**The Black Tapes**

**A Tale of Two Tapes Part 1**

**Alex**: Ghosts, poltergeists, spirits, and demons. Is death the end of the road, or simply a transition to another realm? From the the National Radio Alliance and Minnow Beats Whale, it's the Black Tapes Podcast. I'm Alex Reagan.

**Alex**: For the last two months, I've been immersed in the fascinating world of paranormal investigation. Full disclosure: I love ghost stories. Even if you don't really believe in ghosts, it's fun to suspend disbelief. You dim the lights, set the mood, and tell the scariest story you can think of. And it's fun because we know it's probably not real. Ghosts don't actually exist. Do they?

**Alex**: Do you believe in ghosts?

**Woman**: Depends.

**Alex**: On What?

**Woman**: On why you're asking me! (laughs) Is there a ghost behind me?

**Alex**: Excuse me?

**Woman**: Yes?

**Alex**: Do you believe in ghosts?

**Woman**: Um, I do actually.

**Alex**: Really? Have you seen one?

**Woman**: I haven't seen one, but I heard one when I was younger.

**Alex**: You heard one?

**Woman**: Yeah, I came home from school one day and I swore I heard my mother in the kitchen. And I went in there, and there and there was nobody there. And I called my mom and she was still at work, so.

**Alex**: Were you scared?

**Woman**: Yeah! (laughs) Yeah.

**Alex**: Do you believe in ghosts?

**Man**: No. No, I think that people are just either looking for attention, or schizophrenic.

**Alex**: So it's all a hoax?

**Man**: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. Except, there was this one time...

**Woman**: I was in the Tower of London once, and I could feel Anne Boleyn, her ghost or her spirit, whatever it was, I could feel it all around me.

**Alex**: How do you know it was Anne Boleyn?

**Woman**: Because I was in the Tower of London.

**Alex**: Ohh.

**Alex**: Okay. It's time for a bit of background. Rather than just diving into our first story, I think I need to explain what happened. How things... Changed. The reality is, this podcast started as one thing but very quickly became something else. At a certain point, my producers and I had to make a decision. Do we stick with our original vision, or do we follow the interesting, confusing, and occasionally macabre story that had started spilling out around the edges?

As most of our listeners probably know, I've been working as a segment producer and occasional guest host on Pacific Northwest Stories for three years. A few months ago, Nic, one of my producers, suggested a spin-off series. We would examine interesting lives, remarkable occupations, and amazing stories. Our first episode was a good one, we would dive into the crazy world of paranormal researchers, or ghost hunters.

As our podcast began to... change, we went back and forth on how to proceed. After numerous lengthy discussions, we decided that we would let things play out exactly as they happen to us. You will experience the events just as we experience them. I'll step in every once in a while to help guide you through it. But other than those interruptions, we're going to let things play out exactly as they happened.

It's The Black Tapes Podcast. I'm Alex Reagan. Stay with us.

**Man**: The first thing you need to know about paranormal research is that none of it is normal.

**Alex**: That's Raymond Savorski. He's written five books on paranormal phenomena, and is considered by his ghost hunting peers a pioneer in paranormal investigative techniques. He's tall and thin, but a healthy willowy thin. He's a man who cares about his appearance, and his food. He sent his salad back twice during our lunch meeting because his arugula was too bitter. We'll speak more with Mr. Savorski in a moment.

According to a government poll from 2013, 45% of Americans believe in ghosts. 64% believe in life after death, and 43% believe that ghosts are capable of interacting with, and sometimes even harming, people. That's a staggering number of North Americans who believe that death is not the end of life. Ghost hunting has become a multi-million dollar industry. Wal-Mart sells a ghost hunting kit for both beginner and intermediate level would-be ghost hunters. We decided I would interview three well-known paranormal researchers.

**Raymond**: So, no matter who you ask, it basically boils down to three types of hauntings. Residual energy, intelligent haunting, and inhuman haunting.

**Woman**: When it comes to what people generally witness as paranormal phenomena, we usually get three types. Orbs or mist, full-body apparitions, and demonic presence.

**Alex**: That's Dr. Emily Dumont. She's another paranormal researcher and author of a best-selling book on the subject of location hauntings.

**Man**: I've seen all types of paranormal apparitions. Whoever tells you there are three categories of hauntings is full of (expletive bleeped).

**Alex**: That's Dirk Abruzzi, the host of the popular reality TV show Demon Hunters.

**Dirk**: We're human. The things we chase are not.

**Alex**: So, how do you respond to critics who say that this field is not a science, but rather a pseudoscience?

**Dirk**: Pseudoscience (snickering) Yeah I've heard that one. Well, I would ask them to accompany me on an investigation to see the rigor with which we conduct our experiments. We have actual experiments.

**Emily**: I'd like to point out that even the University of Pennsylvania, an Ivy League school, has a ghost research unit.

**Alex**: Really?

**Alex**: There are critics within your industry who say that with Demon Hunters, you're not engaging in science, but rather in low-brow entertainment.

**Dirk**: They're jealous they didn't think of it before we did.

**Alex**: Well, to be honest, I've been hearing this from several people.

**Dirk**: You're talking about Strand, right? Don't waste your time.

**Alex**: Of course, I wasn't talking about Strand. Not yet. I wasn't talking about anyone in particular. But I started to notice that name, Strand, kept coming up.

**Alex**: Does the criticism ever get personal?

**Raymond**: There's no avoiding that type of character assassination. The ones that tend to sting more are the fellow academics, like Vogel or Strand. It's like they got a vendetta against the whole field of paranormal research. You know Strand's reputation, more of a writer than anything else.

**Emily**: Dr. Strand is well known in our circles, but probably not the way he'd like. How do you say this politely? He puts a lot of passion into work that would benefit from more clinical objectivity.

**Dirk**: Dr. Richard Strand? What's his doctorate in, being a (expletive bleeped)?

**Alex**: Dr. Strand is a paranormal investigator. What makes him such a lightening rod for criticism is that he doesn't believe in the paranormal. He's a ghost hunter who doesn't believe in ghosts. In fact, not only does he not believe in paranormal phenomena, for the past decade he has been on a mission to debunk all claims of the supernatural.

​And Strand is putting his money where his mouth is. Since 1998, The Strand Institute has been offering a million dollar reward for any proof of the supernatural. As you can imagine, he hasn't made a lot of friends in the ghost hunting community. Here he is at a gathering of the Institute of Paranormal Research in St. Louis four years ago.

**Strand**: The Wilson case is not an experiment disproving nor proving the validity of this phenomenon. All you have is a number of witnesses and their claims. That's not good science.

**Interviewer**: A few more questions before we let Dr. Strand go. Yes, in the blue shirt?

**Woman**: Let's assume that what you say is true. Let's say everyone on the panel next to you is engaging in bad science. You haven't brought anything to the table that disproves anything.

(audience applause)

**Strand**: I am not making extraordinary claims against the laws of nature already established by the larger scientific community. I don't have to prove that gravity exists, that cells die, that life ends. We know these things. The burden is on my colleagues to prove that life doesn't end in death. And they haven't provided anything other than weak conjecture.

(dissatisfied murmuring)

**Interviewer**: Okay, you in the black and gold in the back.

**Woman**: Why not let people who take comfort in fairy tales hold onto their illusions?

**Strand**: It's similar to drug addiction. The addict needs escape.

**Man**: Have you ever come across a case where you couldn't find a scientific or rational explanation?

**Strand**: (pause) No.

**Man**: What about the Sagamore?

(clattering and thumping)

**Alex**: And that's when the power went out. Perfect timing for a ghost convention. Dr. Strand is a controversial figure in the world of paranormal research. So why does he do it? Why devote his life to something he doesn't believe in?

**Melissa**: Hello, this is a message for Alex Reagan. It's Melissa calling on behalf of Dr. Strand. I'm afraid he won't be able to meet with you at this time. He wanted to thank you for your interest in his work.

**Emily**: Those are most of the books I've written on the subject.

**Alex**: That's Dr. Emily Dumont, whom you heard earlier. My producer and I flew to Chicago hoping to meet with Dr. Strand, but we haven't been able to set up a meeting. So I asked Dr. Dumont if she had time to give me a tour of her office. She teaches religious studies at the University of Illinois in Urbana.

​Emily Dumont is what you might call stout, with short bangs and a Ramones t-shirt. Her huge brown eyes are filled with the sparkle and energy of a much younger woman. Her office is fairly big, but hard to move around in. Hundreds of scrapbooks and photo albums are packed onto wall to wall bookshelves. In the corner, an ancient popcorn maker from a movie theater appears to be in working order.

**Alex**: *Field Guide to the Paranormal*, *Ghost Hunting for Dummies*, *Monsters and Magic*, *A Guide to Ethereal Beings*, *Past Lives and Your Wedding*. How many books have you written?

**Emily**: Seventeen.

**Alex**: Wow.

**Emily**: Another four as co-author, and some fiction.

**Alex**: Do you find that your work in paranormal investigation fuels your works as a fiction writer?

**Emily**: Not at all. Why would you say that?

**Alex**: I just, it kind of seems like some of the...

**Emily**: My fiction is more personal. More *Fifty Shades of Grey*. But darker, and far more literary.

**Alex**: I spent about an hour or so with Miss Dumont in her office. I think she was a little offended that I mentioned fiction in the same breath as paranormal investigation. It's something I'd been noticing across the board. To a person, all the paranormal researchers I spoke with were a bit touchy about the public and scientific perception of their work. It felt like they were worried they wouldn't be taken seriously. Fair enough. Ms. Dumont came back around pretty quickly. Just as I was about to thank her for her time, she made me an offer I couldn't refuse.

**Alex**: What are those?

**Emily**: Photo albums featuring local events. Each one is a case I've investigated.

**Alex**: All of them?

**Emily**: Yeah.

**Alex**: What kind of cases?

**Emily**: Mainly apparitions. Serial hauntings. This section is demonic. Sumerian, Babylonian, Lovecraftian. And these are mainly Christian and more traditional demonics.

**Alex**: I was going to mention the fact that HP Lovecraft was a fiction writer, but after he reaction the last time I brought up the subject of fiction, I decided to let it go. Back in her office, Dumont describes the contents of one of her many bookshelves.

**Emily**: These ones are poltergeists, water spirits, these are shadows and shades. The rest are complex and simple possession cases, along with a few collections of chem trail evidence.

**Alex**: Wow. I'd love to take a closer look at some of this stuff.

**Emily**: We're going to a psychiatric hospital this evening to explore three separate claims of residual poltergeist activity. You're welcome to come along if you'd like, but you'll have to sign a release. It could be quite dangerous, spiritually.

**Melissa**: Hey Alex, we received your last couple of messages. Thank you for your interest in speaking with Dr. Strand. He's very busy this week. Unfortunately, we're unable to schedule any kind of sit down interview. If you call back next week, maybe we can set something up over the phone or Skype. Thank you again for your interest in Dr. Strand. Goodbye.

**Alex**: If you had told me three weeks ago when my producers and I were outlining this show that I would be walking through an abandoned mental hospital looking for evidence of residual poltergeist activity, I'd probably have politely suggested you be committed. But that's exactly where I ended up. And so you will you, if you stay with us after the break.

(interstitial music)
​(birds tweeting)

**Alex**: Hey Emily. Sorry, we got a little lost.

**Emily**: Did you turn on Lakeview?

**Alex**: I think so.

**Emily**: It used to go right through, but now there's a divider so you need to go around 9th Avenue past that little (*can't make out this word, sounds like "coffee-bo"*) drive-thru.

**Alex**: Oh.

**Donnie**: Hey, I'm Donnie.

**Emily**: Oh I'm sorry, this is Donnie. He'll be running most of our equipment. And this is Tina, our clairvoyant.

**Tina**: Nice to meet you.

**Alex**: Nice to meet you too. Emily, on your website it mentions that you're a clairvoyant as well?

**Emily**: I'm a medium by profession, but I experience some light clairvoyance.

**Alex**: Oh. Okay. How far is the hospital from here?

**Emily**: We're here.

**Alex**: Where?

**Emily**: There!

**Alex**: City Trust is a small credit union that sat near the shore of Lake Manteno since 1987. It is about an hour south of Chicago. It doesn't look haunted. In fact, it's basically the corner of a strip mall. But its location has a more notorious history. Okay. Disclosure time. Dumont alluded to us creeping around an abandoned mental hospital, not a small town credit union.

**Emily**: This spot is where what became known as the Manteno Madness happened. It was 1939, almost 400 of the patients came down with typhoid fever. It was awful. At least 100 patients ended up dying.

**Alex**: Apparently the credit union sits atop land that was once occupied by a psychiatric hospital from the 1930s. It housed nearly 6000 patients and a staff of 760. In 1939, something happened here that would become national news, and eventually leave a national radio podcaster and a professional ghost hunting team standing outside a strip mall. Dumont probably believes that she told me it was a credit union, and not the infamous Manteno mental hospital. She did not.

**Emily**: The hospital closed in 1985. Over on the north campus is a veteran's home, which is very nice. There's a college just back there. This parcel of land was leased to a variety of businesses.

**Alex**: The building's manager, Walter, was waiting for us inside. The credit union had closed permanently a week earlier, and the space was currently available for lease. The security system was still operational.

**Walter**: So this was the security tape from two weeks ago. Place was still open then. As you can see by the timestamp, it's just after midnight.

**Emily**: There's no one in the building, not even a janitor or security guard?

**Walter**: Not at midnight.

**Emily**: And this is when it happened?

**Walter**: Yeah. Here, I queued it up. (long pause) That's what I'm talking about.

**Emily**: Interesting.​

**Alex**: Okay. I'm going to describe what I saw on that tape. It was typical security camera footage, camera angled down from a high corner facing the lobby. There was nothing, just a set of doors. Then... one of the doors opened. Slowly. By itself.​
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**Emily**: That's not an automatic door?

**Walter**: No, ma'am. Here, take a look at the other angle.

**Emily**: That's the rear lobby.

**Walter**: Same doors, different angle.

**Emily**: It's empty.

**Walter**: Yes, ma'am.

**Alex**: Walter showed us the footage from the camera facing the rear lobby. Basically the reverse angle of the other tape. We're seeing both sides simultaneously, and the door just opens. Slowly. By itself. Even now as I'm describing what I saw, I'm getting goosebumps. We went to examine the door for ourselves. It wasn't automatic. Walter had to leave so he left us to lock up. An excited Dumont spoke with Donnie and Tina in hushed tones while I stood there, going over every scary thing I'd heard about or imagined about mental health living conditions in the early 20th century.

**Alex**: So, what do you think is going on?

**Emily**: Clearly something is present here.

**Alex**: Clearly?

**Emily**: Well, this door is too heavy to be moved by wind or another force.

**Alex**: Do you think it might be supernatural?

**Donnie**: Definitely. EMF readings were off the charts.

**Alex**: Do you think it might be the ghost of one of the typhoid victims?

**Emily**: Well, I don't want to jump to conclusions.

**Alex**: Of course not.

**Emily**: It could be a spirit. What you refer to as a ghost. Maybe a patient. But it could also be a nurse or a doctor. Or it might be a lesser entity, a vortex or portal spirit.

**Alex**: Is there any way to find out?

**Emily**: There is.

**Alex**: How?

**Emily**: We ask them.

**Alex**: And ask them we did, after the break.

(interstitial music)

**Alex**: The five of us stood in the main room near the door. On his way back from the car with equipment, Donnie claimed to see an apparition. And old man in the credit union window. More about this later.

Donnie set two flashlights on the floor, one with a red gel, one blue. Apparently this is a common ghost hunting or clairvoyant thing. They were going to talk to the spirit through the lights. Donnie turned on the flashlights and unscrewed the tops just enough to turn them off. The idea being, if the spirit wants to talk, it can touch or push the top of the light and that will turn the light back on. We were standing in the middle of a dark room where a scary old mental hospital once stood. I was getting suitably freaked out.

**Donnie**: If I can get everybody to stand around the lights in a circle? Thank you.

**Tina**: It won't take the spirits much energy to turn the flashlights on and off.

**Alex**: So, we're all standing there... waiting. There was a small amount of moonlight shining through the window, enough to see the flashlights on the floor and the outlines of everyone. It was quite a mood.

**Emily**: My name is Emily Dumont. I'd like to be able to speak with you. Could you turn one of the lights on?

**Alex**: And the red light switches on. We were looking right at it. There was clearly nobody touching it. Crazy.

**Emily**: Thank you. Please turn it off.

**Alex**: And then, after a moment... it was off.

**Emily**: Okay. Now I'd like the blue light to be yes, and the red light to be no.

**Alex**: And then she told the spirit that she wanted the blue light for yes...

**Emily**: Is this okay with you?

**Alex**: And the red light for no.

**Emily**: Blue for yes. Red for no.

**Alex**: The blue light flashed on, just for a moment. I have to admit, it was kind of terrifying.

**Man**: We went over every inch of that place in advance for light switches, for remotes. And we watched Donnie and Tina very closely, they didn't move at all.

**Alex**: That's my producer, Nic. He was just as freaked out as I was.

**Nic**: There had to be some explanation. I mean, we had to be over a flight path, or could it be maybe like, rumble from an underground pipe?

**Alex**: I don't think an underground pipe would explain what happened next.

**Emily**: Oh my god. Was that the door?

(loud clattering and commotion)

**Alex**: Okay. (laughs) You want to tell them what happened, Nic?

**Nic**: Okay, so (laughs) the batteries died in the Zoom recorder, so I went back to get my phone so I could use that to record instead. I tripped over the case for some ghost hunting equipment, and I fell over.

**Alex**: (laughs) It scared us all a little bit!

**Nic**: I don't know what they're doing, but those flashlights, they came off and on. And that door opening on its own, that was pretty convincing.

**Alex**: And just like that, I was officially ghost hunting.

**Alex**: Both Dumont and Donnie said that they saw the apparition of an old man walking around the room. Could there be someone or something haunting that credit union? There's still one more twist in the story. I'm Alex Reagan, this is The Black Tapes Podcast, stay with us.

**Alex**: Hi

**Woman**: Hi

**Alex**: How are you?

**Woman**: Great.

**Alex**: Good, good. Do you mind if we record this?

**Woman**: What's it for?

**Alex**: Oh, sorry (laughs). I'm Alex Reagan, I was a producer on Pacific Northwest Stories for a few years. I still do a bit of work there, but I'm focused on a new project now. It's a podcast about interesting people with interesting jobs.

**Woman**: I love Pacific Northwest Stories. My friend was interviewed for that one that they ended up making into that karate movie.

**Alex**: (laughs) Cool! Yeah, I left a few messages for Jenna, is she here?

**Woman**: Have a seat. I'll check.

**Alex**: Thank you.

**Alex**: Jenna Yeats is Richard Strand's publisher. I sat down with her to talk about Strand.

**Jenna**: How can I help?

**Alex**: A half hour sit-down interview with Richard Strand.

**Jenna**: For the radio?

**Alex**: It's a new podcast.

**Jenna**: You're a producer on Pacific Northwest Stories?

**Alex**: Yes. Well, I was. I still help them out every once in awhile.

**Jenna**: We listen, my husband and I, every week.

**Alex**: Ahh. (pause) So, is Dr. Strand available?

**Jenna**: I'm afraid he's not doing interviews currently.

**Alex**: Is there any way you could call him and plead my case?

**Jenna**: No promises. But I'll see what I can do.

**Alex**: Thank you.

**Strand**: Hello, I'm returning one of 11 calls from somebody named... Alex Reagan? It's Richard Strand. Okay, goodbye.

**Alex**: And so, after dozens of calls, emails, and countless messages, I was finally in a room Dr. Richard Strand.
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**Strand**: Is this okay?

**Alex**: Yeah, anywhere works.

**Strand**: What kind of article is this?

**Alex**: It's for the radio.

**Strand**: People still listen to the radio?

**Alex**: It's digital. On demand. Yeah, people do still listen actually.

**Strand**: Okay. What do you want to know?

**Alex**: Dr. Richard Strand is a tall man, good looking, confident, with a perpetual wry smile and cool blue eyes that betray a sharp intelligence. He's a man who doesn't like to waste time or words. And he just looks like he knows something that the rest of us can't quite understand. He has degrees in religion, and mythology, and psychology from Yale. He formally opened the Strand Institute in 1998.

**Alex**: Well, you have degrees in religion and psychology. Did you study the paranormal, parapsychology?

**Strand**: They don't offer degrees in those subjects.

**Alex**: Why not?

**Strand**: As soon as you apply scientific method to the paranormal, it vanishes.

**Alex**: Hm. Can you tell me about the Strand Institute?

**Strand**: The talking point everyone seems most interested in is the reward.

**Alex**: Oh, the one million dollars for any evidence of the supernatural or paranormal?

**Strand**: That's correct.

**Alex**: Has anybody tried to claim that money?

**Strand**: Thousands of them.

**Alex**: And?

**Strand**: Nobody's even come close.

**Alex**: Really?

**Strand**: There hasn't been one actual case of anything magical, supernatural, or paranormal ever happening on this planet.

**Alex**: Okay, so you're saying unequivocally, that there's no such thing as ghosts.

**Strand**: Isn't there enough wonder and beauty in the world without having to invent magical mythical creatures and spirits to enhance it? I understand humanity's need to assuage our fear of mortality. But if we spent half the money we spent on religion on science? We'd have a colony on Mars and we probably would have cured death and aging by now.

**Alex**: (long pause, footsteps, rustling) What are these?

**Alex**: Dr. Strand has a bookcase filled with hundreds of white VHS cases. For our younger listeners, these are hard plastic cases big enough to hold a VHS tape. Roughly 8 inches by 5 inches. Each one of Strand's tape cases is labelled with a name. Interesting names, like the Poltergeists Dinner, The Haunting of Mr. and Mr. Smith, and The Witch of Wal-Mart 5.

**Alex**: What's in the VHS boxes?

**Strand**: Those are solved cases.

**Alex**: That's quite a bit since 1998.

**Strand**: This is just the last two years.

**Alex**: Wow, that's a lot.

**Strand**: That's pretty standard for us.

**Alex**: And by solved you mean debunked?

**Strand**: That's correct.

**Alex**: May I?

**Strand**: Go ahead.

**Alex**: Inside the VHS case was a USB stick, a DVD, a bunch of index cards, and some photographs. The VHS case worked perfectly as compact storage for everything inside. This particular case appeared to involve some kind of UFO or ghost sightings.

**Alex**: So, you use all of this technology, the scopes, meters, and recorders, the way the ghost hunters do?

**Strand**: Sometimes it's a matter of someone simply telling a story. Making it up. In those cases, equipment isn't much help. In other situations, we do use technology. But not quite the way those people you refer to as ghost hunters use it.

**Alex**: What's this stuff?

**Strand**: These are spectrometers. Over here we have electromagnetics.

**Alex**: What are these?

**Strand**: Nothing.

**Alex**: At this point, Dr. Strand shut down our interview... nicely. He was polite, and generously offered a follow up call if I had any additional questions. I did have additional questions. Questions based on something I saw in Dr. Strand's equipment room. More on that after the break.

**Alex**: I called Dr. Strand a few days later for the followup he promised.

**Alex**: Thanks so much for taking the time.

**Strand**: You're welcome.

**Alex**: I want to play something on my computer.

**Strand**: Over the phone?

**Alex**: If that's okay.

**Strand**: Fine.

**Man**: Have you ever come across a case where you couldn't find a scientific or rational explanation?

**Strand**: (pause) No.

**Man**: What about the Sagamore?

(rumbling and commotion)

**Alex**: What happened in that auditorium?

**Strand**: There was a low rumbling sound, and then the lights went out.

**Alex**: Right after somebody mentioned something called the Sagamore?

**Strand**: That's right.

**Alex**: You claim that it was a coincidence.

**Strand**: It was.

**Alex**: What's the Sagamore?

**Strand**: It's a hotel, a resort in New York State.

**Alex**: And did something happen there?

**Strand**: There've been numerous claims of hauntings, including lights flickering and deep rumbling sounds.

**Alex**: Were you able to debunk them?

**Strand**: (pause) Yes. (pause) (clears throat)

**Alex**: Well, I think we've got everything. But I do have to ask one small favor.

**Strand**: Go ahead.

**Alex**: My assistant's equipment was stolen and we lost your photo, the one we took for our website? (pause) It will only take a few minutes. I'll be in and out, you'll barely notice I'm there.

**Strand**: (pause) Fine.

**Alex**: I wasn't being completely honest with Strand. We did need another photo for the website, but my producers told me we were fine using his standard publicity picture. What I really wanted to do was get another look at something I saw in his equipment room. A row of numbered black VHS cases. It was when I asked Strand about those tapes that he shut down our interview. I wanted to know more.

**Alex**: Thanks again for taking the time.

**Strand**: No problem at all.

**Alex**: I have something I'd like you to look at, if you have a moment. It's a ghost.

**Strand**: Really.

**Alex**: It's pretty convincing.

**Strand**: People are easily convinced.

**Alex**: I don't know about that. This is pretty good.

**Alex**: My ambush worked. Dr. Strand agreed to take a look at the footage from the credit union.

**Strand**: What's the event site?

**Alex**: Manteno Illinois.

**Strand**: The Manteno State Hospital.

**Alex**: You know your hauntings.

**Strand**: Let's say alleged hauntings.

**Alex**: It's actually a building located on part of the old hospital site.

**Alex**: I showed Strand the footage of the door mysteriously moving on its own, along with some footage my producer Nic took using his phone. Nic focused his camera on Dumont and her team's use of their highly advanced ghost hunting equipment, the flashlight stuff, the whole deal.

**Alex**: What do you think?

**Strand**: It's an automatic door. A trick switch somewhere.

**Alex**: The manager assured us that it wasn't.

**Strand**: Mmhmm.

**Alex**: Okay, what about Ms. Dumont and her team? They claimed significant indicators of paranormal motion.

**Strand**: I'm sure they did. Let's function on their level for a moment.

**Alex**: Okay.

**Strand**: In purely scientific terms, which is something Emily Dumont knows very little about, their readings are completely invalid.

**Alex**: Why?

**Strand**: That guy holding the EMF meter...

**Alex**: Donnie.

**Strand**: Sure, Donnie. He's moving. He's waving the meter around like a lunatic.

**Alex**: So?

**Strand**: So, an Electromagnetic field meter needs to be set in one place and left alone. Dr. Dumont is getting lazy.

**Alex**: What is this?

**Strand**: Cell tower locations in the area.

**Alex**: And they're significant why?

**Strand**: EMF readings are compromised by a high volume of cell phone traffic.

**Alex**: Is this a high traffic area?

**Strand**: This area is one of the busiest cell tower cross ping zones in the state. You can't trust EMF readings here.

**Alex**: Mmm. What about the door?

**Strand**: The most important part of a paranormal investigation is history. The history of people and places. Let's start with places. (typing)

**Alex**: What are you looking for?

**Strand**: George Crookshank owns the land that used to house the mental hospital.

**Alex**: If you say so.

**Alex**: Strand was like The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo on that laptop. He was clearly somebody who spent a lot of time researching this kind of stuff. He dug up an article about Mr. Crookshank trying to skirt heritage laws. He wanted to tear down an old house. When they wouldn't let him, he rebelled and turned the place into a haunted house attraction. That house became the haunted mansion of Beale Street. Every Halloween the place was packed. The neighbors gave in and let him tear it down. I guess they didn't like a good ghost story.

**Strand**: What if Crookshank was trying to do something similar with the old strip mall?

**Alex**: That feels like a bit of a stretch.

**Strand**: Maybe. But I found that article along with the EMF readings in 15 minutes.

**Alex**: What about the flashlights?

**Alex**: I knew I had him on this one. I was there. There's no way they could have been messing with those lights. They were plain old three dollar flashlights. No high tech chicanery there.

**Strand**: It's simple physics. Heat. Expansion and contraction. People like Emily Dumont and those reality television ghost hunters use this trick all the time. It's very common. When you turn a flashlight on the bulb gets very hot. Then you unscrew the lid just a little until it turns off. Inside that really hot flashlight is a little bit of plastic that expanded when it was hot. Now that the light is off, that plastic cools and contracts and pushes two little bits of metal together to form a circuit.

**Alex**: The light goes on.

**Strand**: And when it heats up enough again, off.

**Alex**: The ghost hunter set us up?

**Strand**: Maybe. But in my experience isn’t usually just apophenia.

**Alex**: Apophenia?

**Strand**: They really just want to believe, and to that end they force supernatural meaning into meaningless events and patterns.

**Alex**: Wow. I couldn't help feeling a bit... let down at such a simple logical explanation. With very little effort, Strand cast a great deal of doubt on our haunted credit union. And he wasn't finished.

**Strand**: They told you they saw an apparition?

**Alex**: An old man.

**Strand**: Show them an old photo of somebody's great grandfather. Tell them that he was a patient who died in that room. I'll be you tell you they recognize him.

**Alex**: I was surprised. I didn't want it to be true. But in the interest of getting to the truth, I took his suggestion.

**Alex**: So, we dug up a photo of a man who died in the east wing of the hospital, right about where you and Donnie saw the apparition.

**Emily**: That's him. That's the man I saw.

**Alex**: Are you sure?

**Emily:** Positive. I'd recognize him anywhere.

**Alex**: Dr. Strand was right. I did have more questions about the mysterious credit union door, but I wanted to steer the conversation in a different direction. The mysterious black tape cases in that back room.

**Alex**: So, if people in places are the key to most of these things, what's with all the high tech ghost hunting equipment? That stuff can't be cheap.

**Strand**: (laughs) It's definitely not cheap. We need to keep up to date with the latest technology so we know how everything works and how the data can be manipulated.

**Alex**: What's the difference between these white tape cases and the single row of black tapes in your equipment room?

**Strand**: Those are cases we don't have the resources or technology to disprove. Yet.

**Alex**: Yet being the operative word?

**Strand**: Exactly.

**Alex**: Can I take a look?

**Alex**: This was it. The point of no return. I felt like Jack Lemon's Shelley “The Machine” Levene from Glengarry Glen Ross holding out his pen for the Nyborgs to sign. It felt like we sat in that office in silence forever. And then, Strand finally broke the spell. I'm Alex Reagan. You're listening to the Black Tapes Podcast. Stay with us.

(chattering, children playing)

**Alex**: I'm looking at old Super 8 footage of a boy's birthday party. There's nothing outstanding about it. Pretty standard stuff. No bouncy castles or magicians, and certainly no scary clowns. But I should back up a bit. Dr. Strand eventually agreed to let me take a look at one of the unsolved, he would say say unsolved yet, cases from that mysterious row of plastic black VHS containers that I'm going to refer to as the black tapes from this point forward. And yes, this is how we came up with the name of our podcast. It looks like there were around a dozen or so VHS cases on that shelf. This birthday party is from what we're calling tape number one.

(children laughing and playing)

**Alex**: So what are we looking at here?

**Strand**: It's coming up. There.

**Alex**: What is that?

**Strand**: What do you see?

**Alex**: It's a man. More specifically, the shadow of a man. Sort of. It's a dark shadow in the background, it's standing right next to an old shed by a wire fence. It looks like a tall man wearing a hat, but it's proportions are all... wrong. It's impossibly thin. It could almost be mistaken for the shadow of a tree if it didn't look like it had arms and legs. But it's hard to tell, it's pretty grainy.

**Alex**: Okay, it's a shadow of, maybe, a man. Or a really weird looking tree?

**Strand**: (laughs)

**Alex**: What am I looking for now?

**Strand**: You'll see

(wedding vows being read by a priest)

(bride and groom saying their vows)

**Alex**: Okay, it's the same videotape, but a completely different scene. Different people altogether. It looks fairly contemporary, like it could have been shot in the last few years.

(priest reading wedding vows)

**Alex**: Okay, so I'm supposed to see something right?

**Strand**: Yes. Do you see it?

**Alex**: It's like, Where's Waldo. Is it in the foreground, background? In the pews? Where am I looking? Strand: By the organist.

**Alex**: By the organist... okay. Uh. Oh my god.

**Alex**: Okay, that shadowy figure I just described in that kids birthday party? It was there by the stage in the church, behind the organist. It had the tall skinny outline, the hat, and I swear, this time I could see something like fingers. But maybe, not? They were as long as my forearms. I don't know, but whatever it was, it looked creepy as hell.

**Alex**: So, what, people send you tapes of these shadow things?

**Strand**: Not quite. This is the wedding of Robert Torres. He lives in San Francisco, where they got married three years ago as you just saw.

**Alex**: Okay.

**Strand**: That boy in the first section lived in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, that tape was from his fifth birthday party. That was about forty years ago.

**Alex**: Okay.

**Strand**: The boy's name is Bobby.

**Alex**: So...

**Strand**: Bobby Torres.

**Alex**: Bobby is Robert Torres.

**Strand**: Yes.

**Alex**: So that shadow thing is...

**Strand**: Whatever it is, it was there when Robert was five. And it appears to be there again when Robert's 42.

**Alex**: It's following him?

**Strand**: I'm not comfortable speculating.

**Alex**: My producer Nic and I discussed it, and we're sure we have at least another episode worth of material with Richard Strand. So in lieu of our original second episode, which was going to feature me digging into the fascinating and occasionally dangerous world of geocaching, we're going to finish up our story on Richard Strand and his mysterious black tapes.

**Alex**: I'm starting to believe there are a lot of things in this world that I jut don't understand. Why would somebody spend so much time and effort, and probably a lot of money, to create a sophisticated fake child's birthday party film and then repeat the feat decades later at his wedding? Is it Torrest himself? If so, why? And who is it for?

Next week, on the Black Tapes podcast:

**Alex**: Okay, I do understand what you're saying of course, but... I don't know. I just don't feel like... I crossed a line.

**Nic:** No?

**Alex**: No! I don't think so. Do you think so?

**Alex**: You must be Sebastian.

**Sebastian**: Are you fighting with my mom?

**Alex**: Did it sound like we were fighting? We weren't. We were just talking about something very important, so our voices may have sounded worried. But we're fine.

**Sebastian** I know what you're talking about.

**Alex**: You do?

**Sebastian:** You're talking about my friend.

**Alex**: What friend?

**Sebastian**: Why are you following him?

**Alex**: Who says I'm following him?

**Sebastian** He says you don't want to meet him.

**Alex**: More on this, along with a lot more on Strand's mysterious black tapes, next week.

**Alex**: The Black Tapes Podcast is a National Radio Alliance and Minnow Beats Whale production, recorded in Seattle and Vancouver. Produced by Nic Silver, mixed and engineered by Alan Williams and Samantha Paulson. Edited by Nic Silver and Alex Reagan. Executive producers Paul Bae and Terry Miles.