



**THE
TEDIOUS
CASE OF
ROOM 623**

*A Strangely-Wyrd Mystery
by Giles Booth*

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The Tedious Case of Room 623

by Giles Booth

The phenomenon, or so-called phenomenon, I get asked about most frequently... well, I say frequently, but that's possibly misleading. I mean it's all relative. After all, not many people even know I'm here. Anyway, the case I get asked about more than any other is room 623. It's even been featured on a podcast, although I couldn't get past the first seven episodes. It's truly awful. 'The Unexplained Universe of Roger Unthank.' Some spooky music and fashionable sound design thrown at a heap of supposedly strange goings on, all of which have blatantly obvious rational explanations. But I have to hand it to their researcher who tracked me down and asked for my thoughts on it. I wouldn't let her come and see the room, but I had to throw her some meat, lest she contact someone else who discovers I'm here, so I agreed to speak to her. Their unwanted interest in this particular old spooky chestnut tickled my interest and I decided to do some investigations of my own. This what happened, so far as I can be bothered to set it down.

I should probably introduce myself. My name is Professor Strangely-Wyrd, Professor of Paranormal Computing at the University of Lowlands. If any of the names or words in that sentence don't make any sense, seem implausible or merely annoy you, I merely ask you to leave now, or buckle up for the duration.

I don't have a department. I don't have any students. Except Cassie. You might meet her later. Nobody really knows I'm here because in 1999 I unearthed a plan to make me redundant and so I hacked the university's payroll system to continue to pay me, and I moved all my equipment into the old restaurant on the top of Trellis Tower.

Trellis Tower. Unsafe, unloved, brutalist beauty, buffeted by freezing winds direct from the Urals. Listed and hence un-demolishable, but unfit for human habitation, abandoned in the year 2000. But perfect for me. My concrete panopticon, unseen, hidden in plain, if not downright butt-ugly sight, overlooking everything going on in the University of Lowlands.

I filled the restaurant with as much old technology as I could find and prepared for the inevitable future Event. I have machines that harvest randomness. My randomness generators include decaying radioactive isotopes,

detuned AM radios, lava lamps and swarms of fruit flies. Simple computer programs look for patterns in the static and movements, assigning colours, shapes and letters to them which Cassie and I study. While waiting for any meaningful patterns to emerge, and none has so far, I entertain myself by debunking any hokum that comes my way.

So, that brings me back to room 623. This is how I explained it to the podcast researcher, Fiona Scott, when she called me.

‘Professor, you’ve been teaching...’

‘Working.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘I’m not sure I ever *taught* anyone anything...’

‘You’ve been working at Lowlands University for how long?’

‘The University of Lowlands. It *was* Lowlands University. Became The University of Lowlands in 1989. Very expensive re-brand. New letterheads. New illuminated sign on Trellis Tower. Seventeen years.’

‘What?’

‘I’ve been working here seventeen years.’

‘Oh wow, so you were there soon after the events happened?’

‘When I joined room 623 was already a legend, the kind of thing second years tell freshers to scare them into their beds.’

‘Tell me the legend.’

‘The legend, hell, yeah, print the legend, why not? The legend is that room 623 is haunted. Not room 622. Not room 624. Just 623. Anyone who had that as their room either came to bad end or ran away screaming.’

‘We’ve heard from someone who was a student at Lowlands in the early 1980s, he says there were deaths...’

‘The legend says a student fell to her death from the room when it was newly built in the 1970s. Then a few years later objects started flying around the room. Mad noises. Students waking up screaming saying that embodiments of evil had passed right through their bodies. Hearing banging on the door so loud they think it’s going to break off its hinges, but when they open it, there’s nobody there. Lifts being called in the middle of the night in the long vacation when there’s nobody in the building...’

‘This matches what our source tells us...’

I almost snorted at that point. ‘Source’ indeed. Like this was fucking Watergate.

‘Have you any details of your own to add?’

‘Yes, I do. It’s all bunk.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Hokum. Fluff. Phooey. It’s all bollocks.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘In general, these stories are rubbish because there’s no proof. I know this case goes back to the seventies and eighties, but isn’t it odd that despite everyone having a high-definition video camera in their pocket at all times these days, we don’t have any video evidence of poltergeist activity? Hmmm?’

‘And the student who supposedly fell to their death from room 623. I looked into it. I scoured the student newspapers and local rags in the library. I found just two deaths in the whole of the 1970s, one drug-related, one suicide. Neither mentions the tower, the drug student lived in another hall of residence, and the suicide lived in digs in town. I read a lot about the suicide, actually. She took an overdose of paracetamol because she found a cassette letter her housemates had made to send to an old friend of theirs, taking the piss out of her, mocking the way she dressed, mocking her hair, mocking the way she ate. Took her a week to die. If you want to investigate something, investigate that. Find her fucking housemates, find what they’re up to now in their no-doubt varied and successful careers, and ask them how often they think about their friend who never got to graduate, never got that badly-paid first job or furnish her first flat in Habitat or buy pot pourri or a futon or...’

‘Right. Back to room 623, if we may... I know it’s been demolished but is there any chance we could come and visit, to record the atmosphere of the place?’

My diatribe about the suicide victim had mashed by brain a bit, and I almost corrected her. Very interesting. She thought room 623 had been demolished. It’s abandoned, locked up, off limits, but not *demolished*. I decided not to let on.

‘There’s really no point. Lowlands is not the place it was in the seventies and eighties. It’s been rebranded. Made over. Not so much Lowlands as...’

‘Sunlit Uplands?’

‘Quite so. I wish you well, Ms Scott, you’re a good researcher. I just wish you’d research something a bit more... worthwhile.’

And that was that.

Except.

I had to go and find the room of course. The lifts in the tower were long-broken and out of service and the main staircases were very securely closed off

and monitored by CCTV after the student parties and sit-ins during lockdown. I had access to a service elevator at the rear of the building that only ran up to the restaurant but afforded no access to the floors the student rooms were on. I'd have to use the fire escape stairs. I had to see room 623 for myself, just to confirm it was as unremarkable as any other abandoned student room.

I knew Cassie had been listening in to my half of the call (she had headphones on, but they were silent) and I asked her if she fancied joining me on an adventure to explore the now-internationally-famous haunted room. But it was late, and it transpired she fancied going home to watch something on one of those new-fangled streaming services instead, so I grabbed a few tools – a torch, a hammer, some bolt-cutters, lock picks – and set off on my own.

The emergency staircase was dark. The building still had power, but most of the lightbulbs had blown over the years and I'd not bothered to replace them. Facilities management obviously wouldn't do it, and any way I didn't want them snooping about. As far as they were concerned, Trellis Tower was secure and deserted.

By torchlight I gingerly made my way down from the thirteenth floor until I found a large number six stencilled on the wall. I knew all the doors off the main staircase were padlocked, but it turned out they'd not bothered locking the emergency exits. I didn't even need the bolt cutters, it just opened.

A dim light came through a filthy window at the end of a long corridor, and I made my way towards it. The first room I passed was a common room, metal-framed furniture scattered all around, its orange covered ripped with multi-coloured foam spewing out like vomit. An old cathode ray tube TV sat on its side at one end of the room, its screen smashed in and empty beer cans balanced on top. I stepped across the sticky carpet and looked closer. Old, unreconstructed cans of beer with glamour pin-up girls on them.

Next room was a kitchen, mercifully devoid of food but it still smelled rank. A tap dripped. Without thinking, I tightened it up. It broke off in my hand and water rushed out and then stopped. There was still water on the top floor, probably to keep a sprinkler system working, so I supposed the water on each floor must have been shut off.

I moved on down the corridor. Room 601, 603, 605. Sweet how they'd numbered them odd and even on alternate sides like houses in a street. Some doors were open, some closed. I peeked inside 607. A sink, broken off the wall. Built-in wardrobe and cupboard, its wood smashed to reveal the chipboard within. Ghostly shapes on a pinboard where posters and pictures had been

placed. A flyer for the start of term disco, 1986, featuring Slade. I reflected that they must have been really struggling in '86 if they were playing Lowlands.

Finally, I reached 623. Nothing odd about the outside of the door, the metal plate with the engraved number was still intact, not yet removed by souvenir-hunters. The door was closed. And, seemingly, locked.

I shook the handle with force, in case it was just jammed, but it was firm. I got my picks out, delighted to have an opportunity to practise. To cut a long story short, I failed to pick the lock. Brute force was no use either. I hammered on the door with my fists and, well, a hammer, but nothing would shift it.

This was, I had to admit, a little bit strange and very frustrating. I decided to go into the next room and gather my thoughts.

Room 621 was very like 607 except the sink and wardrobe were still intact. I opened the brown nylon curtains to let in what light was available. There was an old swivel chair at the desk which was up against the wall to room 623. I sat at it and ran my hands over the peeling beige paintwork of the party wall. If any of the stories about the room next door were true, the occupants of this room must have heard something, even if it was only the vocal reaction of their neighbour to things in their imagination. But how thick, or more likely thin, were the walls?

I banged on the wall with my fist. It felt surprisingly solid and made little noise. I shone my torch on the floor under the desk and saw a radiator pipe running along the skirting board and into the wall in the direction of room 623. Without knowing why, I tapped on it with my hammer three times.

There was a response. Three faint clanging sounds came back down the pipe.

I told myself that this must be some odd but rational physical phenomenon, the pipework around the whole tower acting like a massive delay line. My knocks must have gone round the tower several times and been returned.

Of course, I knocked the pipe again, three times again.

Three knocks came back.

I knocked twice.

Two came back.

I knocked out a pattern - one knock, a pause, then three quick knocks.

Two knocks came back.

Two.

I had knocked four times and only two had come back. It was like an answer to the rat-a-tat-tat rhythm of my knock.

Then came a knock in the same rhythm as my original one, only it wasn't down the pipe. It was on the door. I dropped my hammer in fright and banged my head on the desk above me.

'I thought you might like some soup before I head home. I made it for my lunch and forgot all about it. It's still warm.'

'Cassie?'

'What are you doing under the desk in the wrong room?'

'Room 623 is locked. I couldn't get in.'

'No, it isn't.'

'What do you mean, no it isn't?'

'It's not locked. I was just in there. I heard you banging.'

'And...'

'That was me banging back, I used the flask.'

That was one mystery debunked, although frustratingly another one seemingly... bunked. How had Cassie been able to get in the room when I, armed with lock picks and a hammer, could not?

'Show me the room,' I snapped, thinking she must have been in 625 instead. But there was no room 625, we were at the end of the corridor. And she led me into room 623.

Even cynical, sceptical me wishes I could report that the walls of the room were covered in strange cabalistic symbols, the floor strewn with evidence of wild drug-fuelled orgies of Satan-worship. But it was just like the other rooms. In slightly better condition, if anything. The curtain wasn't shredded, and the paintwork wasn't peeling as much. One of the cheesy glamour girl cans of beer sat on the desk.

'And you just walked in here?'

'Yes. The door was closed, so I opened it. Saw the room empty, heard the banging in the pipes, decided to bang back.'

'You weren't scared?'

'Not really, no. I thought it was probably you. And it was.'

I went over to the door, opened and closed it several times, even slamming it. Nothing made the latch stick, it just opened normally every time.

'Soup?'

I took the flask, unscrewed the cap and stopper, and drank it straight from the flask. It was lukewarm and tasted of burnt cabbage.

‘Did you make this?’

‘Yes, do you like it.’

‘Don’t give up your day job. Whatever that is.’

* * *

Cassie teases me that I need to get out more. She’s not wrong. Sometimes I don’t leave the thirteenth floor for a week or more, only returning home when even I can’t stand the smell of my own clothes and body anymore. I have running water but no washing machine, shower, or bath up here. I can cook, although without gas, the massive kitchen is somewhat wasted. I make use of the fridges, freezers, hot plates and even an ancient microwave oven that’s built like a tank. I eat in what was the restaurant, usually a sole diner, though sometimes Cassie joins me for lunch.

That evening after exploring room 623, Cassie went home, and I went back up to my concrete and glass eyrie. I wouldn’t like you to think it was spooky or sad. Two things infuriate me in television crime dramas: that people leave their curtains open and that nobody ever turns the lights on. I have thick curtains to ward off the cold and prying eyes. And the space is filled with light and, often music too. I keep it freshly-painted and my living quarters, if not my workshop, are kept very tidy and uncluttered.

I sleep in what was probably a manager’s office, a small room with no external windows, which makes it easy to keep warm using a small electric heater. That night I reheated some pasta in the Soviet-era microwave and added extra chilli flakes to get rid of the taste of Cassie’s soup. I allowed myself a small glass of cheap red wine and got snug in bed with a book. Too tired to read, and too frustrated with the lack of paragraphs or chapters in the book, I soon turned out the light and fell asleep.

The phone ringing woke me up with a start. It’s a landline in the corner of the office that has never been disconnected. It very rarely rings as no-one knows the number. It’s usually Cassie or someone calling a student help-line number which is one digit different.

I picked up the handset. A crackle.

‘Hello?’

The voice was faint and echoey, as if coming down an ancient transatlantic cable.

‘Hello,’ I replied.

‘Is that the helpline?’

‘No, I’m really sorry. I get this a lot. It’s one number different. It’s 556 not 557 at the end.’

‘I’ve only got one ten pence piece and I just used it. Can’t you help me?’

I wondered where on earth it was still possible to use coins to make a phone call, but on this campus, it wouldn’t surprise me if there was still an old brown payphone that had been forgotten about and left connected.

‘I can’t help you. I’m a scientist, not a counsellor.’

‘I’m so alone. Everyone in my house hates me. They made a tape...’

I decided this must be a hoax. Probably that podcast researcher.

‘Oh, very funny, Ms Scott...’

A click. Dialling tone.

I looked at my watch. 6.24. So, the call probably came through at 6.23. This confirmed my hoax theory. I turned on the rinky-dinky little computer I keep next to my bed. After firing off a quick email to Fiona Scott asking her to call me at the earliest opportunity, I went back to sleep.

The phone woke me again.

‘Professor?’

‘Speaking.’

‘You wanted to speak to me? Have you changed your mind about the visit?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘Oh. What did you want.’

‘What were you doing at 6.23 this morning?’

‘Sleeping. Not that it’s any of your business.’

‘So, you weren’t calling me, pretending to be the ghostly voice of a nineteen seventies suicidal student.’

‘I certainly was not. Although I *was* going to call you later today.’

‘Yes?’

‘What you said about that girl who killed herself stuck in my head. I did some research.’

‘I don’t suppose you found much.’

‘I found something that may interest you. The story was picked up by a couple of the nationals, did you look at them?’

‘No, only the local rag.’

‘The Daily Mirror ran a splash on it. Lonely death of tragic student girl, large photo of her, grieving parents demanding an enquiry.’

‘Did they blame her housemates.’

‘Doesn’t say so. But they *did* blame the university.’

‘Lack of pastoral care?’

‘Lack of proof-reading. They misprinted the number for the student helpline.’

‘One digit wrong? 556 instead of 557’

‘Yes. How did you know?’

‘Perhaps you had better come here after all. On your own, not with that Roger Unthank...’

‘Oh no danger of that. He never goes anywhere, never leaves the studio. Or his club. He just reads the script and banks the money. And the producer’s not interested in the suicide of your student either.’

‘He might be he knew about the phone call I had at 6.23 this morning.’

‘Look, I’m getting fed up with the way I’m being treated here. I’d like to start my own podcast, I think this suicide could be the first series. You’re right, we should try and find her housemates, see what they’re doing now.’

‘We?’

‘Yes, you and me.’

‘Me and you.’

‘I need to think about it.’

‘Of course. Think about it. Take as much time as you need. Then email me.’

I hung up. And I knew I did not need to think about it for any length of time at all.