

Sidedoor (S10E04) – Resurrected: Spooked at the Smithsonian

Lizzie Peabody: Hello, Sidedoorables. It's October and here in DC the air is getting crisp, the leaves are falling and Halloween is just around the corner. Which is why we're sharing with you the spookiest episode of Sidedoor ever made. (And also one of my personal favorites.) I recommend listening sometime after dark. In a quiet place, with some hot tea, a blanket, and a few choice pieces of fun-sized candy close at hand. Try not to be too scared. And enjoy.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

Molly Horrocks: *This is the stairwell in question. [whispers] Here we go.*

Lizzie: *[whispers] Okay.*

Lizzie: This story begins in a stairwell, and we'll come back to that stairwell in just a moment, but first I need to tell you a little story. A little while ago, I was at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History for an interview. As I followed the curator through a staff door and into a little old elevator and down a narrow hallway toward her office, I started to wonder how it would feel to be in here alone, in the bowels of the museum, all by yourself with the long hallways and the buzzing overhead lights in the dim corners and the quiet.

Lizzie: So I asked her, "Do you ever feel ill at ease when there aren't visitors around?" "No," she said, "But I do have a colleague who saw a ghost once," totally matter of fact. We went on with our scheduled interview, but the prospect of a ghost lurking the halls of American History kept tugging at the back of my mind. I thought about it every time I visited the museum, until I decided I needed to know more about this ghost, which is why we're in a stairwell, in the National Museum of American History, with Molly Horrocks.

Molly Horrocks: *I'm the collections manager for the exhibit that's right under this staircase, "The Price of Freedom," which is an exhibit about war, basically.*

Lizzie: Molly works as the collections manager for military history. And one morning a few years ago, she came in early. She was meeting with a mount maker, somebody who builds display mounts for objects in an exhibition.

Molly Horrocks: *It was probably, like, 8:30 or so, because we like to do things when people*

aren't around. So I'm leaving my office, I've got my keys, I've got my supplies. I am meeting our mount maker at the case, which is right at the end of this stairwell.

Lizzie: As soon as she steps into the stairwell, she feels ... something.

Molly Horrocks: It was a very distinct stillness feeling. It felt like I could tell that there was something here, but, like, there was nobody here because it was silent.

Lizzie: Had it felt like this before? I mean, you've been up this stairwell, up and down, many times, right?

Molly Horrocks: Mm-hmm. It had never felt like this before. No.

Lizzie: So what happened next?

Molly Horrocks: So I'm at the point in the stairwell where I could either go up or down, and I hear, like, a sound above. Just kind of a thud, but it was enough of a sound, I knew it wasn't just like a weird building sound. Like, it got my attention. But again, I was like, I going somewhere, I didn't really think anything of it. I was just like, "Oh, that's weird. Like, whatever." So I go down the stairs, and at halfway down the stairs I'm like, "Oh, that was a little weird," because there was no sound after. I was thinking, like, "Oh, like, if there was somebody up there, like, wouldn't they have said 'Hello?'" But there was nothing. There was just silence.

Molly Horrocks: So I get to the bottom of the stairs. I'm at the door, and I hear again, like, this thud sound. And this time I look up and, when I looked up, there was a man peering at me from around the banister of the stairs that I had just come from. Like, right where I had been, there was now a person there. I had never seen this person before. They were wearing an Ike jacket, like a World War II-era jacket—olive drab, greenish kind of color. He was pretty young, in his mid-20s, maybe? We made eye contact. That's silly. Like ...

Lizzie: Wait, why do you say that's silly?

Molly Horrocks: Just because, like, he wasn't real. He wasn't an alive person. It was just like an awareness, like this was not a living person, this is just something else. But, like, we made eye contact. I didn't feel scared. It was just—it just was. And he seemed like he was just kind of curious. It was very strange, actually, like how natural it all felt.

Molly Horrocks: And then I just left. Like, I just opened the door and I left. And the door that I was gonna go through opens up to the World War II section. And I told the mount maker who was there already waiting for me, and I was like, "I think I just saw a ghost." And she's like, "Yeah. I don't doubt it. A lot of the staff have had some kind of weird experiences. So ..."

Lizzie: So I started asking around. And once I did, these weird experiences came flooding in—experiences that are hard to define, hard to talk about, especially in an institution founded on the principles of scientific discovery. These are the Smithsonian stories exchanged behind closed doors, whispered between colleagues, the stories that can cause scientists and rigorous academics to question their own eyes and ears. So this time on Sidedoor, we are getting spooked at the Smithsonian. We'll venture into the back hallways of museums, an old house in the woods, and the National Zoo after dark, for a collection of ghost stories you won't find anywhere else. Stick around—if you dare!

Lizzie: Smithsonian ghost stories date back over a hundred years to the very first secretary of the Smithsonian, Joseph Henry.

Pam Henson: *Some of the earliest stories about ghosts at the Smithsonian were about him coming back to wander around the hallways and check up and making sure everybody was doing their work again.*

Lizzie: *I mean, sounds like a nightmare boss, I gotta say.*

Pam Henson: *Micromanager. [laughs]*

Lizzie: This is Pam Henson, institutional historian for Smithsonian Libraries and Archives.

Pam Henson: *And that means I am responsible for the history of the Smithsonian itself.*

Lizzie: She's worked here for nearly 50 years, which may sound like a long time, but by Smithsonian standards ...

Pam Henson: *50 to 60 years is not unusual. It's just not. I mean, people come here and they don't go away.*

Lizzie: *Sometimes even beyond the grave.*

Pam Henson: *And now today, we're gonna talk about people who, even when they are gone from this world, are still here, yes. [laughs]*

Lizzie: The first secretary of the Smithsonian, Joseph Henry, died in the Smithsonian Castle in 1878. A couple of decades later, a *Washington Post* article from May of 1900 reported ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP: An old watchman repeatedly said that he had met Professor Henry, fully clothed in the garments he wore in life, walking quietly about, keeping watch over the treasures of the Smithsonian that he so loved.]

Lizzie: After his death, a statue of the first secretary was placed in front of the Smithsonian Castle.

Pam Henson: *There were stories from the nighttime watchman guards seeing his shade go in and out of the statue.*

Lizzie: *What?*

Pam Henson: *There's a little door on it, and he would go in and out at night.*

Lizzie: *What?*

Pam Henson: *Yes, they reported that.*

Lizzie: Now ironically enough, Pam says ...

Pam Henson: *Joseph Henry would not have liked that.*

Lizzie: *Why not?*

Pam Henson: *He was a scientist, and he did not believe these things happened. So I always jokingly say he was probably haunting them because they were claiming that he was a ghost, you know, and it made him angry. He came back to teach them a lesson. But he himself did not believe in ghosts, and did not believe that you could contact some spiritual world. When you were gone, you were gone.*

Lizzie: But according to the *Post*, the night watchman at the Smithsonian disagreed.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Officers on watch have seen men lurking about, but by the time a search was begun, no one was to be found. This has happened many times, and to nearly every watchman at the buildings.]

Lizzie: Now as much as I'd like to, there is no way to talk to *these* night watchmen from 1900, but there are still plenty of night watchmen at the Smithsonian—the boots on the ground who pace the silent halls after everyone else has gone home. So to hear stories of the Smithsonian

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after dark, I would need to talk to one of them. Which is how I ended up in the woods at 1:00 am with Corporal Howlin.

Ronald Howlin: *Now wait for this car light to go out. As soon as it goes out, you're gonna see how dark it is out here. And see? We got a full moon tonight, now. If we didn't have any moon at all, you'd barely be able to see me.*

Lizzie: Corporal Howlin is a night watchman at the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, or SERC. Between midnight and 8:00 am, his job is to patrol the many acres of conservation land out in Edgewater, Maryland, driving the wetlands and woods in a little electric car that he practically has to fold himself in half to get into.

Ronald Howlin: *They keep buying these small vehicles, and I'm freaking big.*

Lizzie: *You are really tall. How tall are you?*

Ronald Howlin: *6'5".*

Lizzie: *Okay. [laughs]*

Ronald Howlin: *So—and for this house to scare me, everybody was laughing, but I don't care.*

Lizzie: Corporal Howlin is pretty much exactly who I picture when I think "night watchman": ex-military, a volunteer firefighter. But there's one house out here where Corporal Howlin does not like to go. And that's where we're heading.

Lizzie: *So—okay, so you—on a typical night then, do you have a circuit that you always drive or walk?*

Ronald Howlin: *No. You want to change it up because you never know. You never know what you're gonna walk into. There's a deer.*

Lizzie: *Oh! Big deer.*

Lizzie: Most of the time it's wildlife.

Ronald Howlin: *Hey, Jimmy!*

Lizzie: We pull up in front of some docks.

Lizzie: *Oh, wow. This is beautiful.*

Ronald Howlin: *Want to get out?*

Lizzie: *Yeah.*

Lizzie: Not a house, but Corporal Howlin says he needs to check on the research boats.

Ronald Howlin: *I kind of feel happy. I never have somebody out here talking to me.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Ronald Howlin: *A lot of times talking to myself.*

Lizzie: The water looks like liquid silver under the full moon.

Lizzie: *Oh, this is beautiful.*

Lizzie: I wait for Corporal Howlin to check on the boats, make sure everything is ship shape. It feels really peaceful out here, and I start to think how nice it would be to spend all this time out here alone in nature. I can feel a very light breeze, and then I notice a little tickle on the hair of my arms.

Lizzie: *Are you feeling like little cobwebs on you right now?*

Ronald Howlin: *Yes. You walked into some spiderwebs.*

Lizzie: *I don't mind but, like, where are they coming from?*

Ronald Howlin: *We can walk out there, I'll show you where they come from.*

Lizzie: *Ooh, okay!*

Lizzie: We walk out towards a little shed at the end of the dock, and I can just see a few strands of silky spiderweb catching the moonlight.

Ronald Howlin: *Oh, there you go. Here you go. And there's one. Look at that!*

Lizzie: *Oh my [gasps]!*

Ronald Howlin: *Look at that big sucker.*

Lizzie: Big spiders! The juicy kind with the fat middle and the hooked curving legs.

Ronald Howlin: *It's a big sucker.*

Lizzie: The size of golf balls.

Ronald Howlin: *And they are all over this building. And see? The webbing will get on you, and you know he's on you somewhere.*

Lizzie: *Oh! It's all over me! [laughs] Spiderwebs everywhere! Oh, my God, I'm not walking any further than this.*

Ronald Howlin: *You can stay right there. I just got to check this here.*

Lizzie: *Okay.*

Lizzie: From the docks, we go to the education building. Again, not a house.

Ronald Howlin: *I just need to turn some lights off in here, check a couple doors. That's it.*

Lizzie: Then we drive out to the end of some road ...

Ronald Howlin: *This is not bad.*

Lizzie: ... and back. And just as I'm beginning to think we are going anywhere *but* the place we are supposedly heading ...

Ronald Howlin: *This is the house.*

Lizzie: ... we drive up to a red brick house, narrow and tall, silhouetted against the night sky.

Ronald Howlin: *This house right here is the oldest piece of property that the Smithsonian owns.*

Lizzie: Well, the oldest that's still in its original location. The house was built in 1735 by the Sellman family, one of the first European families to arrive in what was then called the Colony of Maryland. But now it belongs to SERC, and nobody's lived in there for over a decade. The house is a stop on his patrol route, but Corporal Howlin tells me he does not go inside—not since one night, years back.

Ronald Howlin: *I'm on patrol. So I came up here ...*

Lizzie: *Hang on. There's a spider on me. I have to—sorry, sorry, sorry. [laughs] Do you mind starting again?*

Ronald Howlin: *Okay, so I'm on patrol and I came up, parked the vehicle, left it running. And something told me to look up. Well, I look up at the very top window, and it used to have curtains over the window, and those curtains moved.*

Lizzie: He says, this wasn't the kind of ripple a mouse running along the hem would make. The curtains fell closed in the middle, like someone was holding them apart and then stepped back from the window.

Ronald Howlin: *Hair on my arms was standing up when I saw that. That's why I've never been back in the house. And I know people are going to have their—they're gonna think twice. They're gonna say, "Oh, no. Maybe not." It's what I saw.*

Lizzie: By now, we're both peering up at the dark little window on the third floor, and I feel like he can probably guess what I'm about to ask.

Lizzie: *Can we—can we go inside? Would you go in now?*

Ronald Howlin: *No. [laughs]*

Lizzie: *Okay, I'll ask you again in five minutes.*

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Ronald Howlin: *That's fine. You're gonna get the answer, "No." I'm not going in the house. I'll go right there. We're only gonna walk in right here, okay? I'm not walking through that house. I'm not!*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Ronald Howlin: *I'm not.*

Lizzie: We go in the side door.

Lizzie: *Okay.*

Ronald Howlin: *I mean, this is the house.*

Lizzie: The house has tall ceilings, big windows and old wooden floors.

Lizzie: *This is the biggest fireplace I've ever seen.*

Lizzie: We make our way through the old kitchen, and little by little, Corporal Howlin and I walk further and further into this house.

Lizzie: *Is this farther than you've been in before?*

Ronald Howlin: *I've never been in this far.*

Lizzie: *Wow! I'm honored that you're coming in here with me. And you don't have to. I can—you don't have to.*

Ronald Howlin: *I understand.*

Lizzie: *Okay.*

Lizzie: And at this point, I'm actually feeling pretty tough, leading this 6'5" fully-armed ex-military professional through these rooms. And then we emerge into the front hallway where a wide wooden staircase leads up and out of sight.

Lizzie: *Honestly, there is something so creepy about stairs. Is that just me, or do you find that creepy?*

Ronald Howlin: *This is as far as I'm going in the house, if that's what you're asking. Because right now, I'm not gonna lie to you, I'm not—I don't like this house at all.*

Lizzie: And I can tell he's telling the truth, but somewhere above us is that window and these stairs lead to it.

Ronald Howlin: *I'm not going.*

Lizzie: *Oh my gosh! See, now, I'm like—I'm torn because I feel like it's my job to go up there.*

Lizzie: But if I'm being honest, I don't want to go up there. It's not that I think I'll encounter anything, anyone. Logically, I am sure I won't. But I'm beginning to feel unsettled. Maybe it's seeing Corporal Howlin so ill at ease, or the way our voices cut into the silence of the house, the sound traveling around corners and into rooms we can't see, or the way the shadow of the upper floor seems to fall down the stairway. But I have that feeling you get when you're a kid playing hide and seek, and you're tucked away in a quiet place waiting to be found.

Lizzie: *[whispers] My legs are shaking.*

Ronald Howlin: *It's okay, my hands are shaking. I'll be here.*

Lizzie: *Okay.*

Lizzie: And I start up the stairs. One by one, I walk through the upstairs rooms.

Lizzie: *[whispers] My heart is beating so fast.*

Lizzie: Empty. I get the distinct feeling that this is not my space. Like, if there's something here, I don't want to risk disturbing it. And all of a sudden, I really want to leave.

[footsteps down the stairs]

Lizzie: *Wow! Okay. Well, I think I need a minute. [laughs] I went up to that window and I looked out.*

Ronald Howlin: *Did you?*

Lizzie: *Yeah.*

Lizzie: It's really hard to explain, but even now, sitting in a recording studio weeks later, thinking back to what it felt like to be in that house, it makes my legs go a little wobbly.

Ronald Howlin: *Walking this house and walking around that property, there's some spirits here. I really truly think there's some spirits here.*

Lizzie: When we come back, we find a bathroom at the National Museum of Natural History where the normal rules of plumbing do not seem to apply. And we meet a shadowy figure at the Smithsonian's National Zoo. Don't go away!

Lizzie: Inside the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History are many wondrous treasures. We've explored a lot of them on this show—dinosaur bones, live tarantulas, the Hope Diamond—but there's one place in the museum we haven't been to yet.

Deb Hull-Walski: *Anyway, so this is the women's room. Anybody in?*

Lizzie: The third floor staff bathroom, which has the creakiest door I have ever heard.

Deb Hull-Walski: *They used to call it the haunted ladies' room, because people would come in and a sink would go on.*

Lizzie: This is Deb Hull-Walski. She's a collections manager at the museum where she's worked for the last 30 years. And back in the early '90s when she first started, she would hear stories about this bathroom—the faucets, manual turn knobs, would turn on by themselves. But Deb didn't really pay any attention to these stories. The plumbing was old, there was probably some explanation, and this bathroom was closest to her office. It was convenient. And so one morning she heads in there. It's a pretty big bathroom, six stalls with wooden, swinging doors, six sinks. And when she walks in, the bathroom is empty. She walks into the stall, closes the door, locks it, and as soon as she does, she hears the water turn on at one of the sinks. And she thinks, "Huh!" She goes out of the stall and over to the sink.

Deb Hull-Walski: *So I turned it off. It was the hot side. I turned the hot side off.*

Lizzie: Deb thought somebody probably didn't turn the knob hard enough when they left.

Deb Hull-Walski: *If you don't turn them off quite right, the water can start leaking and maybe then it can become more of a force.*

Lizzie: *Like the pressure could build up.*

Deb Hull-Walski: *Yeah, pressure can build up a little bit and make a more steady stream of water.*

Lizzie: And just as she's thinking this through ...

Deb Hull-Walski: *The next sink went on, and then I turned the knob off on the next sink. And then the next one went on! And I turned that one off and it stopped. So I'm thinking to myself, "Huh. Either there's really bad plumbing here, or all the stories I've heard about this room are correct." I went home and I told my husband this story about the sinks and what I had done, and he looked at me and he said, "Plumbing really doesn't work that way. The faucet shouldn't have made the next faucet go on. Turning off one shouldn't have made the next faucet go on or the next one."*

Lizzie: A short time later, Deb brings her daughter into work for a visit.

Deb Hull-Walski: *I took her to the Museum, and I told her this story because it's a great story.*

Lizzie: *Mm-hmm.*

Deb Hull-Walski: *And I showed her the bathroom.*

Lizzie: Deb's daughter didn't really believe her. She was 15, skeptical.

Deb Hull-Walski: *Then we walked to my office, which is right down the hall from here. My office is one that has a sink, and it's one of the older offices that was built around 1910, 1911. We both sat down. I sat at my desk, she sat at the table at the front of the room. The minute we both sat down the sink went on.*

Melissa Johnson: *I felt frozen.*

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Lizzie: This is Deb's daughter, Melissa. I called her up to find out what she remembered.

Melissa Johnson: *Like, I wanted to move more, but I couldn't move more. Like, I was just frozen in place for a few seconds. And I got the goosebumps.*

Deb Hull-Walski: *And the two of us looked at each other like, "What?"*

Melissa Johnson: *She walks over to the sink, and she has to physically turn the knob to get the water off. So at that time, I knew someone or something had turned that water on.*

Lizzie: *What feeling did you get?*

Deb Hull-Walski: *So I think I was not scared, just so surprised. And—because really, I did think it was the plumbing to some extent, all those stories where so many people had the same story. But it was obvious that something was being playful and turned the faucet on, because it had never happened before. Sink had never gone on on its own before, and it never did after that day. It was the only time that it happened to me.*

Lizzie: For our final spooky story, we're going to the zoo. When Kim Dixon was a young zoology student, she landed the volunteer gig of her dreams at the Smithsonian's National Zoo. It was 2001, and a new baby elephant, Kandula, had just been born.

Kim Dixon: *And the researchers there wanted to take on behavior research of a new mother and calf in captivity. It wasn't readily examined at that point in time, and to have this there at the Smithsonian was a great point to research.*

Lizzie: The zoo staff stationed trained volunteers in the elephant house around the clock, observing and taking notes on the elephants. Kim had the midnight shift.

Kim Dixon: *And I would sit there in the dark with just a red light on for my data, and watch the elephants every 15 minutes to take a mental snapshot of what the animals were doing and write that down.*

Lizzie: *So give me an example of, like, what kinds of things you saw. What kinds of things were you writing down?*

Kim Dixon: *Well, I had the joy of watching very, very young Kandula learn life. For instance, one of the greatest things I've ever seen in my entire career was him learning how to use his trunk.*

Lizzie: *Oh!*

Kim Dixon: *So he extended his trunk and wrapped it around one of the bars of the enclosure, and then put his trunk in his mouth. And then was completely baffled by the fact that he couldn't move.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Kim Dixon: *And just watching his ears because I could see him thinking through the process and trying to figure out why he was stuck. And eventually, Shanthi came over and kind of gently moved him to the side so he could figure out you don't do that. You get yourself stuck that way.*

Lizzie: *It was a great gig. Kim loved being alone with the elephants for hours, nobody else around. But one night that changed. This is what Kim remembers.*

Kim Dixon: *It was about 2:30 in the morning. I'd been on my shift maybe an hour, and I was taking my notes, sitting in the dark with my red light on, and I heard the far door by the hippo enclosure open. And then I heard the echoing footsteps of hard soles across the tile floor. Very slow, deliberate steps, just a simple click, click, click, click, click, click. And since it was a big open space with that concrete floor, it just echoed everywhere.*

Lizzie: *There were only two sets of doors in the elephant house. Both were kept locked at night, and the only people with keys to that lock were zoo staff.*

Kim Dixon: *It didn't disturb me at that point in time, because I still thought it was maintenance, it was security, it was a keeper. It was someone that I knew. Not a big deal. So I was in the middle of taking some notes, and I looked over in front of Ambika's enclosure, who was the enclosure to the left of where I was sitting. And there was a tall, what I felt was male figure, and he leaned into the lower bar and put his hip out and looked at the elephant, and then he turned and he looked at me. I don't remember any facial features, and I didn't think anything of it. I smiled, I nodded. My timer went off, so I looked down and I started to take my notes, and then I looked up to say something to them and they were gone. I didn't even breathe at that moment because I was listening for any footsteps around me since it was pitch black other than my little red light. And I didn't hear any footsteps and I didn't hear any door.*

Lizzie: *Kim had been given a flashlight with a red lens, so the light wouldn't disturb the elephants. She flipped it on, and as quietly as she could she started to search*

Kim Dixon: *Enclosure by enclosure, using my flashlight to check if there was anything open, if there was anyone in that area, if there were any odd shadows. Watched for every shadow,*

listened for every sound, you know, on top of my heart, just pounding, pounding, pounding, pounding. There was no one there.

Lizzie: She went to check the doors.

Kim Dixon: *The doors were still closed.*

Lizzie: The building was completely silent. She hadn't heard any more footsteps, hadn't heard any doors open.

Kim Dixon: *So at that point in time, I was quite upset. There was someone in the building who probably shouldn't be in the building with me, and I didn't know where they were or what was going on.*

Lizzie: Kim booked it for the keeper's office, locked the door and wrote a message to security.

Kim Dixon: *"There's someone in here with me, I think. Could someone please come down?" And they were very good. They came within a few minutes, and they walked around with me, too. They didn't see anything. They have a log of who comes in and out of the buildings. There was no one—no one in and out of that building.*

Lizzie: Kim was so shaken up the guard sent her home, even escorted her to her car in the parking lot. The whole drive home, she kept running through what had happened in her head, trying to make sense of what she saw.

Kim Dixon: *Could it have been that you were falling asleep? Could it have been the lighting in the room? Nope, that didn't work. I checked that. I checked that. I checked that. And to this day, I can still kind of see how they were: gray figure, very solid-looking. And I know they turned and they looked at me. They noticed me. We made some type of contact in that moment. But the second I looked down, they vanished.*

Lizzie: *From where you sit here today, what do you think happened that night?*

Kim Dixon: *I think, because of the history of that building and the history of the grounds, I firmly believe that there was an entity very tightly connected there. It seemed to appreciate looking at the elephants, and it almost felt friendly. So I really do think it was just connected to the building in some way.*

Lizzie: *Hmm. So it sounds like you believe that, for lack of a better word, you saw a ghost.*

Kim Dixon: *Oh, yes. Oh, yes.*

Lizzie: I shared this story with Pam Henson. As a Smithsonian historian, she knows all about that building, the history of the zoo, and I wondered if she had any guesses as to who, if Kim did see a ghost, she might have seen.

Pam Henson: *Well, first would come to mind would be William Blackburne, who was the first keeper. And he was there over 50 years.*

Lizzie: *Wow!*

Pam Henson: *Okay? And Blackie, as he was called, could get animals to do anything. One time, one of the big cats got out, and he talked the cat back into the enclosure. He had that ability to communicate with them. I mean, his devotion to those animals was just beyond belief. And he walked the first set of elephants up into the zoo.*

Lizzie: *He did?*

Pam Henson: *Yeah, when it opened. So I would say, my guess would be most likely it's Blackie back again, just checking out how the newest elephant's doing.*

Lizzie: Kim says 20 years later, she's as certain of what she experienced as the day it happened. And while it was scary in the moment, she surprised me by saying that she sees this encounter as a gift.

Lizzie: *That's interesting what you say about the gratitude piece, that you are kind of grateful for that experience. Tell me more about that.*

Kim Dixon: *Well, as a scientist, I am always looking for proof, and it's very hard to disprove a negative. So the more experiences I have like that, the more I can be more open-minded to that aspect. So I'm grateful for it.*

Lizzie: *I think—and this is something I'm finding with the stories around the Smithsonian, is that, like, the realer, the truer they are, I think the more loath people are to share them because they really actually mean something to you.*

Kim Dixon: *Mm-hmm. They do. It's a once in a lifetime experience, maybe? And it's that special gift that I have from the Smithsonian. There's definitely a connection. They couldn't pay me to work the 2:00 am shift anymore. [laughs]*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

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Kim Dixon: *I did it for free until that moment. [laughs] But I was given a tremendous gift that I can carry with me for the rest of my days.*

Lizzie: The Smithsonian is full of collections, objects, animals, architecture. Some of their stories we know. Those are the ones you'll see captioned in display cases. But other stories, the lives these objects have touched, we may never know. Maybe we'll just catch glimpses from time to time. Who's to say whether these stories are real or not, but I find it comforting the idea of sightings, sounds, encounters we can't explain. It makes me think there's something here that we don't understand, and certainly always room to explore and discover more.

Lizzie: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. Thank you to all the brave souls who came forward with their spooky tales, those who told them for the record, and those who whispered them to me beyond the microphone's reach. [whispers] Your secrets are safe with me.

Lizzie: For photos of the supposedly—okay, I think totally haunted bathroom at Natural History, the stairwell in American History and snapshots from my ride-along with Corporal Howlin at SERC, subscribe to our newsletter. You can do that at [Si.edu/sidedoor](https://si.edu/sidedoor). And if you have a spooky tale to share, we want to hear it—or at least I do, I love this stuff. You can find us on Twitter and Instagram @SidedoorPod, or shoot us an email at sidedoor(@)si.edu.

Lizzie: Special thanks this episode to Molly Horrocks, Deb Hull-Walski and her daughter, Melissa Johnson, Corporal Ronald Howlin, Pam Henson and Kim Dixon. Thanks to our colleagues at the Office of Protective Services, especially Dylan Garon and Emily Clyne. Thanks also to Robert Padgett, Valeska Hilbig, Tina Tennessen, Jen Zoon, Jim Wood, Matt Dozier, Maddie Green and Dan Wood.

Lizzie: Our podcast team is James Morrison, Nathalie Boyd, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Tami O'Neill, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch and Sharon Bryant. Episode Artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

Lizzie: If you like our show, tell your friends and leave us a review on Apple Podcast. We love hearing from you!

Lizzie: If you want to sponsor our show, please visit [sponsorship\(@\)PRX.org](mailto:sponsorship@PRX.org).

Lizzie: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

GPS: *Turn right.*

Lizzie: *Oh my God, that was my Google Maps! [bleep] Scared the bejesus out of me! I didn't know my [laughs]*

Ronald Howlin: *You've got to think! This house? Before?*