

Episode Four: The Dollar-Fifty Kennard Novelty
"Superstitious"

By: Amy Bartram

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"A kindergarten teacher [...] is removed from her class today apparently after story time for using a Ouija board in front of her students last week. The teacher was put on leave after a parent reached out to school leaders, upset by what her five year old son was exposed to while at school Friday. The child told his mother his teacher turned off the lights, pulled out a Ouija board, and started talking about scary stories and spirits. The teacher says that the Ouija board had been in her classroom since October, and the kids constantly talked about it, so she took it out. She says they only talked about scary stories; never about spirits" (WISN).

"Well, I don't know if it's harmful to see something but if you begin to practice it is, because the idea is you're dealing with a spirit. The spirit is causing that little uh, needle or -- I'm trying to-- whatever they call that thing. It goes around to letters and spells words and so you feel like some dead person -- but actually it is communicating with demonic spirits and it is a dangerous thing and I strongly urge people not to get involved in it" (700 Club).

In the 1990s, a high schooler named Travis decided to get involved with his friends for some fun. In the middle of the night, admittedly with a little alcohol in their systems, the high schoolers took a Ouija board to a mausoleum. Gathering around in a circle, the group placed the board in the center of the room and proceeded to ask questions. "Is there someone with us tonight?" But the board failed to answer. At least, not straight away. As the group waited with a sense of apprehension, the planchette began to move ever so slightly. Travis, believing the movement a hoax, accused his friends of messing with his head, but one of the girls, nearly in tears, cried in fright. "It's not me," she exclaimed. The planchette, now gaining momentum, traveled from letter to letter, spelling out a name. S-I-M-M-O-N-S. This was the name imprinted on the mausoleum. Travis gave a chuckle; one of their group had to be spelling this out. But the rest of the group, terrified, pulled their hands away from the planchette. A rock flew across the room at one of the girls. She screamed, nearly missing a hit to the head. As Travis looked down, the planchette moved alone. "Get out," it spelled. Travis was convinced. The group of high schoolers fled the space in horror. Sprinting, the group only turned back at a sharp sound; the slamming of the mausoleum door behind them. Not a living soul could have shut that gate. Was this instance a bonified spiritual occurrence? (Anonymous).

Were they experiencing a cross-dimension reality? Were demons speaking to them through the board? Or had their minds simply been playing tricks, thrusting them into the placeboed realm of the superstitious?

Intro

Harry Fuller and his wife Nicola, were shot and killed in their home in England in 1994. The murderer, Stephen Young, is believed to have shot the Fullers for financial gain, although, the couple was discovered dead in a white substance, suggesting a potential drug crime. Stephen Young was found guilty for their deaths and sentenced to a lifetime in prison in March of 1994 ("Ouija Board Appeal Dismissed"). However, the case was not an open and shut one. Rather, it was later discovered that the jury had conducted something scandalous. Something secret. Four of the jurors had decided to meet in a hotel room during the trial and attempt to conjure the dead couple, asking them for their killer. The jurors pulled out a Ouija board, and during a drinking session, used an upturned wine glass to ask the board questions. When the board supposedly spelled out Young's name, the jurors were set to convict him.

Upon the discovery of the Ouija board tryst, the conviction of Mr. Young was overturned and a Ouija-less jury convicted Stephen Young a second time in December of that same year.

There is something about the Ouija board that is both frightening and intriguing. But where did the Ouija board come from? Why does the Ouija board instill such a grandiose fear within us? To find out the answers to that, you have to travel back in time to the Victorian era.

Humans have a need to know all the things they cannot know, and this is especially true during times in which life expectancies were lower, and a belief in ghosts allowed people the calming effect of a confirmed life after death. The seeking out the ghosts of loved ones passed also gave the living comfort in knowing that they would once again be reunited with their friends and family.

William Wallace Lincoln, son of President Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd Lincoln, died at the young age of 11 in 1862, one year into the American Civil War. The distraught Mary wanted nothing more than to contact her young son; to see him again would mean that she could find out if he was okay; to know that she would one day be rejoined with him in the afterlife; to show him how much she still loved him. She took it upon herself to hold seances in the White House. This was just one

of the many stories coming out of the spiritualist movement in America.

But the spiritualist movement began before Lincoln ever took office. In fact, the spiritualist movement, or a belief that the dead could communicate with the living, really took off in the late 1840s (Diniejk). In fact, the spawning of this movement began with two teenage girls in Hydesville, New York, in 1848. On April Fool's Day.

A 15 year old Margaret and her 11 year old sister, Katy had decided to play a prank on their mother. They decided to concoct eerie noises that would echo throughout their farmhouse. "At first, the girls tied strings to apples, then repeatedly and rhythmically dropped them on the stairs to mimic ghostly footsteps" (Stuart). The girls, enjoying the pranking of their mother stepped up their game by creating popping and cracking sounds in the night. Their superstitious mother became convinced their house was haunted by the previous owner who had been shot and killed. Finally, the sisters decided that they would ask the "ghost" questions by rapping on the walls. The ghost in turn would answer by rapping. Of course, this was a plan made by the girls, and their mother was frightened.

Although the girls confessed their mischievous deeds to the *New York Tribune* some 40 years later, it was too late. The spiritualist movement had already traveled throughout the country, and some were smart enough to capitalize on this movement.

By 1886 a new fad had been hitting the spiritualist camps throughout Ohio. Talking boards. These boards had letters and numbers on them and a device that was used for pointing at the letters and numbers. Originally, the pointing device had a pencil attached to the front which would allow a spirit, after being contacted by a medium, to write a message or point to what he or she wanted to say. This had developed to be a quieter version of the Fox sisters' rapping on the walls. The Associated Press had written an article on the talking boards in Ohio which peaked the interest of one Charles Kennard of Baltimore, Maryland (McRobbie).

Excited for the potential of some serious cash during such a frantic time period, Charles Kennard pulled together a group of investors "including Elijah Bond, a local attorney, and Colonel Washington Bowie, a surveyor, to start the Kennard Novelty Company" (McRobbie). The group wanted to be the exclusive owners of these talking boards. But, in order to sell the game, they needed a name. It's believed that Elijah Bond, the local attorney, had a sister-in-law who fancied

herself a medium. She decided to conduct a seance around the talking board, and asked the board what the group should call it. The board spelled out O-U-I-J-A. The medium, Helen Peters, then asked the board what this meant, for which it replied, "Good luck" (McRobbie).

The name of the board and the cryptic message that followed are admittedly eerie. However, it is believed that Helen Peters was wearing a locket that evening; a locket that contained the picture of a famous author and women's rights activist named "Ouida". It's said that the picture in the locket had the author's name printed above her head -- Peters got it wrong, mispronouncing the name as Ouija. Regardless, the name Ouija would become one of the most famous names throughout history.

The Kennard group now had another hurdle to jump: getting the game patented. And they had to prove the board worked. So, local lawyer Elijah Bond brought his sister-in-law, Helen Peters, to the patent office in Washington when the application for the board game was filled out. The chief patent officer wanted a demonstration. If the Ouija board could accurately spell out his name he'd allow the application to proceed. As the story goes, neither Bond nor Peters knew the patent officer's name, but the group sat down with the board anyway, and the planchette faithfully spelled out the officer's name (McRobbie). By the way, Elijah Bond was a patent attorney . . . Either way, the patent officer granted the Kennard group the patent for their "toy" or "game" on February 10, 1891 (McRobbie).

The rules of the game were and are fairly simple:

1. Pick someone to be the medium. You need someone to ask all the questions.
2. Place your fingers on the planchette. And you want the planchette resting on the letter 'G' to start.
3. Develop an opening ritual.
4. Ask a question.
5. Watch the planchette move.
6. Close the board.

The mystery behind the board was thick. The patent office would say nothing about the board other than it worked which struck a fearful curiosity in the mind's of the public. People had a firm belief in the Fox sisters and spiritualism, and only 26 years after the Civil War, people wanted answers to their own mysteries. They wanted the Ouija board, and they would pay to own it. The board initially sold for \$1.50. With a loaf of bread costing around 10 cents at that time, the Ouija

board would be worth 15 loaves. With inflation, the original Ouija board would cost around \$39.

And the Ouija board was a money making machine. A year after its patent, the Kennard Novelty Company expanded from one factory in Baltimore "to two in New York, two in Chicago, and one in London" (McRobbie).

Two years after its patent, the Ouija board would change owners. Kennard and Bond owed a great deal of money to debt collectors, and sold their portions of the company to one William Fuld, an original stockholder in the company. However, Colonel Bowie still held interest in the company and held on to his portion until 1919 when he gave up and sold the remainder to Fuld for \$1. But Fuld would not hang on to the company for very long. He died in a freak accident, falling from one of the factory floors in 1927. Interestingly, the factory where he died was one in which the Ouija board told him to build.

The Ouija board comes into pop culture in waves, generally when people want to, or need to believe in something. Wanna-be crime solvers turned to their boards in the 1920s when they were seeking out answers to unsolved crimes. And the Ouija board was popular during the Great Depression. And yes, the country was in financial turmoil, but the people needed answers; they needed something to believe in. And shortly after the stock market crash of 1929, boards flew off the shelves. In 1944, while the world was involved with WWII, a single department store in New York, over a period of five months, sold more than 50,000 Ouija boards. In 1967 alone, during the Vietnam War, more than 2 million Ouija boards were sold, outselling Monopoly, everyone's favorite family game. It seems that every time the country encounters a major crisis, Ouija boards fly off the shelves to provide answers.

While talking to the dead was once considered a normal thing to do, something has increasingly changed with the board over time. Something terrifying. Today, many claim that playing with the Ouija board is a dangerous endeavor; an endeavor that can conjure unwanted spirits or demons.

"I didn't know what a Ouija board was, I just, was playing with it, and my mom was just 'I don't want a child playing with a Ouija board.' But I played with it a good 45 minutes before she came home" (Anonymous).

"I could feel something looking at me through the bathroom. And upstairs was two big rooms that were connected by a long bathroom. So, it was like from this door to that door and there was -- behind that wall was a shower -- that long bathroom, and the toilet, and the powder room. And it was all connected.

And then my room. So you could walk straight through and go to my room. The other room was always sealed off. That was my playroom. But I never felt right in my play room. One night the bathroom door was left open. That night -- you know those old Spy Kids door lock things that you have to have a plastic card for? I had one on my door, and my door was open and it went down a spiral staircase that went down to the first level of the house. That thing came off, hit the window on the opposite end of that foyer area, and dropped down in front of the front door that was ten yards that way. Also that night, there was, I had, my whole room was covered in like glow in the dark stickers for like the galaxy. So it looked like the entire galaxy was in my room. Like little bitty ones. Thousands of stars. That night, none of them glowed (Anonymous).

There's something exciting in a frightfully good story. Think about it. Stephen King has made an entire career out of scaring people. Similarly, in the 1920s, newspapers loved a good stories filled with murder, mayhem, and intrigue. Fear engages people. And that's what happened. In 1921, the New York Times reported on a "Chicago woman being sent to a psychiatric hospital" (McRobbie). The woman had tried to explain that a Ouija board told her to leave her mother's body in the living room of her home for 15 days before burying her in the backyard (McRobbie). By 1930, newspapers were reporting about two women who murdered by the instruction of a Ouija board, by '41 a man joined the Army because the Ouija instructed him to, and in the late 50s, some were leaving their inheritance money to bodiless spirits contacted via the board.

By and large, the Ouija board was considered harmless, and this was true for more than 100 years -- until 1973. It is this year, and in one particular moment, that the fear of the Ouija board was born.

The Exorcist tells the story of a young girl, Regan, who becomes possessed with a demon after playing with a Ouija board alone. This is the defining moment of the game's history; the moment in which the Ouija board became a thing to be feared. This moment can be related to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. No one was afraid of taking showers until they witnessed the famous shower scene (McRobbie). The Ouija board became a thing to be feared almost over night. Christian groups, who, until this point in time had no problem with the board, began to denounce the board claiming that the board is a portal to the devil. Throughout the years after 1973, the Ouija board has been thrown into fire pits alongside its equally "evil" counterparts: The *Harry Potter* series and Disney's "Snow White".

Horror film makers love the Ouija board. Since the board game lined the pockets of all those involved with *The Exorcist*, the Ouija board has been used time and time again. You'll find it in the *Ouija* movies, *Paranormal Activity 1* and *2*, and episodes of "Breaking Bad" and an amalgam of paranormal TV shows.

The Ouija board has been around for 126 years -- and longer, if you take into consideration the original talking boards. They've gone from a mere telephone to the dead to a portal for evil. But *how* do they really work?

I hate to burst any bubbles here, but scientists, who have studied the board for decades, almost a century, say that the board is *not* powered by spirits or demons (McRobbie). Rather, the board is powered by those who believe or want to believe. And I know, you've played with a Ouija board or one of your friends has and the planchette moved, and no one was moving it. They swear, you swear, no one was moving the planchette. But scientific evidence exists for the explanation as to why the Ouija board works. It's called the ideometer effect.

The ideometer actions are actions that occur through the unconscious mind. They're involuntary motor movements performed by a person because of prior "expectations, suggestions, or preconceptions" (Jackson). In other words they're automatic muscular movements that take place without the conscious will. You can think about it like crying in reaction to a sad movie.

The planchette is a lightweight device with a felt like padding on the bottom so it can move with ease. Therefore, the ideometer effect is this: people who play the Ouija board either believe they are truly conjuring a spirit, or they *want* to believe they're in contact with a spirit. In turn, the planchette *does* move, albeit through subtle, unconscious movement. It is also through this belief that horrific things *do* start to happen. And "what's true in our minds is true whether anyone else believes it or not" (What Dreams May Come).

In December 2016, in the town of Bay City, Michigan, a woman by the name of Crystal appeared at a hospital claiming to have fallen from the hay loft in a barn on her property. Suspicious of her wounds, hospital staff called the police and reported her wounds not as an accident, but rather, a deliberate stabbing. Crystal's friends were contacted who told the police that the woman had, in fact, been stabbed. By her boyfriend. It was believed by the woman that her house was haunted. So, she pulled out a Ouija board in the hope of contacting the spirit in her home. Her boyfriend, Cody, entered the home, saw the Ouija board, and stabbed her,

collapsing her lung. He eventually told police, "Ouija board is a game that should not be played at someone's house; it's a game for Satan-worshippers." Cody was arraigned on single counts of assault with intent to cause bodily harm (Waterman).

For those who believe in the power of the Ouija board, there are some added superstitious beliefs if you wish to play safely:

Rule #1: Never play the Ouija board alone. Many want to play safely; having someone nearby gives you an added advantage.

Rule #2: Do not allow the planchette to count down through the numbers or alphabet backwards. Allowing this can allow the spirit to stay in the world of the living.

Rule #3: Always place a silver coin or other silver item upon the Ouija board before playing. Silver has the ability to repel evil.

Rule #4: Never mention "God". This makes spirits angry, and anger = danger.

Rule #5: Always say "goodbye". This is the same as turning the game off. Failure to do so can allow the entity to stay behind.

We either believe in the power of the Ouija board or we don't. But throughout its history, the Ouija board has sparked intrigue and mystery. Although the Ouija board is just that, a board, for so many people, it's an open door. A door that has allowed comfort in the seeking of loved ones and a confirmation in an after life; a door that allows us to believe in something greater than ourselves. The Ouija board isn't a powerful device because it allows spirits back into our world; it's powerful because it gives us the ability to believe in something higher than ourselves.

Each episode of Superstitious features a segment called "Idioms for Idiots". On this episode, we discussed the Ouija board, its origins, and its inexplicable modern day attribution to the devil and demons. Our idiom for this episode is "all hell broke loose".

We use this phrase to express the idea that everything that can go wrong, does go wrong or everything that could go wrong, did go wrong. And we use this phrase as a means of expressing how grandiose the wrongness actually is. All Hell breaking loose is the worst of the worst; an extreme of Biblical proportions, which is fitting, because, according to scholars, the first use of this phrase was by one John Milton. The same

John Milton who wrote "Paradise Lost". The epic poem was written in 1667 and features Satan as a major character. In a segment of the poem, the angel Gabriel asks Satan why the inhabitants of Hell had not broken out of the underworld and accompanied him to the garden. In fact, Gabriel asks, "Wherefore with thee came not all hell broke loose?" (Mitchell). 350 years later, all hell breaking loose has become part of our contemporary slang. So, if you're playing with a Ouija board on your own and in a cemetery at night, think of Milton -- all hell might break loose...

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