**The Black Tapes**

**A Tale of Two Tapes Part 2**

(Theme song and intro)

**Alex**: This is episode two of The Black Tapes Podcast.

What started off as a Pacific Northwest Stories spin-off series featuring a weekly profile of interesting people and occupations, has turned into something else. Last week I told you this was going to be a two-part series on paranormal investigators, or ghost hunters. Over the past few weeks, a series of very interesting things happened surrounding Dr. Strand and our investigation into his work.

My producers and I sat down, and after a lot of back and forth, came to the conclusion that for the rest of this season, we're going to be telling one story. The story of Dr. Strand and his mysterious black tapes cases. We'll be telling the story in order, week to week. So if you haven't listened to episode one, go back and start there. We'll wait.

From the National Radio Alliance and Minnow Beats Whale, it's The Black Tapes Podcast. I'm Alex Reagan.

(Musical Interlude)

**Alex**: Last week we looked at two shadowy figures in two separate videos of what turned out to be one person, Robert Torres.

We're going to explore this case further, but first I'd like to bring up two things. I'll be brief, I promise. Number one, while researching the paranormal investigators for this show, my producer Nic dug up some interesting facts about the ghost hunters that we didn't include because they're not directly related to paranormal research. But because a lot of those interesting facts relate directly to Richard Strand, and because Strand has now become an integral part of this series, we're going to meet later this week to discuss whether or not we want to pursue or reveal the information we dug up on this podcast. The second thing is directly related to my work as the host of this show.

**Nic**: I just, I think it's something we need to address.

**Alex**: That's my producer, Nic. I'm not going to bury the lead. He's concerned I may have coerced Dr. Strand into allowing us access to his black tapes cases.

**Nic**: I just think, ethically speaking, that a line may have been, well, not exactly crossed, but maybe... things got a bit edgy?

**Alex**: Okay, I'm looking at two separate sections of the journalistic ethics code. The first, "journalists should not use subterfuge to gain access to information intended to be private." The next section, "avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information unless traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public."

**Nic**: (laughing) Subterfuge?

**Alex**: That's what it says! I'm not making it up.

**Nic**: I don't know, Alex. “Vital to the public”?

**Alex**: (sighs) 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?

**Nic**: No. I don't. Well, I'm pretty sure I agree with you. But, devil's advocate, couldn't somebody make a claim that the way you gained access to these black tapes was... a little unethical?

**Alex**: I don't know. I don't feel like... I don't think it was.

**Nic**: I don't think so either. I just thought it was worth a conversation.

**Alex**: I understand why Nic felt he had to say something. It has to do with two things. The first thing, I asked him to. While we were outlining the type of show we wanted to do, I made Nic promise that he would challenge every single aspect of each story. And in particular, my approach and attention to detail regarding research and point of view. Second, there were those interesting facts I mentioned in the opening regarding Strand and whether or not we would introduce those facts into the story. More on that later.

Now, regarding my journalistic integrity, we went back and forth and in the end, we agreed that I would come clean with Strand about tricking him into getting him to show me the black tapes. But Strand didn't care. He said that I had nothing to apologize for, and that he's not actually that easy to manipulate. Fair enough. He agreed that I could ask him some more questions regarding the black tapes.

**Strand**: What else would you like to know?

**Alex**: Well, if you can't solve these black tape cases, don't you owe somebody a million dollars?

**Strand**: I can't solve them to my satisfaction yet. And no, the burden of proof isn't on the institute. In the end, there's a scientific explanation for everything.

**Alex**: You're pretty sure about that?

**Strand**: Yes. Certainly until somebody proves otherwise.

**Alex**: What about the case we looked at? The Robert Torres films?

**Strand**: That footage is third or fourth generation. The geography of the rooms is unclear. There are a lot of technical questions.

**Alex**: I was wondering if you would be willing to explore that particular case a bit further.

**Strand**: Mr. Torres wasn't amenable to going any further.

**Alex**: Well, my producers got in touch with him. He's interested in reopening the case, so to speak.

**Alex**: Strand asked that we stop recording for a moment, and we had a discussion about the history of the Strand Institute's involvement in the Torres case. Mr. Torres agreed to an interview and, in the end, my producers and I were able to convince Strand to come along. It didn't take all that much convincing. Which leads me to believe Strand may have been feeling a bit conflicted about the way things ended in San Francisco. Apparently, Mr. Torres was not at all happy with the Strand Institute's inability to disprove the film's seemingly paranormal events. Strand says he didn't think Torres was after the reward money. And in fact, Strand says Torres never brought it up. I'll let you decide for yourselves.

Coming up on The Black Tapes Podcast, we go to San Francisco. I'm Alex Reagan, stay with us.

**Alex**: Hi, thanks for meeting with us.

**Robert**: You're welcome. Dr. Strand.

**Strand**: Robert.

**Robert**: Please come in.

**Alex**: Thanks.

**Robert**: Make yourself at home.

**Alex**: Torres agreed to meet us in his home just south of San Francisco in the suburb of Cupertino. He works in the finance department of a tech firm just outside Silicon Valley. His hair has a bit more gray than someone in his mid-forties would normally have, and he has the look of someone who doesn't sleep well, and probably hasn't for a long time. It became apparent immediately that he and Strand had some history. Their relationship seemed strained.

**Alex**: So, Dr. Strand showed me your tapes, the birthday party...

**Robert**: And the wedding.

**Strand**: How is Maria doing?

**Robert**: Not good.

**Strand**: And Sebastian?

**Robert**: With Maria.

**Alex**: I think I should take you back to the beginning, just to clean up the timeline a little. Robert Torres, the man in the two films on Strand's black tape, started experiencing strange events shortly after his marriage to Maria. They consulted a host of paranormal experts, including Lorraine Warren. And every single expert agreed: the couple were being haunted by a malevolent spirit. They referred to the shadows in the two videos as proof. Torres wasn't convinced and called Strand. Torres described some of the events that prompted that initial call.

**Robert**: I was working late. It was our corporate year end, so I had to get our taxes in order. Except for the night janitor who was working on the floor above me, I was alone in the building. And as I was locking my office door I heard something coming from the far end of the hallway.

**Alex**: Can you describe that sound?

**Robert**: It sounded like a fan, like something electronic.

**Alex**: Did you recognize it?

**Robert**: Yeah.

**Alex**: What was it?

**Robert**: It was the microwave.

**Alex**: And what happened next?

**Robert**: I walked down to the lunch room and I turned on the light. There was nobody there, but the microwave was on, it was cooking… nothing. There was nothing in it.

**Alex**: There was nobody there?

**Robert**: Just me.

**Strand**: You're certain you were alone?

**Robert**: Absolutely.

**Strand**: How can you be sure?

**Robert**: I spoke with the night janitor on my way out. He'd already cleaned that wing of the building, there was nobody but me. And there was something else.

**Alex**: What?

**Robert**: As I was leaving, he asked me if my friend was gonna be staying, and if so, he would need to sign in.

**Alex**: You said you were working alone.

**Robert**: I was.

**Alex**: So, what friend was he talking about?

**Robert**: The tall man.

**Alex**: He said, "the tall man"?

**Robert**: He said he could see me working in my office from the second floor of the wing, directly across the courtyard from my office. He said he saw two of us in my office, me and "the tall man."

**Alex**: But you were alone, all night.

**Robert**: Absolutely.

**Alex**: Did this happen a lot?

**Robert**: This happened all the time. Appliances turning on, random banging noises, I can't tell you the amount of times people thought I was with somebody when I was clearly alone.

**Alex**: Did you feel like you were being followed?

**Robert**: Yes.

**Alex**: How long did this go on for?

**Robert**: For at least a year.

**Alex**: What about Maria?

**Robert**: Maria, she heard things too. Voices when nobody was home. Sometimes she would lose time, an hour here or there. It was her, it was Maria who decided to call the priest and eventually the paranormal investigators.

**Alex**: And it was Maria who noticed the shadows in your wedding video, and your birthday party film?

**Robert**: Yeah, that's right. She was reasonable about the whole thing at first. Pragmatic. She treated it like a cockroach infestation, or termites. But that didn't last. And pretty soon she was... acting different. Crazy. She became convinced that there were demons in our house. She would chant and burn sage. I honestly thought she was gonna have a nervous breakdown.

**Alex**: And that's when you called Dr. Strand?

**Robert**: Yeah. It didn't take him long to figure out that we were experiencing what he called um, what was that again?

**Strand**: Apophenia.

**Robert**: Apophenia.

**Alex**: Yeah, Dr. Strand once told me I was experiencing the same thing.

**Strand**: It's not uncommon.

**Alex**: Could you please define apophenia again, for our listeners?

**Strand**: It's the mind's need to make sense of random things. To create patterns no matter how spurious the connection. It's what makes people believe they hear demonic voices when playing certain rock albums backwards. It's what makes the sports fan convinced that something he or she does can affect the outcome of the game.

**Alex**: What happened after Dr. Strand became involved?

**Robert**: Well, things were...

**Strand**: Sorry, centering everything around my team's arrival might be creating connections for the audience that aren't legitimately there.

**Alex**: Fair enough. Okay, um.  Around the time Dr. Strand was looking into your case, something changed, didn't it?

**Robert**: Yeah. Things were... different for me. I no longer felt like I was being followed, I didn't hear any strange noises, things were... calm, at least at first.

**Alex**: But Maria still wasn't convinced?

**Robert**: No. Things had become very strained between us. She was consulting psychics, mediums, spending a lot of money. We fought a lot. I told her what Dr. Strand said, that it was just... apoph... phenia. She wouldn't listen, she was really worried about our son.

**Alex**: Had something started happening? With Sebastian?

**Robert**: Yes.

**Alex**: So, to clarify. Torres and his girlfriend at the time, Maria, had a child named Sebastian. They got married when Sebastian was three years old. He was ring bearer at his parents' wedding ceremony. Trust me, if you could see the video, that kid is really cute. The strange tall shadow in the background, not as cute.

Robert Torres mentioned that things stopped happening to him around the time Strand finished his investigation. I think it's fair to say Strand's investigation was inconclusive, at least as far as Maria was concerned. So things stopped happening to Robert, but things didn't stop... happening.

**Robert**: We moved into this place. It's much bigger, we had the yard. We were gonna get a dog. I hoped things would get better, you know, more space, a change of scenery. But I noticed something was wrong almost immediately. Maria was getting worse.

**Alex**: This was after Dr. Strand had completed his investigation and went back to Chicago?

**Robert**: Yeah, that's right.

(shuffling, a door opens)

**Alex**: This is Sebastian's room?

**Robert**: Yeah. Our room, my room, is down at the end of the hall. First time I remember it happening was around 11:00 at night, Maria and I were watching TV. She went to check on Sebastian and I heard her scream. I ran in, I saw her holding onto Sebastian, and he was crying.

**Alex**: What made her scream?

**Robert**: She said she saw someone standing over his bed, Sebastian's bed.

**Alex**: What did that someone look like?

**Robert**: She said it was a tall person dressed in black. Freakishly tall, she said his head almost touched the ceiling.

**Strand**: His?

**Robert**: She wasn't sure, his back was to her. She thinks it was a man.

**Strand**: So she really didn't get a good look.

**Robert**: She turned the light on, and he, it, whatever, disappeared.

**Strand**: Maria knows what the shadow looks like on both your wedding video and your birthday party film. She may have just transferred the shadow from you to Sebastian.

**Robert**: She wouldn't make this up, Dr. Strand. She would never frighten Sebastian like that.

**Alex**: You said there was more than one uh, event?

**Robert**: Yeah.

**Robert**: She was giving Sebastian a bath in here. In the middle of it she said she felt someone behind her. When she looked, it was that thing in black standing here in the doorway. It almost gave her a heart attack.

**Strand**: I don't suppose you recorded any of this?

**Robert**: Of course not. I just wanted it to stop.

**Alex**: Did you consider calling Dr. Strand at this point?

**Robert**: Maria wouldn't let me. She was pretty upset at this point.

**Alex**: Did she provide any other details about what she saw?

**Robert**: Not really. She starting calling it “the shadow man.”

**Strand**: How many more of these events were there?

**Robert**: I think maybe, five, six, seven.

**Strand**: Where is Maria living now?

**Robert**: Los Gatos, about fifteen minutes from here.

**Strand**: When did she move?

**Robert**: Not long after we moved here into the new house.

**Strand**: I'm sorry.

**Robert**: Yeah, you should be. The other paranormal investigators called it evil, said it was a, a, malevent spirit.

**Strand**: Malevolent.

**Robert**: Whatever it was, you told me you'd prove that they were just shadows, that there was nothing to be afraid of.

**Alex**: How many other paranormal investigators did you speak with?

**Robert**: All of them.

**Strand**: These things are just... shadows. A trick of the light.

**Robert**: And the shadow man at my wedding?

**Strand**: Same thing.

**Robert**: “Just coincidence.”

**Strand**: That's right.

**Robert**: And Sebastian? That's... that's a lot of coincidence.

**Strand**: Was Maria under a lot of pressure at the time? Maybe trouble at work?

**Robert**: I didn't believe her at the time, I thought she was becoming unbalanced. I believed you when you told me you could prove that it wasn't evil.

**Strand**: Your wife believes these shadows are more than what they are. The burden of proof lies with whoever is claiming the existence of something outside the natural world. She's bending reality to her preconceived ideas, she's seeing these shadows around Sebastian because she expects to see them.

**Robert**: (pause) You were supposed to help us.

**Strand**: There is nothing paranormal about those shadows. Your wife chose to believe something else. It's a choice, I can't force her to believe me.

**Robert**: Please. Stop. Talking.

**Alex**: Mr. Torres?

**Robert**: Yeah.

**Alex**: Have you ever seen these shadows around yourself or Sebastian?

**Robert**: No, never. I mean, not outside of the films and photographs.

**Alex**: It was difficult listening to Torres talk about his marriage. He looked helpless. When he looked at Strand, that helplessness turned to anger. His wife was convinced that these shadow figures were real, and that they were after their son. Torres wanted her to seek psychiatric help but she was insulted that he didn't believe her. This caused a lot of friction in their marriage and led to their eventual separation. I got the sense that Torres was actually more worried about his son than his wife. I think he's terrified that the shadow man is real, and that it's following his son. They had their home exorcised and prayed over countless times, but Maria’s visions didn't stop. In the end, she blamed Torres. Said that he gave the shadow man to Sebastian. She moved out, taking their son with her.

**Alex**: Do you still have the original film of your birthday party?

**Robert**: Yes.

**Alex**: Could we see it?

**Robert**: If the bulb on the projector still works.

**Alex**: The bulb didn't work. But we were able to dig one up. Torres' reel-to-reel film projector was the kind they used to use in public high schools: really ancient. He threaded the 8mm film and let it play.

(sound of reel, children playing)

**Alex**: There.

**Robert**: Yes.

**Alex**: Maybe it was the sound of the film projector, but seeing it like this made it feel more... real? Creepier, if that's possible. And it was even clearer that there was someone or something standing at the back of their yard. Looking at the original footage, it's obvious that whoever standing back there is pretty tall. Maybe seven feet, or more. When Strand showed me the video, I thought it might be the shadow of a tree. But now I'm not sure. Up close like this, it really doesn't look like the shadow of a tree.

(sound of reel, children playing)

**Alex**: Do you have the original wedding footage as well?

**Robert**: I do, somewhere. But that was videotape, so it looks just like the copy I sent Dr. Strand.

**Alex**: Can we see it?

**Robert**: You can do whatever you want, but I'm not watching that again.

**Alex**: Of-of course. I'm sorry.

**Robert**: You have nothing to be sorry about.

**Alex**: At this point, he glared at Strand.

**Robert**: Have you ever been married?

**Alex**: No, not me. I know because my mother reminds me every Sunday.

**Robert**: How 'bout you, Dr. Strand?

**Strand**: (pause) No.

**Robert**: I’m not surprised.

**Alex**: I asked Strand if he thought the film was doctored. He told me that the experts he used to examine that film were the best forensic tech team in North America. That Super 8 footage was real. It just comes down to a matter of perspective. Do you see a shadow, or a person? We'll come back to this. But first, Dr. Strand and I visit Torres' wife Maria and son Sebastian in Los Gatos.

I'm Alex Reagan. And you're listening to The Black Tapes Podcast. Stay with us.

(Musical Interlude)

**Alex**: Los Gatos is small. Just south of Cupertino, it's a walking size town. Would probably take you 20 minutes to cover it end-to-end. It's quaint. Maria and her son were renting a small bungalow on the edge of town near the highway. She seemed a little surprised by our request for a visit, but she was as welcoming as one could expect under these circumstances.

**Strand**: Maria.

**Maria**: Dr. Strand.

**Alex**: Hi, Maria. I'm Alex Reagan. Nice to meet you.

**Maria**: From the radio?

**Alex**: Well, yeah. This is for a podcast, but, yeah. Digital radio on demand.

**Strand**: We just came from Robert's house in San Francisco.

**Maria**: (sighs)

(door closes)

**Maria**: I don't want Sebastian hearing this.

**Strand**: How is Sebastian?

**Maria**: He's okay, all things considered. How's Robert? (pause) Uh, never mind. I know how he is, forget I asked. So what happened to the rest of your team?

**Strand**: I've taken a bit of a sabbatical. I haven't been doing anything but writing for the last few years.

**Maria**: I see.

**Alex**: Maria is the kind of woman you want on your side in the event of a zombie apocalypse: no nonsense. Street smart and strong. Her eyes are narrow, but open incredibly wide when she wants you to know what she's saying is important. Whatever madness or temporary madness she was going through at home was gone. Although, there is a bit of world weariness around the edges. Her kitchen is spare and functional. She clearly has a thing for roosters.

**Alex**: Could you tell us, in your words, what you believe is happening in the films and videos?

**Maria**: It's been following Sebastian.

**Strand**: What do you mean, "following"?

**Maria**: At school. I wait for him outside so we can walk home together, and sometimes I see ... it across the street. It's waiting for him too.

**Strand**: Have you recorded this event? Maybe on a smartphone or similar?

**Maria**: No.

**Strand**: Did anyone else report seeing it?

**Maria**: They pretend not to.

**Strand**: I'd like to take a look at some photographs or video of Sebastian if you don't mind.

**Maria**: You can't.

**Alex**: Mrs. Torres...

**Maria**: Rodriguez.

**Alex**: Mrs... Er, Ms. Rodriguez, I promise we'll be very respectful. We just want to see if there's anything similar to what we're seeing on the tape in any of those photos.

**Maria**: (pause) I don't have any.

**Alex**: Any what?

**Maria**: Photographs.

**Alex**: You mean, you don't ha- you don't have any photographs of Sebastian?

**Maria**: No.

**Alex**: Could we look at some videos, maybe?

**Maria**: I don't have anything.

**Alex**: Well (sighs) are you sure there's nothing?

**Maria**: I deleted, burned, and threw everything away.

**Strand**: Everything?

**Maria**: It was in all of them.

**Alex**: What could make a mother delete every single photograph of her child? First day of school? Trips to the grandparents? Those are keepers. No pictures on her phone? Nothing framed in the hall? Something is definitely way off here. Is it possible that there was something in every photo? Or has all of the stress and pressure caused some kind of mental or emotional collapse? Maybe her getting rid of the photographs was her way of exorcising part of this thing. Her way of coping with the impossible. She told us that she didn't want Sebastian seeing anything scary. Fair enough. I suppose.

**Maria**: You still think I'm seeing things.

**Strand**: I didn't say that.

**Maria**: You think I'm crazy, but I know what I see.

**Alex**: Do you talk to Sebastian about it?

**Maria**: Never. I don't want to worry him.

**Strand**: That's understandable.

**Maria**: You don't know what's understandable, Dr. Strand. You still think I'm crazy. You all do. You can't see him because it's not you he wants.

**Alex**: Who are you talking about?

**Maria**: Don't act like you don't know. You just want to make me sound crazy for your radio show.

**Alex**: I would never, Ms. Torres... Rodriguez. Please, I'm genuinely interested in what you have to say about all of this.

**Maria**: (pause) Come with me.

**Maria**: It's back here.

(door creaking)

**Maria**: There.

**Alex**: What is that?

**Maria**: You see now?

**Alex**: She opened up Sebastian's closet, and there at the back behind his clothing was a black image or smudge. It looked like it was burned into the back of the wall. But if you followed the darker outlines, it looked vaguely like the outline of a face. Kind of like the face in Munch's The Scream, but painted by a child in black charcoal. It was definitely eerie in light of everything being talked about. But, to be frank, if you'd pointed that image out to me at any other location, I'd say it was probably a black mold stain.

**Strand**: Did your son draw that?

**Maria**: Does this look like something a child would draw?

**Strand**: To be honest, yes.

**Maria**: (scoffs) Why would Sebastian deface the back of his closet? He is a good boy.

**Strand**: I'm sure he is. But children all kinds of dark images. It doesn't mean that they're unhappy or bad in some way.

**Maria**: Sebastian didn't draw that... thing. You know he didn't.

**Alex**: Maria went into some personal medical details about her son, and we thought it best not to disclose this information since it bore little relevance to the case. But as you can probably hear, things were getting tense. Strand had to return to Chicago, but my flight home was still two days away. I decided to do a little digging online.

**Woman**: My wife and I listen to Pacific Northwest Stories all the time. When is it gonna air?

**Alex**: This isn't for Pacific Northwest Stories, it's a spin off series called The Black Tapes Podcast. We're not sure exactly about the schedule, but I'll have one of our producers let you know.

**Woman**: Cool.

**Alex**: That's Susan Jefferies, I ended up speaking with Susan because of one of her Facebook albums. It was Sebastian's kindergarten. The cover photo was Sebastian's class. It was pretty standard stuff, a bunch of cute kids standing in front of a dark red curtain, the date, the teacher's name and the rest of it. One thing that was missing however, was a tall creepy shadow.

She told me that the photographer took photos of all the kids individually as well. She gave me the number for Regent Photography. I called and Wanda, the woman who took the photos that day, agreed to see me. She was out of town for the afternoon, but she said that we could meet a few hours before my flight tomorrow. I went back to Maria's to see if I could get her to open up more about her relationship with Strand. And to show her the class photo.

**Maria**: What is this?

**Alex**: It's a photo I found online, it was on Sebastian's school's Facebook page.

**Maria**: Okay. So why are you showing it to me?

**Alex**: Well, you told Dr. Strand and me that there was a shadowy figure in all of the photos of Sebastian. I'm afraid I can't see anyone in this photo except for the teacher and the students.

**Maria**: (phone ringing) I've never seen that photo before. I mean, I can't remember maybe I've seen it, but. Look, like I told you earlier. I don't want Sebastian seeing anything scary. We don't take photos any more. (phone ringing) Excuse me.

**Alex**: I wasn't sure what to make of Maria's reaction to the photo. It felt like she was telling the truth. While she was in the kitchen on the phone, Sebastian came into the living room. This was my first time meeting him.

**Alex**: You must be Sebastian.

**Sebastian**: Why 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**: Tall Paul.

**Alex**: Tall Paul? Who is that?

**Sebastian**: He doesn't like me talking about him.

**Alex**: Well, you're talking about him with me.

**Sebastian**: That's okay.

**Alex**: And why is that?

**Sebastian**: Because you can see him too.

**Alex**: Sebastian, where is Tall Paul now?

**Sebastian**: In my closet.

**Alex**: Can you show me?

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

**Alex**: Well, who says I'm following him? Sebastian, is Tall Paul in this room right now?

**Sebastian**: (pause) He says you don't want to meet him.

**Maria**: I'm sorry Ms. Reagan, but I have to get Sebastian ready, he has a dentist appointment.

**Alex**: I understand.

**Alex**: Sebastian is not your typical kid. He reminded me of those child actors they always cast in ghost movies. Those ethereal, way wise beyond their years kids. Scary kids. Or am I describing him that way because of the context? Was I experiencing what Dr. Strand calls apophenia?

If you keep talking about a shadowy figure following a child, and that child suddenly tells you he's friends with that shadowy figure and gives it a really scary name, are you going to see that kid as creepy? No matter how cute he is? I went to meet with Wanda Dugay, the photographer who took Sebastian's class photo.

**Wanda**: Yeah, I remember this photo.

**Alex**: Wanda's been with Regent Photography for six years.

**Alex**: You must take hundreds of class photos every year.

**Wanda**: (laughs) It feels like that, but it's probably more like dozens.

**Alex**: Could I see the individual photo of Sebastian Torres? I believe his mother called ahead to give us clearance.

**Wanda**: She did. Yeah, I have it right here on my laptop.

**Alex**: That's great, thank you.

**Alex**: It was a photo of Sebastian standing in front of the red curtain. Nothing creepy. A great shot, actually. He was almost smiling.

**Wanda**: Can I ask you why you're so interested in these photos?

**Alex**: Of course. We're doing a kind of profile on paranormal research.

**Wanda**: Oh, sounds interesting.

**Alex**: You have no idea. Anyway, the whole thing started with these shadow figures in these two home videos. We just wanted to rule out the same thing in any photographs.

**Wanda**: I took them out.

**Alex**: What?

**Wanda**: The shadows.

**Alex**: What do you mean?

**Wanda**: Um, Photoshop. There was something in a few of the pictures. Like a kind of a dark blur. I just went in and took it out with Photoshop, it was easy. I usually enhance the eyes a little bit anyway, it's a trade secret.

**Alex**: Which photos had the dark blur?

**Wanda**: Uh, this one, Sebastian Torres, and the class picture.

**Alex**: Could I see the originals?

**Wanda**: Sure. Yeah, I think they're on this drive. Um, yup, here we go.

**Alex**: Is that the original?

**Wanda**: Mmhmm. See look, look at this smudge. Right there?

**Alex**: Wanda brought up Sebastian's class photo, and moved the cursor over a dark stain. It was a long, vertical black smudge off to the side of the photo by Sebastian’s teacher. It was kind of hazy, like some kind of dark, thick smog. Vertical, like black steam out of a large kettle. At first I thought it was part of the fold in the dark red stage curtain behind the students. But it didn't extend all the way up to the top of the frame like the other shadows in the curtain did. It was the same with Sebastian's solo picture.

**Alex**: So what is it?

**Wanda**: I mean, to be perfectly honest these things just happen sometimes. Not as often, obviously, now that we're in digital, but they still happen. It's nothing a little Photoshop can't fix.

**Alex**: So, there was something in the photos. It didn't look at all how Maria Torres described it. But still, there was something. I have to admit, I was not expecting that. I called Dr. Strand and let him know what I discovered.

**Strand**: I'm sure there's an explanation for what happened. A lens aberration or something similar.

**Alex**: That's possible, but... Isn't it also possible that Maria Torres wasn't seeing things? There was a shadowy image in the original print of that photo.

**Strand**: That's a pretty big leap from a dark smudge on a photograph to a sinister demon following a child.

**Alex**: Maybe. But you have to admit it's a pretty strange coincidence.

**Strand**: I don't, actually. However, I do find it interesting. Did the photographer in any way suspect that stain or mark was a figure?

**Alex**: No.

**Strand**: Did you see a figure?

**Alex**: I'm not sure.

**Strand**: You're not sure because you're allowing your mind to see things based on someone else's context and bias. Had you seen that photo on its own, without ever having met Maria Torres, you'd have seen what the photographer saw, some kind of lens aberration. A mark on the photograph. That's it.

**Alex**: I don't know.

**Strand**: It's understandable. There are cases where coincidence and psychology meet in a way that allows you to consider things you never thought possible.

**Alex**: What about Robert Torres? I really don't think he wants to believe. He wasn't willing to believe, even if believing meant saving his marriage.

**Strand**: Let's try a more realistic scenario. Maybe Robert and Maria Torres were stuck in an unhappy marriage. Maybe Maria Torres is experiencing a mental breakdown, and that is the thing taking the toll on their marriage. These sightings of shadow people are simply an externalization of everything wrong in their marriage. They can't face the reality that the only thing wrong in their lives is their failing union. (pause) Hello?

**Alex**: You don't find that a bit patronizing? To reduce their experiences, which sound frightening to them, to a bad marriage?

**Strand**: I never find the truth patronizing.

**Alex**: Okay, but, in the little time I've known you, I've heard you talk about the importance of evidence. But there's very little evidence that they have a bad marriage.

**Strand**: They're separated right now, aren't they?

**Alex**: Okay. On the subject of evidence, I've seen four distinct cases of something strange in photographs and videos surrounding the Torres family. Also, there's the anecdotal evidence from all three of them.

**Strand**: I wouldn't call any of that evidence.

**Alex**: You know, you're actually bordering on condescension at this point.

**Strand**: I'm sorry, but I just don't see anything supernatural about any of this. As a journalist, I'd like to think your mind would be a little bit less... pliable.

**Alex**: (pause) I'm going to hang up now.

**Alex**: I suddenly understood why Dr. Strand makes so many enemies. I don't think he's being purposely smug, it's just that he seems to have an answer for everything. And those answers are occasionally dismissive of people's subjective experiences.

**Robert**: Have you ever been married?

**Alex**: No, not me. I know because my mother reminds me every Sunday.

**Robert**: How ‘bout you, Dr. Strand?

**Strand**: (pause) No.

**Robert**: I'm not surprised.

**Alex**: At the beginning of this episode, I mentioned that my producers dug up some information during their research into the paranormal investigators. A lot of that information related to Dr. Strand. In the end, because it wasn't directly related, we decided we weren't going to include any of that information on this show.

However, during one of our interviews in San Francisco, Dr. Strand told Robert Torres and myself that he was never married. The truth is, Strand was married. And his wife went missing under very mysterious circumstances in 1997.

Now, I suppose he might lie about something like this to protect his privacy. But if he's willing to lie about his wife, what else might he be willing to fabricate? He's been working alone for the last two years. But what happened with his former team? So far, every person we can find who worked with Strand has denied our requests for an interview. A few days after our falling out, Dr. Strand called and left a message.
​

**Strand**: Hello, Alex? It's Richard Strand. I'd like to apologize for the other day. I'll be up in Seattle next week, and if you're interested, I'm bringing along another case from my collection. From the section I believe you refer to as “the black tapes.” I think you'll find this one very interesting. Anyway, I... I hope you're well. I'll leave my information with your producers, take care.

**Alex**: Strand was right, I was interested. Very interested. And I believe I can say, without exaggeration, that what happened with the first black tape is nothing compared to what happened with tape number two.

I'm Alex Reagan. This is The Black Tapes Podcast. We'll back again 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 Bay and Terry Miles.