on the phone with her boyfriend David and finishing up her door tags. It is important to note that at this time all the suite doors on her floor were shut and locked. Upon finishing her door tags, Suzy began to tape them up on the doors. Nothing was out of the ordinary until she attached the tags to suite 310. Then strange things began to happen. As soon as she applied the tags, a loud creaking sound was heard from within the suite. While it is not unusual for a few creaks to be heard throughout the nearly forty-year-old building, this was abnormal in that it was rather loud and seemed to continue. Suzy, ever the practical RA, was intrigued but not curious enough to enter the room, dismissing the sounds as natural to the building and/or figments of her imagination. Suddenly, a loud noise erupted from the suite. It sounded as though someone, or

something, was inside banging around and slamming furniture within the suite. Suzy became frightened and ran downstairs to get Ryan Schoeffield, a fellow RA in the building. Moments later, Suzy and Ryan returned to her floor, but the strange noises had ended.³

The story does not end there. After the residents of the building had returned, strange happenings continued within suite 310. Strange noises, while not as severe as those experienced by Suzy, continued to be heard. Also, the girls who lived in that suite continually smelled a strange perfume-like smell that, no matter how hard they cleaned or what they did, never seemed to go away. Furthermore, none of the girls in that room wore a perfume that contained a scent anything like what they constantly smelled. For a time they blamed the exotic odor on the people who lived downstairs from them, but they too wore no perfume or possessed any scents that were anything at all like the unfamiliar odor that they were all smelling. With all the strange goings-on, from the scary noises to the unidentified odors, Suzy began to worry so much that she even asked the girls who inhabited the suite if they wanted their room to be blessed. The girls discussed it but decided against that course of action. The strange odor continued in the room for a time thereafter, but after a few months it eventually went away, just as mysteriously as it had come.⁴ For many, this tale would be unbelievable if it were not for the numerous students who smelled strange and unusual odors within the confines of their suite. "...A smell's truth is difficult to deny. If you smell something yourself, how can you say the smell does not exist? When the sense of smell becomes linked to a legend, that legend may become more persuasive."⁵ This story from Smith Hall has become legend in part because of the fantastic nature of sounds and smells, but also because of the repeated tellings of the story has elevated it to near mythic proportions.

Another tale of the paranormal to come out of Hinman occurred in the Fall of 2005, this time in the basement of Hughes Hall. It was late one evening, and Andrew Rubino, a senior RA in Hughes at the time, had been up late at night doing his laundry. When he had gone down initially to do his laundry he noticed that the exit sign was flickering strangely. He made a mental note to put in a work order to get it fixed but thought nothing of it. Later on in the evening, as he was finishing his laundry he heard a strange noise. He exited the laundry room and looked out into the hallway between the staircase and the actual laundry room. Out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw the image of a young woman dressed in a pink dress with long blonde hair. When he went to approach the young woman she dematerialized into thin air. As one might imagine this left Andrew very nervous and frightened and ever since he has become reluctant to enter the basement of Hughes alone ever since.⁶

This would not be the last time that a ghostly apparition would appear in the basement of Hughes Hall. The ghost, who would eventually be dubbed Charlene, would be seen in other areas of Hughes. Sightings of Charlene would occur mostly in the laundry room but also in the study lounge, in particular near the stove. Most of the times her coming and departure would be heralded by a flickering exit sign. A sort of mythology has arisen around the ghost known only as Charlene. Speculation is that she was a resident of Hughes Hall sometime in the 1970's, that she had been a popular student who had met an unfortunate end within the residence hall itself, and that her hobbies included studying, cooking, and doing her laundry, as evidenced by her appearing mostly around the laundry room, kitchen, and study lounge areas. However, there is no known record of a young woman named Charlene living in Hughes during the 1970's era. Many who have become interested in the case of the Hughes Hall haunting have speculated that no specter exists and that the ghost is merely a sort of pop culture reference that has perpetuated

itself through Hughes hall tradition, much like stories of the Loch Ness Monster or Bigfoot. In fact, the only confirmed and believable sighting of Charlene was the initial story told by Andrew Rubino. Most of the other stories centering around Charlene have been called into question and do not hold water. The popular conclusion that has been drawn is that besides from the initial story, most of the other stories are either fabrications or grossly embellished to the point where they are completely unbelievable. Whether or not a ghost of a young woman haunts the basement of Hughes Hall is yet to be determined. What is for certain, though, is that the ghost of Charlene has entered into the imaginations of many Hughes Hall residents and will almost certainly remain there as long as the stories about her supposed sightings continue to be spread.⁷

As compelling as either of these stories may be, perhaps the most famous ghost story and the one most prominent in Hinman history, is the story of the Cleveland Hall ghost. The story of the haunting of Cleveland Hall begins in the relatively recent past. In the year 2000, Mary Ann Gleockner, then the RD of Cleveland, began to experience some strange phenomenon inside the walls of Cleveland Hall. The first sign of strange and mysterious happenings was a series of strange noises that she heard one summer when she was completely alone in the building. While she tried to explain away the noises as figments of an overactive imagination, she could not deny physical evidence of unearthly happenings. One example of this physical evidence was that the elevators in the building would move from floor to floor with absolutely no one either inside of them or pressing the button on the other floors. It seemed as though the elevators had a life of their own. Furthermore, the lights in random rooms in the building would turn on absolutely by themselves.⁸

The strange noises and goings on continued with another highly unusual occurrence. Virtually every resident in the building, and across Hinman for that matter, had had the

experience of being in their room and hearing the unmistakable sound of marbles hitting their ceiling. While this could be easily explained away as the residents living above you playing a game of marbles, this certainly could not be the case if you lived on the top floor with only the roof over your head. The sounds of the marbles hitting the ceilings began in 2001 and continue intermittently in each residence hall to this very day.⁹

These bizarre occurrences continued for several years. It was in 2004, though, that an actual specter decided to make an appearance. On the third floor of the “B” side of the building in suite 325 strange and terrifying things began to happen. A group of residents living in that suite were just hanging out and taking a well-deserved rest from a strenuous day of coursework. The extraordinary episode that happened next was amazingly caught all on tape by then suite 325 resident Jing Jing Hu. One of the female residents, Kayleigh George, began to imitate an Ashley Simpson music video by jumping up and down near her bed. In the video Kayleigh is facing away from the suite window. The camera records her jumps and the laughter of those in the suite. For a moment it pans away from the girl to catch the expressions of the laughing friends to the side. As the camera pans back she finishes her Ashley Simpson impersonation and steps off of the bed. During that time though, in the window is the distinct reflection of a little girl, a girl who was far too young to be a college-aged student and furthermore there was no one, girl, child or otherwise, who looked like the reflection in the window.¹⁰

This episode was experienced first hand by four-year Cleveland Hall resident and current senior sociology major Peggy Ma. At the time of the video, Peggy was a sophomore and lived down the hall in suite 322. She was in the room at the time of the apparition in the window and remembers clearly seeing a number of strange things that night. While Kayleigh was jumping up and down near the bed, out of the corner of her eye, Peggy noticed what she thought to be a

person sitting in one of the roommate's chairs. Although her memory is somewhat fuzzy, Peggy remembers there being something like a black blur seated in the chair, however, she thought nothing of it, and neither did any of the other residents in the room. They merely assumed that it was the roommate seated in the chair. After reviewing the videotape and seeing the childish figure in the window, they realized that the roommate was not there. The roommate returned hours later. She had been working at her job the entire time and had not been in the suite during the recording of the ghost on film. It has never been determined who or what was occupying her chair during the filming of the video.¹¹

The story of the Cleveland ghost spread like wildfire throughout Hinman and in Cleveland Hall especially. For a time it seemed like every amateur ghost buster across campus was interested in making contact with the child spirit. Many would try to contact this spirit but the ghost would only make herself known on her own terms. The ghost, who would later be called Lilly for unknown reasons, would make numerous appearances in Cleveland, especially in the "B" side stairwell near the end of the hallway, occasional in the basement of the building, but mostly in suite 325. The appearances of Lilly were marked usually by a strange, uncomfortable feeling overcoming the people in her general vicinity, followed either by quick appearances by the ghost or more commonly by the sounds of a young girl giggling gleefully, almost as though she were taking mischievous delight in spooking the residents of Cleveland Hall. Occasionally more dramatic signs of her comings and goings would occur, such as a report when a poster of Sarah Jessica Parker in suite 325 momentarily morphed into the visage of Lilly.¹² Also there was more substantial physical evidence like a set of unidentified footprints appearing mysteriously in the suite with no explanation. The footprints belonged to no one living in the suite. In fact, the tiny footprints looked as though they would belong to a child.¹³

By all accounts, Lilly was not a malign spirit. For all intents and purposes Lilly appeared to be just a mischievous little girl who took delight in spooking the residents of Cleveland Hall by quickly appearing then dematerializing into thin air or by simply making strange noises and sounds in suite 325 or in the adjacent stairwell. That was all about to change. Libby Tucker, a Binghamton University English professor with an intense interest in folklore and in particular campus ghost stories, made investigating the Cleveland Hall ghost an assignment for one of her folklore classes. A group of students in her class investigating the story of the ghost entered Cleveland hall armed with a video camera and an Ouiji board. They attempted to use the Ouiji board to contact the spirit of Lilly, but without success. Finally they approached suite 325 to do an interview with Jing, the camera operator during the time of the filming of the ghost. During her interview, Peggy now a junior who had given numerous other interviews regarding the ghost before and since, entered the room to help shed some light on the situation for the researching students. However, during the course of the interview, Peggy's lips suddenly turned blue and she passed out. The group making the video was able to revive her, but she passed out again almost immediately. Peggy regained complete consciousness only after she had been helped out of suite 325 and back to her own room, 322B just down the hall.¹⁴

Later during her interview with this author, Peggy spoke about her experience during the blackout. "It was really strange. I hadn't eaten all day and I was stressed because I had been studying for a big test, but I had done that before...gone all day without eating and never passed out once. I've done it since and its never happened to me."¹⁵ Peggy would go on to describe her feelings just before she passed out. She started sweating profusely and she had a ringing in her ears and a strange indescribable feeling came over her and made her feel very uncomfortable. Yet as soon as she got back to her room and lay on her bed for a few moments, all of the

symptoms inexplicably vanished. She described coming to from this episode as similar to “waking from a scary dream.”¹⁶ This strange and upsetting event caused Peggy to think twice before she would tell the story about her experience with the ghost again, though she would do many more interviews with no harsh results. She also considered moving permanently out of Cleveland Hall and into an apartment in Susquehanna with some of her friends. She would decide against this, explaining that Cleveland was her home, that she liked its location and the atmosphere of having lots of people always around. Peggy still lives in suite 322, and even though for a time she was apprehensive about entering suite 325, she has since spent time in there without any ill effects. Peggy still to this day feels uncomfortable from time to time, experiencing weird feelings and what she calls bad vibrations (undoubtedly the opposite of the Beach Boys’ *Good Vibrations*) and does not even like to walk down to the basement by herself if she can help it. Once again, she does this routinely without ill effects.¹⁷

Jing, the person who had supposedly caught Lilly on film, also experienced some strange events. One foggy night, Jing was taking pictures out of her suite window in the suite’s common area, enamored with the fog and hoping to get a good shot. During this time, she felt a presence and turned around to see the figure of a little girl standing just outside her doorway. Just as Jing was about to do a double take, the little girl was gone.¹⁸

Jing would have many other supposed sightings of Lilly. One night she was up late studying in Cleveland’s study lounge. It was 2:00 a.m. and absolutely no one was in the study lounge area. During this time, Jing got a strange feeling, and suddenly no longer felt comfortable or safe in the study lounge. Knowing full well that these feelings were unreasonable, she still decided to stop studying and return to her room for the night. She stepped into the elevator, and just as the doors were about to close, a shadowy, black form dashed past

the elevator doors. Jing would eventually move out of Cleveland. Not because she was afraid of the ghosts, but because she and some of her friends wanted to get an apartment in Susquehanna and have their own rooms for their senior year. Still, the unearthly events that she experienced with the Cleveland Hall phantom would forever remain in her memory.¹⁹

By the end of the Spring semester of 2006 the sightings of Lilly and the strange noises and feelings associated with her had mostly stopped. Even though the haunting may have stopped, the question remained: why did they start in the first place and who was Lilly? There were no good answers to any of these questions. There was no good reason why the haunting should have begun in the first place. There was no story about a little girl named Lilly passing away in Cleveland Hall. There was a middle-aged male janitor who had passed away unexpectedly in the basement of Cleveland Hall sometime during the early 1990's, but no ghost of a janitor had ever made an appearance, though some claimed that his death contributed to haunting in the building. Like Charlene, the ghost of Hughes Hall, a popular mythology seemed to develop around Lilly. The story that evolved stated that she was the daughter of some pioneering settlers into the area and that she had met an unfortunate end on the spot where Cleveland Hall would later be constructed. Some would say she died as a result of an Indian attack on her settlement, others say that she was burned alive in a fire.²⁰ None of these stories can be verified. The former RD of Cleveland, Mary Ann Gleockner, stated that she believed that the building was haunted because the site of Cleveland Hall had once been a place where local Native Americans had practiced religious rituals. Once again, this report could not be proven.²¹

There has been a long-believed rumor that Binghamton University was built over the site of an Indian burial ground. This report has been discounted, though the land that the University now occupies was once tribal land used by local Native Americans who passed through the area

regularly. In fact, many of the reports of ghostly activity in Hinman and the rest of campus occurred during a period where an actual Native American site near Nichols, New York was being excavated. Some have argued that this disturbed the spirits of Native Americans which made them more prevalent on campus, which was once their native land. Others have argued that this event triggered a sort of psychological guilt among the people on campus, especially those of European descent, for the tragedies and atrocities heaped on the Native American populations during the time of westward expansion and manifest destiny. This guilt manifested itself in visions of ghosts and other paranormal phenomenon. In some ways this is considered a lesson to the current student body to never forget the painful past and lost world of the native inhabitants of America.²²

It seems as though personal experiences drive the ghost stories. Whether it is the horrible noises and smells permeating from Smith Hall's suite 310, Charlene haunting the laundry room of Hughes Hall, the ghostly Lilly of Cleveland Hall or even the near universal experience of hearing marbles dropping from the ceilings of virtually everyone room in Hinman, all are perpetuated by students telling each other stories about their personal experience with the phantoms from the other side. Their stories grow upon one another to the point where the original tale seems to have become so embellished as to be unrecognizable. Granted, some of these cases are unique only to Hinman, but not all.

In the case of the marbles, there appears to be a worldwide phenomenon of ghosts causing marble-dropping sounds. There is a story from Southeast Asia where workers constructing a new dormitory for college students, believing that the site they were building on was haunted, placed marbles within the floors to appease the ghosts. The idea was that if the ghosts played with the marbles, they would see no need to haunt the living. Hearing the sound of

marbles dropping is a global phenomenon, especially on college campuses. Oddly enough, the sound marbles dropping accelerated after the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Some link hearing the sound of marbles with tragedy and other stressors in the lives of individuals, especially college freshmen who trying to adapt to a new environment with new people and to excel in academics all at the same time.²³ Others see it as nothing more than a metaphor for losing one's mind, as in the slang term "losing your marbles."²⁴ Whatever the explanation for the sound of falling marbles in Hinman or elsewhere in the world, it is certain that it feeds off of popular stories told and retold countless times to students in the room next door, in the building across the quad, or to the friend in the university in another city or another country. These stories have a way of perpetuating themselves and driving deeply into the popular consciousness of a student body, and result in everyone hearing the sound and having their own story of marble falling.

The ghosts of Hinman, like the ghosts who may haunt anything from an old house to a centuries old graveyard, signify something that we as a society need to talk about.²⁵ The ghost of the little girl Lilly may or may not be an actual poltergeist. Lilly may represent the need for us to identify with the child within us all and the need to retain some of that childlike innocent. All too often as people age and mature, they lose some of that virtue that seems to be found naturally in all children. Maybe Lilly is a message to all the students living in Hinman warning them not to grow up too fast, to always keep some of that childlike wonder about them no matter how old you get or where life takes you. The same could be true of any of the other tales of paranormal phenomenon in Hinman.

The question then should not be whether these tales of the supernatural are real or imagined, rather it should be about what all these paranormal happenings mean to those who are

certainly alive and well. The answer to this question is hard to come by. The spectral apparitions could be metaphors for topics that need to be broached or they could be something else entirely. What is important is the need for a dialogue to start, to have real discussions about the issues that these ethereal visitors raise. Maybe that is the answer then. The appearance of these ghosts in the residence halls of Hinman is not so much about the dead but about drawing the living together. If that is the case, there is really nothing to be frightened about, for then these specters will be nothing more than visitors from another plane of existence that for whatever reason have come back to the world of the living to communicate, strangely or silently perhaps, with the people still here in order to create a new understanding between the lives of the living and the lives of the dead. Proof positive does not need to exist. It is in the stories told and retold to a new generation of freshmen each year that these ghosts will continue to live on in the only known immortality: that of human memory.

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¹ Elizabeth Tucker, *Campus Legends: A Handbook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 1.

² Suzy Chhim, AOL Instant Message to author, October 30, 2006.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Elizabeth Tucker, *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses*, University of Mississippi Press, expected publication Fall 2007.

⁶ Megan McDermott and Ashley Connor, interview by author, October 31, 2006.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jing Jing Hu, interview by author, November 5, 2006.

⁹ Elizabeth Tucker (Binghamton University Professor of English), interview by author, October 30, 2006.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Peggy Ma, interview with author, November 3, 2006.

¹² Tucker, *Haunted Halls*, Fall 2007.

¹³ Jing Jing Hu, interview by author, November 5, 2006.

¹⁴ Peggy Ma, interview by author, November 3, 2006.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Jing Jing Hu, interview by author, November 5, 2006.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Peggy Ma, interview by author, November 3, 2006

²¹ Ibid.

²² Elizabeth “Libby” Tucker, “Spectral Indians, Desecrated Burial Grounds,” *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore* Volume 31, Spring-Summer 2005, <http://www.nyfolklore.org/pubs/voic31-1-2/spectral.html>.

²³ Tucker, *Campus Legends*, 2.

²⁴ Tucker, *Haunted Halls*, Fall 2007.

²⁵ Elizabeth Tucker, (Binghamton University Professor of English), interview by author, October 30, 2006.