

Stay as a guest of The Inn, and if you have the nerve, request room 107. Maybe you'll rave about your stay. Or just maybe, you'll check in but never check out - at least not through the front desk.

The Inn

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THE INN

A Cocoa Beach Ghost Story

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Chapter 1

THE WOMAN'S CONSTRICTED AIRWAY absorbed her initial scream. Eyes wide and mouth formed into an eerie oval, she resembled a silent movie damsel in distress.

She convulsed. The action cleared her throat and allowed her second scream to escape. The shrill and piercing sound rode a strong offshore current, swept over an exposed walkway, through a weatherproof double paned slider, and across a breezeway separating the decorative lobby of The Inn at Cocoa Beach from its northern two-story wing.

Diminished after forcing its way through dense plate glass, the woman's cry failed to shatter the concentrated focus of ten individuals gathered in the lobby. A few of the ten sat. A few stood, short in front, taller to the rear. Mesmerized by the pictures flashing across a console television, an impenetrable halo of silence encircled the ten.

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Trained to remain cool while covering a cataclysmic event, an unseen broadcaster attempted to recall his lessons and deliver a steady and calm report. His voice, however, refused to cooperate. It cracked with emotion as live video shots presented each new and gut-wrenching scene.

Except for a sullen teenager who rejected its potential implications after a single attempt to alert his parents, the woman's third scream elicited the same reaction as her previous.

The teenager touched his father's arm. "Pop's?" he said.

The man brushed his son's hand aside in a blatant act of dismissal.

The teenager responded in a manner practiced often since puberty transformed his voice, his body, his mind, and his attitude into a brooding adolescent unknown to his parents. He slumped deeper into the soft couch cushion.

Their eyes locked on a now visible and trembling television reporter, the boy's mother and father leaned closer to the TV. Stricken with a combination of horror and anguish, they watched and listened as the broadcaster described a frightening volcanic eruption to a camera concerned neither with the event nor the man's roller coaster emotions.

Earlier that day, Sunday, May 18, 1980, and three time zones to the west, dawn in the Pacific Northwest arrived. It brought neither clouds nor humidity. The rising sun's brilliance allowed Washington's magnificent Cascade volcanic peaks to glimmer as if fulfilling every child's dream of a perpetual ice cream cone. One mountain peak above all others stood out, Mount St. Helens, located ninety-six miles south of Seattle and fifty-six miles northeast of Portland. The snow and ice covered

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symmetry of Mount St. Helens' peak earned it the nickname, Mount Fuji of America.

At 7:00 a.m. Pacific Daylight Time, David A. Johnston, a volcanologist with the U. S. Geological Survey stationed at an observation point six miles north of Mount St. Helens, radioed in the results of laser measurements taken earlier that morning. The USGS command center located in Vancouver, Washington received David's report and agreed with his analysis. Current volcanic activity showed no change to a protruding bulge that continued to grow daily. David relaxed for a moment. He smiled at the giant eyeball peering at him from the mountain's northern flank.

One hour and thirty-two minutes later at twenty seconds after 8:32 a.m. and without warning, a magnitude 5.1 earthquake below the volcano allowed hell to escape from the bowels of the earth and visit the surface.

The bulge collapsed. The north flank of the volcano plunged into the valley below. The first few moments of Mount St. Helens' instant transition from benign and beautiful to malignant and monstrous witnessed the largest landslide in recorded history. The landslide, however, proved a minor prelude to what followed as the hot and pressurized rock held captive within the north flank below the bulge erupted in a twenty-four megaton display of power.

1,314 feet of the mountain disappeared not up, but out from the blast. The explosion's violence sent 3.7 billion cubic yards of volcanic ash screaming to the north.

The eruption and resulting destruction killed fifty-seven people including David A. Johnston. Six miles from the blast, Johnston radioed the following words before a 660-degree blast of superheated air traveling at 300 MPH vaporized him, "Vancouver! Vancouver! This is it!"

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Harry R. Truman, an eighty-three year-old curmudgeon who refused to leave his home on Spirit Lake at the base of Mount St. Helens, received a similar fate for his audacity to challenge the mountain's intent. His comment, "If the mountain goes, I'm going with it," captured worldwide attention in the two months prior to the eruption.

The sounds of the lobby door crashing open ripped Jerry Kelly's attention from a distant disaster and focused it on an urgent and nearby calamity. Jerry spun around. He glimpsed Andrew Keskes, the Inn's intern and jack-of-all-trades, prone on the floor, mouth agape, and hand pointed towards the open door. Confused, Jerry moved to assist Andrew as the woman's fourth plaintive attempt to seek assistance arrived in wave after wave.

Jerry's refocused mind swirled between three thoughts. *What the hell? Please, not on my first day as Desk Manager! And, Move old man – move!*

The third thought prevailed and Jerry sprinted for the lobby door as fast as his sixty year-old legs allowed him to move. He left a crowd split between events unfolding three thousand miles away and those within shouting distance. A single person followed Jerry, the sullen teenager. Jerry crossed the tile breezeway and threw open the slider. He planted his left foot and started to turn right towards the source of the unabated cries—but he skidded to a stop after seeing a naked blonde three doors away. The woman directed her screams into room 107.

Unconcerned with her nudity, the woman's hands covered her ears as if trying to shut out the terrifying sounds escaping her throat.

Chapter 2

MIND NUMBING FEAR THREATENED to force a retreat, but with a, "Holy sheik...!" Jerry rushed towards the unknown woman. He placed his five foot five and one hundred fifty pounds between the woman and the open door leading into room 107. Jerry understood the state of the woman was his second priority. First he needed to neutralize whatever danger lurked inside the room.

Jerry spun to confront the peril.

Expecting to discover a bloody scene from a Vincent Price movie, Jerry stiffened his resolve and peered into the room. Instead of blood and gore, however, Jerry saw a space bathed in opaque light from a single antique bedside table lamp. A few articles of clothing lay scattered on the floor.

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Jerry heard no sound coming from the room. No vision caused dread to constrict the flow of blood to his heart. He exhaled and turned to face a woman who had replaced her screams with chest-wracking sobs. Intending to provide comfort, Jerry touched the woman's arm. She reacted, jerked her arm away. Fear glazed her begging eyes. "Please tell me nightmares aren't real—tell me they're only dreams," she said.

Unsure how to react Jerry stepped back. The moment he moved, the woman transformed her fear into blazing hatred. Her eyes glared past Jerry and into the room. Guttural sounds rushed from the back of her throat, formed into words, and escaped her lips. "Keep him! You can have him, you snarling SOB!"

Jerry's fears returned for a moment but passed as the woman's eyes rolled up into her head. Limp, she slumped towards the ground. Jerry reacted. He set his renewed fears aside and reached for the woman. He caught her before her crumpling knees scraped the walkway. Jerry lowered the woman onto her back and took notice of her physical condition. On the far side of thirty with stringy bleached hair, Jerry discovered a red coloration on her right ear and cheek. He noticed needle tracks on both tattooed arms and at the same time caught a strong whiff of alcohol coming through a powerful scent of fear. Jerry refused to jump to conclusions but instead raised his eyes and searched for help. Frozen in place and mouth wide open, the teenager who had followed Jerry stood three feet away.

"Young man?" Jerry said.

The youth remained unresponsive.

"Young man. The room. Get me a blanket. Now!" Jerry glanced past the teenager to a gathering crowd. "Someone call 911!"

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The boy reacted. "Yes sir!" Heart racing, he ran into the room. Frightened by what he might discover, he concentrated on his single assigned task. He ripped a coverlet from the end of the ruffled bed, started to turn, and paused. His senses detected a strong odor of decay. The boy gagged. He clutched his mouth, held his breath, and bolted. He dropped the coverlet into Jerry's hands, turned away, and lost the contents of his stomach.

Jerry ignored the young man's plight and placed the covering over the woman. She stirred. "Whe...where? Who?" She sat up and glanced around. Embarrassed by her naked condition and realizing people stared – the woman clutched the cover close.

Jerry reached out a hand. "Here, let me help you," he said. "The ambulance and police are on the way. They..."

"Police! No police! I don't need any ambulance. I just need my clothes." She stood, took an unsteady step towards room 107, but thought better of it. "My clothes. I...please?"

Jerry turned towards Andrew who had wedged his way through a gathering throng of curiosity seekers. "Escort this lady to the office? I'll get her clothes and meet you there."

Andrew led the woman through a pack that parted as if she carried the plague.

"Thanks for your help," Jerry said to the ashen-faced teenager.

Shocked by the surreal events, the young man failed to respond.

Jerry didn't attempt further conversation. Instead, he walked past the boy, stepped over the threshold, and hesitated inside the doorway. After watching every episode of *Kojak*, a 70's TV detective series that focused on gritty detective procedures, Jerry understood he needed to leave the room

undisturbed, but he justified his presence with the woman's need for clothes. He vowed to touch nothing else.

Jerry tested his senses multiple times but failed to discover any warning signs. He took a deep breath, exhaled to calm his nerves, and entered 107. He glanced toward a rumpled bed in disarray. A single lamp on a small table to the left of the bed illuminated the room. The other bedside table lamp emitted no light.

Jerry turned to his right, noticed a lamp lying on its side. He stepped to a two-drawer Queen Anne glass-topped side table marked by its distinctive cabriole legs. The table sat on the wall opposite the end of the bed. Jerry set the lamp upright and turned the knob. The dim light flashed with brilliance—and died. Jerry yelped. He withdrew his hand and cursed his overreaction.

Jerry calmed his breathing, flipped on two separate lights, and stuck his head into the bathroom. Except for a few items left behind by the woman, he failed to see anything out of the ordinary.

Jerry walked around the bed and switched on the other table lamp. A white line of powder on the glass top table caught his eye. Never a user, Jerry nonetheless recognized what the line held since late 20th century American TV blared with inane shows touting the drug. Lying on the floor at the base of the wooden table Jerry spotted two half empty bottles, a cheap scotch, and a cheaper vodka. Seeing nothing else of interest, Jerry gathered the woman's clothes lying scattered on the floor.

He walked past the end of the bed, but paused when a fleeting image to his left caught his eye. He swiveled and cocked his head towards the wall. A quick glance revealed the Queen Anne table with a matching chair and armoire to either side but nothing out of the ordinary. Again Jerry cursed his heightened sense of foreboding. "You're being..." An image

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flashed across an antique beveled mirror hanging above the Queen Anne table. Once gilded, the mirror's frame now reflected a mottled series of dull gold splotches interspersed with dark stains of indeterminate colors. Jerry stepped closer. Ignoring his reflected image, he peered deep into the mirror. Saw nothing. "I guess it was my imagi..."

Jerry dropped the clothes and stumbled backwards. He bumped into a cushioned bench at the end of the bed but remained standing. He stared at the reflected image of a burnished copper skull resembling a long-dead steer. "What the...!" Jerry blinked twice. The mirror cleared. Jerry reached out, touched the reflective surface with the tips of his fingers, and discovered – a mirror.

"Humph." Jerry scolded his continued overreaction. He collected the woman's clothes and walked from the room.

Chapter 3

THE FIRST POLICE OFFICER on the scene dispersed the crowd and secured the room. Ambulance attendants examined the woman but discovered no medical issues requiring a trip to the hospital. For the next half hour one police officer interviewed Jerry and the other witnesses. His partner and a female officer interrogated the unknown woman in an interior office reserved for guests of The Inn while a lab technician dusted the room and snapped pictures for possible evidence. Halfway through his examination, one of the officers pulled the technician aside and into the lobby. Jerry thought he overheard the comment, "There's no crime." The technician packed his kit and drove off.

Nichole Kaminski, the Inn's manager, arrived as the technician drove from the lot. She stepped from her car with a

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grace belying her young age and motioned for Jerry. He explained the unpleasant situation. "Not good publicity," Nichole said.

Jerry disagreed. "Depends on how the papers play it. If they even imply something supernatural occurred, who knows? It might help business."

Nichole's expression told Jerry she didn't agree with him. "I need to go, but keep me informed," Nichole said.

The officers emerged from the woman's interrogation a few minutes later and Jerry heard laughing, not what he expected. The female officer led the woman towards the lobby door with the comment, "I'll take her home so she can sleep it off."

The other officer approached Jerry while shaking his head. "Drunks and druggies. Their stories get more bizarre every year."

"Excuse me?" Jerry said. "But what's going on? That woman acted as if she had seen a ghost."

"She's an alcoholic, a drug abuser, a certifiable nutcase, and a known prostitute. It's how she keeps her pimp and her drug supplier happy. Sorry she involved you in her hallucinations."

"Does she have a name?"

"Sandra Livingston. Probably an alias but who knows."

"So you're saying nothing happened to Sandra Livingston other than a drug induced hallucination?"

"I'll tell you what she told us. You decide."

For the next few minutes the officer retold Sandra Livingston's story. He interjected a few snide comments and laughs. "It seems the man who rented room 107 called a local escort service and they sent our little lady of the night to, shall we say...service him? By the way, who checked into that room?"

You might want to warn your staff that in the future...." The officer left the warning hanging in the air. He knew Jerry understood.

Jerry ignored the mild threat. He walked to the check-in desk and opened the register. "His name is Smith, John Smith. He didn't use a credit card. He paid cash for two nights."

"Smith. Yeah right," the officer said. He made a note in a small spiral notebook. "Probably another alias. His address?"

"A PO Box in Biloxi."

"Mississippi?"

Jerry glanced back at the card. "Says Minnesota. Never heard of it." The officer didn't bother to make a note. "Sorry," Jerry said. "He'll probably return since he left a few things in the room."

"If he doesn't, let me know. Maybe his prints will shed some light. Besides, I'd love to hear his side of the story."

"What's hers?" Jerry asked. "Just curious since she scared the daylights out of half the staff and guests."

The officer smirked. "Guess it won't hurt. It seems our little lady and Mr. Smith spent the morning and into the afternoon suck'n, snort'n, and shoot'n. After Mr. Smith started to get downright mean, Ms. Livingston tried to leave the room. Our Mr. Smith grabbed her by the neck and sent her sprawling onto the bed. He demanded she undress while he watched. She complied. Shaking from a combination of alcohol, drugs, and a rising fear, she undressed and lay on the bed. She asked him what he wanted from her and he said he wanted her to remain real quiet while he tied her up. He removed a switchblade from a back pocket, snapped it open, and tossed it from hand to hand. She recognized by his actions and his expression, he intended to kill her. Escape offered her the only chance. She feigned left and jerked right, but she failed to catch him leaning the wrong way. His left arm shot out. His openhanded slap

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landed hard on the side of her head, and she fell back onto the bed. Without waiting, the man crouched and leaped at her, knife blade ready to slash...." The officer chuckled as he recalled her story. "This is where it gets really interesting. Or maybe weird is a better word."

"Weird?" Jerry said.

"Weird. She said that as the man's feet left the ground, a ghost grabbed him in midair and without pause yanked him backwards. The man slammed into the mirror but didn't fall to the floor." The officer again paused and stared at Jerry. His arrogant smirk tested Jerry's patience.

"What?" Jerry said.

"She said the mirror absorbed him."

"Absorbed?"

"Absorbed, or at least that's what our crazy little prostitute said. The last thing she saw of Mr. Smith was his face just before the ghost sucked him into the mirror. It seems Mr. Smith can't receive with the same depravity he gives. Our little druggie said the terrified expression on his face would haunt her until the day she dies."

Jerry's ashen image expressed more than words. Seeing the effect, the officer laughed and clapped Jerry on the shoulder. "Don't believe a word of it. Drunks imagine much worse. I'd wager a week's salary that as we speak Mr. Smith is laughing over a beer with his buddies."

The officer started to leave but Jerry's questioning voice stopped him. "Did...ah, did she say anything about a different image in the mirror?"

The officer stared for a moment before answering.

"Don't recall. Why?"

"No, no reason."

Mr. Smith failed to show that day or the next. Jerry considered it strange but after a few days his mind filed the incident away. The staff cleaned the room and Jerry returned it to the rental list.

The papers played the episode straight with no hint of supernatural overtones.

A police detective called weeks later and informed Jerry that they had identified the mysterious Mr. Smith. Roland Smyth was a lifelong criminal with an outstanding warrant from Daytona Beach. Daytona wanted him for questioning regarding the murder of his former girlfriend. The police considered him the prime suspect. Jerry started to disconnect but hesitated. He asked if the detective knew of any other strange disappearances at the Inn. "Not that I remember," the man said.

With the incident reopened in his mind, Jerry vowed to investigate the mystery a little deeper. He started with Nichole the next day. She was a logical choice since she had worked at the Inn for the previous twelve years. Nichole appeared reluctant to discuss the matter. "We don't want to spread gossip and false tales about guests vanishing, now do we?" she said after Jerry raised the explosive issue.

"Of course not. But since we've had one strange disappearance, I was just wondering if you knew of any others."

Nichole paused and studied Jerry's eyes. "Some people leave and don't bother to check out. Happens all the time. We should leave this prostitute's problems to the police. They're equipped to handle it." She walked away.

Jerry realized Nichole had couched her answers to protect the Inn. He didn't blame her but he sensed the mystery

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needed further investigation. He spoke to other employees, one by one and in groups. Most members of the cleaning staff suggested they sometimes heard strange sounds in room 107 but nothing that frightened them. They discounted the sounds as nothing more than normal building creaks and groans. One woman, however, said, "You might want to talk to Rebecca Harrington."

"Rebecca...?"

"Harrington. She's a former housekeeper who quit in the middle of her shift. She told the former day manager a ghost had assaulted her in room 107. Everyone discounted her story since she was a little...you know...kooky, not right in the head. Besides..." The woman leaned close to Jerry and whispered, "She also hit the bottle pretty hard, here and off the job."

"Know where I can find her?"

The woman shrugged and walked away.

Jerry discovered Rebecca Harrington in a Cape Canaveral hospital ward two days later. She was incoherent and dying of alcohol poisoning. The attending physician informed Jerry that alcohol had ravaged Rebecca's mind. "It's only a matter of hours or days before it kills her body."

After the doctor left the room, Jerry heard Rebecca mumbling. Her eyes remained closed but she beckoned him to move closer. Jerry placed his face near her parched and cracked lips but heard nothing except a death rattle. He started to withdraw when suddenly, as if an unknown power injected new life into her ravaged body, Rebecca sat up, her eyes flashed open, and she screamed, "Please don't let that scarred animal rape me again!" Then, with an apparent urgency to reclaim death, Rebecca fell back and slipped into a coma. Startled by her actions but positive Rebecca's outburst was the result of an irrational mind near death—Jerry discounted the event and left the hospital.

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Rebecca never regained consciousness. She died two days later and Jerry dropped his investigation.

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