

Andrew McKee/1

*An Unabridged Guide to the Weird and Unexplainable*

By Andrew McKee

Theodore and Rosanna Marshall disappeared on June 2, 2008. They left me, Oliver Marshall, with no indication of why they left, where they were going, not even when they might be getting back. This was, unfortunately, not a rare occurrence for my parents.

When I was growing up, Mom and Dad were very cagey when it came to information about their jobs. When I asked (and I asked constantly), they always told me not to worry about it. They reassured me that it was “big kid stuff” and that they’d tell me when I was older.

So, what piece of information was so reality-altering that my parents kept it hidden away from me for my entire childhood? I finally found out on my thirteenth birthday.

Pharmacists. My parents were pharmacists.

They owned a small pharmacy right in the middle of our mid-size Midwest hometown of Portia, Ohio called Healthy Hearts. They didn’t do much, just a lot of reading and filling prescriptions and giving the occasional medical advice, but somehow, they were *always* busy.

My parents worked at least six days a week, for no less than fifteen hours a day. They were there an hour before opening, and multiple hours after closing. Every time I asked what they were doing with all the extra time, I got the same answer.

“Taking inventory!” they would both say with a smile.

I always thought it sure was a lot of inventory for a town with a population of less than ten thousand, but there was no point in arguing.

Then there were the business trips. Usually, my parents were gracious enough to give me a heads up before they took off for a couple days. They frequented medical conferences and pharmaceutical trade fairs and even the occasional dog show, which was apparently a passion of my dad's, although you'd never guess it by looking at him. He had a larger, muscular build, and flowing black hair that touched his shoulders. He wore thick-rimmed glasses that emphasized his green eyes and sat on his very large nose.

Sometimes, however, there was no heads up. Sometimes, there was *nothing*. I'd wake up to a completely empty house. There would be no note, no message on the answering machine, nada. Finally, after I freaked out for about an hour, the home phone would ring, and Mom would be on the other end apologizing profusely for forgetting to tell me they were leaving.

She was always a bit gentler than Dad, but she certainly didn't look like it. Her sharp features and short brown hair made her look much more intimidating than she really was. It didn't help that Mom got into kickboxing at a very young age, and although she never had any interest in going pro, it kept her *very* in-shape. Despite her ability to

knock out a six-foot tall man in a single kick, she always knew exactly how to defuse a situation.

Unfortunately, when waking up to an empty house happened to you so often, you just kind of got used to it.

So, when I woke up on June 2, 2008, it was a normal summer day. I sat in bed for a few moments, did my best to convince myself to move my body. It was only when I realized how quiet the house was that I decided to get up. It was another morning on my own, and *someone* needed to make me breakfast. Usually, I just grabbed a piece of toast and ran out the door, but it was summer. I had some time to kill.

My time at Portia Public High School had finally drawn to a close, and I had nothing to show for it other than a slip of paper with my name and *SUMMA CUM LAUDE* written on it in a fancy font.

Most other kids my age from Portia Public were probably spending their first few days of freedom partying with their friends on a drug induced bender. I, on the other hand, rolled out of bed, booted up my computer, and gulped the last remaining swings of an energy drink I'd started the night before.

Making friends was never my strong suit.

I excelled at a lot of things in school. I was a great reader and a passable writer, loved math and science, and even got perfect grades in gym, but maintaining a social life? Not exactly my forte. I didn't *really*

mind, anyway. Most of my time during the school year was spent doing homework or studying, so making friends was never a major priority of mine. Don't get me wrong, I didn't have *zero* friends, but I really only talked to people at school.

Plus, for most of my life I didn't need friends. I had Julianna.

Julianna was my older sister. She had me beat by just under a decade, but always had a way of making me feel like we were the same age. As time went by, my brain had trouble piecing together *exactly* what she looked like. I had pictures, but I'd always believed people looked much different in real life than they did in pictures (and they smiled a lot less).

I rarely ever stopped thinking about Julianna, proof of which was next to the empty energy drink can on my desk. I still had an old Polaroid my parents took of me and Julianna at her high school graduation stuck to the corner of my monitor with sticky tack.

That morning, I looked at the picture for a long time. I didn't know why, but I just stared at her. I guessed I was hoping if I looked long enough and refused to blink, the eyestrain might contribute enough kinetic energy to make the picture feel real again. It didn't.

Julianna had long black hair that went to her waist and cropped bangs. Her hair was her favorite feature, and she treated it like a temple. It paid off though, I remember her being very popular when she was in

high school. Boys and girls alike swooned over her, and classmates fought tooth and nail to sit next to her. She never really cared, though.

I looked at myself as well. Despite being nearly a decade older now, I still had the same short sideswept black hair and the same big nose inherited from my dad. The only thing I really changed was my style. I went from wearing t-shirts and gym shorts to wearing t-shirts and jeans, a real upgrade.

I snapped out of my sleep induced trance and turned my attention back to my monitor. My browser's homepage was set to Paul Peter Porter's Perfect Puzzle website. I had made it a habit to complete his daily riddle first thing in the morning.

I *loved* riddles (and puzzles, and brain teasers, and logic puzzles, and *anything* else in that vein). Growing up I wanted the whole world to be one big solvable puzzle, full of fun mysteries along the way.

For example, when I was really young, I was absolutely convinced my math teacher was an ogre concocting an evil plan to eat all his third-grade students alive. My parents shot down this idea immediately and gave me a long talk about not calling bald people ogres. They shot my weird ideas down *a lot*, but I guessed that was par for the course when your parents are scientists.

Every day, a new riddle was featured on the front page of Paul Peter Porter's site in obnoxious red Impact font, but today there was just a short handful of words on the screen.

*No puzzle today. Family emergency. If you need me, knock.*

Bummer. If I couldn't spend the first hour of my morning dusting off my critical thinking skills, perhaps breakfast could suffice.

I walked into the hallway toward the kitchen but stopped outside of Julianna's room. It was shut tight, like always. The only time it ever opened was when Mom went to water Julianna's plants, which were miraculously still alive.

Julianna absolutely loved those plants, and she knew a *lot* about them. When she could, she spent most of her time at home in her room meticulously taking care of her botanical garden's worth of flora. Julianna saw them as natural machines and was always eager to learn all about how they worked.

During high school, Julianna was only really interested in her studies and excelled in math and science. Clearly, anti-social tendencies ran in the family. Year after year she brought home straight A's, with seemingly no end in sight. At my age, she graduated top of her class at Portia Public and had already accepted an offer to study mechanical engineering at MIT. She was on top of the world.

Then she got sick.

My parents took her to every single doctor they knew (and they knew a lot), but not a single one could give us a definitive answer about her condition. Things got bad after that. Julianna never went to college. By the time the first semester started at MIT, she was still getting worse. By the second semester, she was gone.

I meant that literally, one day she was just *gone*. Julianna spent some time at hospitals, but she was usually bedridden at home.

One day I woke up, checked Julianna's room, and her bed was empty. Dad said she went to an "extended stay treatment center" to help her condition, but the whole day my parents looked like they were holding back tears.

I loved my parents. At this point in my life, I realized and accepted there were things about their personal lives that they would never tell me, but sometimes I still got so angry about Julianna. I wished they just told me the truth instead of feeding me some elaborate lie to try to protect me. I waited for *years* for her to come back before finally realizing "extended stay treatment center" was just another way of saying "butterfly farm."

The Polaroid of my sister was still fresh on my mind, so I decided to take a quick peek inside her room. As I opened the door, I expected the familiar scent of a flourishing rainforest to fill my nose, but it never came. I swung the door open completely and gasped.

Everything was dead.

Julianna's beds of flowers that lined her windowsills were wilted and falling apart. The ferns that grazed her ceiling were now crumpled into crusty curls. Even her succulents had become a deep shade of brownish red. What was once a luscious rainforest fully contained within a teenage girl's room was now a plant cemetery.

It didn't make sense. Surely Mom *was* watering the plants. Could the dead plants have been from overwatering? My sister tried telling me about her collection and how to take care of it, but it was usually in one ear and out the other. Mom would've known, though, she studied plant care for weeks after Julianna left. I would have to ask about it when my parents got back.

For now, it was time for a date between me and Captain Crunch.

As I entered the kitchen, my confusion only intensified. The few houseplants we had outside of Julianna's room, including a beautiful bonsai tree that graced our entryway, were similarly deceased. It was like nobody had touched them in weeks, maybe even months. I figured I could investigate further once I got a little food.

I opened the fridge and lo and behold...

No milk, not in this fridge anyway. We usually had some extra two-percent in the basement fridge, but even at the ripe old age of eighteen I didn't love going down there. Maybe it was my introduction to

horror movies at a young age, maybe it was my crippling fear of spiders, but something felt *off* down there. Alas, unless I wanted dry cereal, I would have to brave the terrifying depths of the cellar.

The stairs creaked under every step I took and screamed at me to turn around and forget about the milk, but I persevered. The dingy atmosphere in the basement was straight out of a horror movie. Exposed pipes, massive spiderwebs, even a faint buzzing noise that almost sounded like gentle breathing. A shiver shot through my spine. I took a deep breath and turned the corner to face the fridge, but something caught my eye.

In the corner of the basement, sitting on an old card table all alone, was an old CRT television. Whether I wanted to admit it or not, the real reason I didn't want to come down here was due to the off chance that I might have the unfortunate displeasure of seeing that TV again.

For the past few years of my life, this CRT loved to make random appearances in the basement. My dad said it belonged to a friend of his, and sometimes he would bring it to the basement to repair it for him.

The first time it happened, I was still curious to investigate it myself. In the middle of the night, I went into the basement and the TV seemed to be in perfectly good shape.

When I entered the basement, it was already turned on and tuned to some nature channel. The camera sat completely still and looked out into a forest clearing as woodland animals went about their day. After a few minutes, a beautiful doe walked into frame and stared directly into the camera. She just stood and stared straight at me.

I got scared and went to turn off the TV, but there wasn't a power button on the console, just knobs for tuning and volume. I reached for the plug instead and followed it all the way to the wall. To my shock and horror, the cord was completely frayed at the end. The CRT couldn't be unplugged because it was never even plugged *in*. By the time I mustered the courage to look at the screen again, it had turned off.

This was a repeat occurrence. For years if I dared to venture into the basement while Dad had the CRT, there was a small chance the screen would flicker to life and the doe would walk into frame, always with its blank stare.

Needless to say, seeing the CRT in the basement was usually my sign to get out as soon as possible. I grabbed a fresh gallon of milk from the top shelf of our yellowing and peeling basement fridge and shut the door.

Again, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the CRT. Only this time, to my utter dismay, the screen was on.

I cautiously took a step toward it. The TV screen was clearly showing the same forest clearing I'd seen half a dozen times before, but something was different. Sitting center frame wasn't a doe, but a brown bipedal rabbit.

Every once in a while, it put its eye really close to the camera, almost as if it was trying to see what was on the other side. Almost as if it was trying to see *me*.

"Hello?" A small, irritated voice came from the TV. "Hello, hello? Can you hear me? Hello?"