

“It’s those kind’s of things that make you want to back up against a wall...the paranoia, to me, is worse than what you might actually see,”

I don’t know whether my love for horror stems from fear or intrigue. Perhaps it’s both. Growing up in a religious family, it was almost tradition during get togethers for the kids to sit in a circle, cramped up in the tiniest room of the house with the lights off, and exchange stories of both evil and benign entities that our parents had told us of. The younger kids would watch wide-eyed as the older ones would scare them with ludicrous spins on already frightening tales of witches or spirits that tormented our parents in their childhood spent in Fiji. I remember the unnerving feeling that remained with me long after everyone had gone home and I was alone, lying wide awake in bed, conscious of every minute sound; the creak of a floorboard, the sound of my blood rushing... There was nothing quite like it. Ten years later that ‘on-edge’ feeling still fuels me, however hearing stories and watching horror films no longer has the same effect that it used to.

Earlier this year, I noticed a trend online where people would explore abandoned places, or places with rich history, notorious for their ghostly activity, record their experiences, and post them for the world to watch. Though they were purely for entertainment; a challenge to spirits to make sceptics believe, I couldn't help but wonder how being in those environments would make me feel. Every time I brought up the idea of wandering into abandoned places and hunting for ghosts to my mother, she would narrow her eyes and remind me of the many possessions to have plagued her family.

“Don’t go to these kinds of places,” she would say, “These things can latch on to you and never leave!”

Although I believed her entirely, I found myself combing the internet for ‘haunted places near me’, or ‘Haunted Places in Western Sydney’, or ‘Top Ten haunted places Sydney’, until finally I came across Parramatta Correctional Centre.

Built in 1842, it is the third gaol built in Parramatta, and the largest, the inmates burnt down the first prison, and outgrew the second prison, subsequently calling the third and final prison home for the rest of their days. The blueprint of the prison was heavily influenced by colonial penitentiaries in England. Parramatta gaol has six wings, all three levels high, holding eight hundred inmates at full capacity.

Today it remains on a state heritage listing, rich with almost 170 years worth of history. While doing my research on the jail, I notice that although it is regarded highly on Sydney’s list of haunted places, there is no evidence or background information on where this notion arose from. As I scoured the internet for sources that delved further into the ghostly presences at Parramatta Gaol; I came across a company, aptly named: APPI Ghost Hunts and Tours.

The cream limestone walls run along and meet at the corner of New and Dunlop street. As I drive adjacent to them, I notice a dark mildew stained on the large bricks, the barbed wire spirals atop the walls, uninviting.

As I approach the looming mahogany gates, Peet Banks meets me on the other side, lugging the metal gate ajar for me to enter. Her striking red hair, up in a bun, matches her lips as she introduces herself to me, leading me through to the open area near the administration offices where her crew is sitting. It is considerably cooler from outside the gates.

“The very first one, I think, and I’ve heard this from a few different people which makes me think it’s real, is: a guard, in this guard tower, was looking towards sixth wing and he saw a prisoner walk through a wall...when another guard went to go and check, they found the prisoner hanging,”

Silence fills the room as Peet recounts the chilling tale that shook Parramatta Gaol in the late seventies. As the founder of APPI Ghost Hunts and Tours, Peet has many stories like this, some of which she has experienced herself. Despite this, she does consider herself a sceptic of the supernatural; though she wants to believe, she's functions much more on logic.

"I don't think paranormal experiences happen half as much as people think they do" she says. I believe her. In my own paranormal experiences, I've learned 'mind over matter' is crucial in overcoming the fear I was so used to as a child.

Peet continues, *"Most of the time when people experience something paranormal on a ghost tour, it's because they've psyched themselves up to see something...I mean, going on a ghost tour, people put themselves in that mindset..."*

I reflect on the times I convinced myself I was being haunted. Taking non-medicated sleeping pills to get through the night without waking up. The fear of being home alone, even in the day time, infested itself into my mind. Back then, the thought of wandering the prison cells alone would have frightened me to no end.

I ask one of the volunteers, Jess, if she ever got scared being alone in the prison wings; *"No, not really, you just have to remember that you have the power...they can only scare you if you give them the permission to,"*

As Peet took me through a few of the wings, I felt a slight unease; surrounded by pitch darkness I could only see where the flashlight allowed me. The cool air was still and the musty smell was a result of the prisons unrestored facade. We walked down the corridors, prison cell doors wide open on either side of us. My mind conjured up the spirits of prisoners watching us from their cells as we

walked passed them. At the end we reached a tall arch window which let in notes of the soft blues of dusk. It was only as my eyes travelled up to the top of the arch, that I noticed the grills above us.

Peet's voice rang through the wing as she told me of the spirit of a guard often heard walking across the grills of the second story. The crew hypothesise that his spirit is stuck in perpetual duty as heavy footsteps are heard late at night, walking to and fro.

Peet leads us into a cell, I immediately notice how claustrophobic it feels, the cement walls, now plagued with graffiti, close in on us. Peet mentions that the five by four cells housed up to three inmates, one of the most famous inmates being Michael Murphy, his prison escape attempt a playbook for what not to do when trying to escape Parramatta Gaol.

Michael Murphy loiters at the phone booths, fiddling with some coins as he waits for an inmate to finish his phone call. He runs his thumb over the ridges of a ten cent coin before using his nail to scrape off some of the dirt.

"Go for it," the inmate said to Murphy as he hung the phone back up.

Murphy picks the phone up and wedges it between his shoulder and ear, listening to the dead tone as he slides fifteen cents into the slot.

The line comes alive with a dial tone as Murphy leans his arm against the phone booth.

Six and a half rings later a voice bursts through the other side,

"Hello?"

"Nan, it's Mike, put the roast on, I'll be home by Sunday," he says

Michael did not make it home by Sunday. His overconfidence had been the downfall to an otherwise picturesque plan. In a very Shawshank inspired plan, Murphy and three other inmates had been working on tunnelling out of Parramatta Gaol. On the weekend of their escape, after Murphy's

succinct and confusing phone call home, his mother called the prison asking about her sons 'release'.

'She'd only gone and ruined the whole plan' Peet said. We stood around the now cemented tunnel in Murphy's cell; remnants of an almost escape.

Peet informs me that after another plan of escape, this time successful at Silverwater jail, Murphy ends up being one of the five men to rape and kill Anita Cobby. The cell felt a little heavier, the air almost thick. The gravity of the types of people locked up in the jail weighed on me.

I begin to think that ghosts or spirits aren't the scariest part of an abandoned Parramatta Gaol. To have so many people incarcerated for horrific crimes like rape, murder and molestation scares me more than any malevolent spirit ever could.

As we tread onwards to a separate wing, I notice it is completely dark outside; the sun has set. Every Muslim kid knows what this means, we had heard it countless times as kids when we played outside with the other kids on the street.

"Be home before Maghreb, the Jinns come out after dark, don't disturb them,"

"Yes Ma,"

"Don't walk under any trees with your hair out,"

"Yes Ma,"

"Don't whistle, you'll summon the Jinn,"

"Yes Ma,"

"Don't pluck any flowers or leaves from trees,"

"Yes Ma,"

I couldn't help but think of the many Jinn that called this desolate prison home. They were attracted to lonely, forgotten places. They live among us, in a universe that crosses over our own; though they have the power to see us, we do not have the ability to see them. They're in many chapters of the Quran, preexisting humanity, living through prophetic era's and surround us even today.

I thought if in fact, through an Islamic perspective, the hauntings of Parramatta Gaol were the workings of Jinns. Although the idea of a \$90 ghost hunt screams 'gimmick!', a gloss of APPI's website and testimonials suggest otherwise. Dozens of people have posted their proof of 'ghost' sightings in Parramatta Gaol with pictures and videos of ghostly figures, and almost incomprehensible audio of communication with 'ghosts' through spirit boxes and ouija boards. A place with 170 years of incarceration of Australia's criminals throughout history, was sure to harbour something unsettled, I'm just not sure that it's the spirits of ex prisoners.

A few of the volunteers sit chattering as they begin closing up the gaol after a tour. After an exhilarating night with quite a rambunctious tour group, the 'spirits' are what Peet calls 'activated'.

A roar of laughter erupts from the circle, swiftly interrupted by a loud bang from a nearby cell. The group all pause, exchanging looks. The room is suddenly denser, the high of the tour has dissipated. Mouths become dry as hearts jump up throats.

Jess, true to her words of wisdom, swallows any uncertainty of the unknown and decides to walk past the cell to investigate.

She approaches it as she makes her way down the corridor, the tubing needed replacing, it flickered constantly.

As she stops in front of an open cell, she hears a low guttural growl. Too low for it to have come from any human throat.

We stand in front of this very cell, Peet and I, an inverted cross carved on the top of the doorway; perhaps drawn to scare people on the ghost hunts. Jess's story aligns with what my parents would always teach me about Jinns; don't disturb them. Allow them to live in peace as they allow you.

During my time with Peet I had heard stories of prisoners, and supernatural occurrences at Parramatta Gaol. I struggled to centre on a single narrative for why the hauntings at Parramatta Gaol take place. Though almost every inch of me tells me to remain rational, have a 'mind over matter' attitude, I can't ignore everything I've been brought up learning about Jinns and the Islamic viewpoints of supernatural occurrences. My own experiences with Jinn conflict with Peet's ideas the supernatural, and even 'possession'. She doesn't believe in possession per se, anyone, in her experience, who has been possessed, was most likely faking it. Whereas my family alone, has had three cases of possession.

The cultural differences between Peet, who was raised Catholic, and I, shape our attitudes to the paranormal. We both are fairly unfazed by it all, though Peet has admitted there a certain periods of her life when she feels down, that she gets a little overwhelmed with any unnatural occurrences. I concur.

The last story she tells me, and the one that sticks with me, takes place in the same wing as that guttural growl from the prison cell.

"It was the end of the tour, and we were locking up," Peet begins. "Jackie and I were at the main switchboard turning off lights while the others waited outside for us, letting us know if any of the lights were still on,"

We stood in front of the main switchboard inside the administration area of the wing as Peet mapped out the scenario for me. There were buttons aplenty.

Peet flicks a switch.

“Off!” calls a crew member from outside the office.

She flicks another switch.

“Off!”

Another switch.

Silence.

“Is it off?” Jackie calls.

Silence.

“Is it off?” Jackie calls again, this time louder.

Silence still.

Peet begins to feel frustrated; she calls again, her voice booming around the office of the wing:

“IS IT OFF?”

“Down here it’s not”

Peet flicks the switch again

“How ‘bout now?”

No answer.

Peet goes to check up on the crew, and finds them waiting for her, engaging in casual chat.

She confronts them about the ordeal that had just taken place to find them bemused about the situation.

“You just told me the lights weren’t off,” Peet looks at Sue

“None of us have said a word in ten minutes,” Sue said

“I heard her voice, clear as day,” Peet tells me, *“It was Sue’s voice- unmistakably,”*

It seemed it was an inexplicable phenomena of ‘vocal doppelgängers’ as the APPI crew called it.

“The thing that really terrifies me about that situation is that I heard the voice of someone whom I trust with my life,” Peet said.

Her words resonated with me. I don't know if what was communicating with Peet was a spirit, or a Jinn, or even a trickster.

I do know why I used to fear the supernatural so much when I was younger; the fear visited me often, it still does from time to time. Though the feeling nowadays manifests itself in the double edged sword of being alone, and not being alone.

The particular unsettling fear that makes us back up against a wall, riddled with paranoia, sees both feelings exist simultaneously.