

London Ghost Story

Ten years ago, I spent six weeks in a Pimlico "maisonette" that had such a weird vibe I felt it must be haunted. This two-story, top-floor flat in a Georgian building was crammed with expensive vases, bibelots, and elaborately-framed antique prints that were surely cut out of valuable old books. The whole ensemble seemed to have been rescued from some larger home and my very first day there I couldn't stop thinking about *The Haunting of Hill House*.

There was something ominous and inimical in the air that perhaps emanated from a locked room whose door was roped closed. Even the flat number was peculiar: no 1. It was on the top floor and every single cab driver asked me why it took me so long to come outside after they'd texted me they'd arrived. I explained the numbering and they were all dubious. I could hear them thinking "Americans!" Well, I imagined it anyway.

Strange things happened on a regular basis. I'd go upstairs to the kitchen and the paper towel roll had come wildly undone with the towels pooled on the floor. There was something creepy and claustrophobic about the walk-in closet which I disliked using. And my iPhone and iPad never seemed to be on the same floor as I was.

The flat overheated so much even with windows open that I began to feel it was haunted. I'd had two previous experiences with ghosts in New York and Michigan that have been published in *Paranormal Magazine*, so that sense of a hostile presence was not strange to me.

I was in London to teach creative writing and Gilded Age Literature with a cohort of about twenty bright, eager, funny Michigan State University students and had injured a knee right before departure. Limping and being in frequent pain seemed to heighten the flat's peculiar atmosphere.

For all its apparent luxury, the flat was an unhappy, unwelcoming place to be and as I worked there, read student writing, phoned or emailed home, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was an intruder. *That I was being watched.*

Someone had left the bathroom towel rack heater on--unless it came on "by itself"--and I burned myself the second day stumbling out of the shower, a shower that had no inside door handle and was extremely difficult to open. The living room was a minefield of small, fringed, oriental rugs that hadn't been tacked down to the polished floor, a trap for the unwary. From day to day, they never seemed to be in the same exact place.

I slipped more than once no matter how careful I was until one night I actually fell, banging my left hand on the insanely heavy round oak table where I had been working. My hand ballooned and I ended up at a hospital where my pain was so intense that I passed out in the waiting room. Moving about the maisonette with a cast the last few weeks of my stay made me feel even more vulnerable and spooked.

I tried to counterbalance what was happening by self-care: I stayed in regular touch with friends and family back home, arranged for massage therapy twice, went to recitals at a nearby Victorian-era church with great acoustics, and dined at wonderful local restaurants. I also visited Tate Britain, the British Museum, and the Wallace Collection for heavy fixes of art: Matisse, Malevich, Sargent, Caravaggio, Leonardo, Henry Moore, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and many more artists I had admired for years.

But returning to Pimlico was always a buzz kill. I slept badly, wary of what might happen next and troubled by strange dreams that I could never quite remember in the morning.

Psychologist Otto Rank wrote in *Art and Artist* that artists are at war with life in a way: we need to be in the world for material, but need to pull back to transform it. I couldn't wait to leave London, but defiantly started a short story right there about a flat that was trying to kill the narrator. I refused to be intimidated and the opening of the story was my defense. This opening simmered for a very long time after I got home until I found just the right voice for my very first ghost story which was published in [Bewildering Stories](#).