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## Cries in the night

*Many souls visited the Christie School; some stayed*

**BY PAUL DUCHENE**

*The Portland Tribune, Oct 26, 2001*

### Janet Reiner is very upset.

Hand on her cheek, the psychic bows her head and her long dark hair falls forward as she walks into the darkness, following a flickering torch. She has asked not to be told anything about this place.

Broken floor tiles crunch under her feet. The sounds echo through the shadowy attic of the Christie School, in Marylhurst, once home to hundreds of orphans.

“Oh, my God,” Reiner says intently. “Were there beds here? Were they sick? I hear a lot of crying. Don’t you hear it?”

We shake our heads and Reiner continues pacing around the edge of the room, peering out the mullioned windows and talking, almost to herself.

“Something happened at one of these windows. I don’t know, I can see children banging on them. Something’s not right,” she says.

The roof slopes down between the dormers, creating closets under the eaves. Reiner is drawn to one of them.

“No, it’s in here,” she says. “I can hear children crying. This room was something. If the children did something wrong, they were sent here to

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think about what they did.”

The space curves around into the darkness, and several brown metal beds line the wall. They’re tiny, maybe 2 1/2 feet wide and 5 feet long. We checked the area in daylight but missed them hidden away under the eaves. Reiner casts around intently, feeling for something we can’t see.

“There are three children in here. They’re frightened. They’re sitting in the corner,” she says. “Feel how much colder it is over here?”

She finds a child’s marble, and it rolls across the floor, as loud as a bowling ball in a mausoleum.

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We’re on the fourth-floor attic of the old Christie School building. The top two floors were condemned by the fire marshal in 1963 because of wiring deficiencies. In the early years of this century, the fourth-floor attic was home to the “moppets,” the name given by nuns to the 6- to 9-year-old orphan girls.

The attic crowns a stately Federal-style brick building that was originally St. Mary’s Home for Orphan Girls. Twelve members of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary founded an orphanage in Portland in 1859, and the order built the Christie School in 1908, naming it after the archbishop who helped them purchase the land, situated between state Route 43 and the Willamette River.

For 50 years, the building housed as many as 150 girls at one time. Administrative offices now occupy the first three floors. Today, students board in modern buildings nearby.

Administrator David Bales estimates as many as 12,000 orphans passed through the doors before the 1950s, when the school changed to handle emotionally troubled children. During World War II there were boys here as well.

All the orphans left behind a psychic imprint, says Reiner, who has come down from Olympia to share a vigil with Vancouver, Wash., ghost hunter Jefferson Davis. Reiner, who’s 40, and Davis, 39, have explored several haunted buildings together. He says she’s extraordinarily intuitive and describes himself as “a lower form of life” who’s just curious.

Davis is the author of four books on Northwest ghosts. Despite his youthful enthusiasm, he’s a serious archaeologist, juggling time between teaching at Clark College in Vancouver and working for the Army.

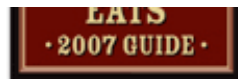
Reiner is a successful real estate agent, but she’s been able to communicate with other dimensions since she was 5 years old.

“I thought everyone could do it,” she says. “I’m hypervigilant, thanks to an abusive mother, and I think it’s made me extra-sensitive to what’s around me.”

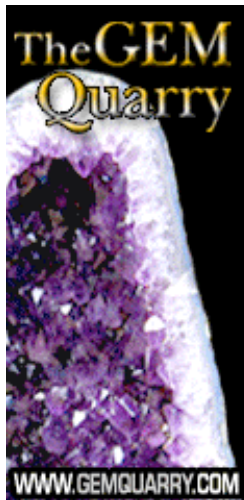
Such sensitivity means that Reiner can see child spirits following us curiously as we examine the halls and passageways in the echoing attic.

At one point she stops Tribune photographer Kyle Green.

“What did you do? Was it the flash? Don’t move! There’s a child holding



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on to you. She's a little girl with really big blue eyes. There's a whole pack of them," she says. "They were safe here, but they were sad. They didn't feel loved so they loved each other."

Reiner's observations about the spirits in the building seem to fit stories told by longtime staff members, many of whom have heard crying, singing and especially footsteps. None reported sightings.

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With hardwood floors, 15-foot ceilings and wood paneling, the building is a natural echo chamber. The school's community relations coordinator, Drina Simons, says she barely notices strange noises.

"Personally, I'm never scared," she says. "I'm so busy working, it'd be, 'Make my day, ghost, I'm in no mood.'"

But even Simons has a story to share from her nine years at the school.

"I was working very late one day in 1997, getting ready for the spring auction," she says. "My colleague had a springer spaniel, and she'd go into the corridor on the third floor and throw a tennis ball for the dog to chase. Every time he got to this door Ñ the old infirmary Ñ he'd stop and walk around something in the middle of the corridor. Dogs can see things we can't; this one obviously saw something."

When an exhausted Reiner comes down from the fourth floor, she brightens up as she reaches the old infirmary door.

"Now there's a little boy here," she says. "He's about 5 or 6 years old; he's precocious, smiles a lot and has shoulder-length wavy hair. He belongs to somebody who worked here. He runs up and down the corridor and he's laughing, but the predominant air here is one of sadness."

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Heidi Scott, 34, is the school's music therapist, and her desk is behind a partition screening her from the door. In three years at the school, she says, she has been plagued by footsteps of people she can hear but never sees.

"I'd only been here a few weeks, and somebody came into my room," she says. "I said hello, and I heard the steps walk away. I bolted out of my room, and I could hear footsteps going downstairs. So I ran down the stairs, and when I got to the bottom I asked the receptionist who had just come down. She said, 'Nobody.'"

Scott says she also has heard steady footsteps on floors above her when she knew she was the only person in the building.

"I rarely stay here after dark anymore," she adds.

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David Bales is the school's facilities manager. In 23 years he has witnessed a number of events. Bales recalls that when children died they'd be laid out in the chapel overnight, and there were tales of ghostly weeping.

"I came in late one evening to get some work done, and I swear I heard crying down the hall from me," he says. "I talked to Althea Bartlett, who'd been here 20 years, and she told me there were a lot of reports of crying."



Bales also tells of singing that unnerved him enough that he had to leave work. His story corresponds with memories of Joy Parks Velte, who was 5 years old when she came to the school in 1938 after her father died. She left in 1942 when her grandmother remarried and took her home.

Velte remembers the bigger girls singing on the landing to soothe the distraught moppets. "It was hard to sleep with the other girls crying," she says quietly. "And of course I was crying, too."

Bales' most chilling story was witnessed by a colleague.

"We'd finished a Halloween party in the third-floor canteen and locked up for the evening," he says. "We looked back from the bottom of the steps, and all the lights were on on the fourth floor and there was no power to that floor.

"I said, 'Do you want to go back and turn them off?' and she said, 'No.' I said: 'Me neither!' That was very frightening."

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As Reiner continues to search the attic, she's aware that there are two people who are hostile to our presence.

"There were two adults here," she says. "One was the leader and is very upset that we're trying to figure out what went on. She's tall and skinny and very stern. She doesn't smile. I think she frightened a lot of children. The nuns cared for the kids, but they were very strict. Not a lot of caring or nurturing, hugging and kissing."

Reiner also is fascinated by a door that's been boarded up behind another closet. She dismisses Davis' hope that something could be hidden there.

"Were there males in this school like a priest or something?" she asks. "Do you remember we were talking about psychic imprints? This is going to sound really weird, but I think there was sexual stuff going on here. This is an adult, not a teen-age, thing. Sexual things were going on, and they wanted to stop it from happening, so they boarded up this closet."

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At the end of the evening Reiner "smudges" us all with smoke from a sage and sweetgrass torch.

"Spirits don't like this," she says. "You'll sleep better."

I arrive home a little before 2 a.m., open the car door and grab my camera and sweater from the passenger seat. As I do, I hear footsteps crunching through the gravel behind me at the end of my short driveway.

It's odd that anybody would be walking so late in an unlit suburban area of Southwest Portland. Out of curiosity I look up and down the street. There is nobody in sight. I shrug it off but spend a restless night.

Davis is philosophical when I mention it to him. "Sounds like you gave somebody a ride," he says.

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