

Has Anyone Ever Died from the Willies?

by Erik_Deckers

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In a previous job, I used to work with people who are blind or visually impaired. I traveled quite extensively to different conferences and trade shows. During those conferences, I had the opportunity to meet all sorts of people and see all sorts of products related to technology, mobility, and independent living. After a while, everything started running together, and I can't remember where I've been without a datebook and an atlas. But the memories of one conference will remain with me, for the rest of my life, no matter how hard I try to forget. I was standing outside the conference hotel in Louisville, Kentucky, with my friend, Brian. We had just been to a Louisville Bats baseball game that night, and were chatting and winding down. As we talked, a school bus pulled up to let off several conference attendees who had been on a field trip. The first woman off the bus tripped as she was coming down the steps, and fell three feet, landing squarely on her knees. When she fell, she dropped her purse, her cane, and a few other objects. Brian and I were standing right there, so I picked up what looked like a button or some kind of decoration. It was white, slightly larger than a quarter, squarish, and concave. I thought it went with her white purse, so I held onto it, until the woman got up. She was still on the ground, and the bus driver was trying to help her, but something was wrong, because she wouldn't get up. She stayed on the ground, feeling around to find her lost items. As I waited, I realized I still had this button thing in my hand, so I flipped it over to see what it was. I was more than a little shocked to discover that I wasn't holding a button. It was her artificial eye. And it was staring at me. Now I'm a city boy, born and raised. I never grew up on a farm. I never got to witness the Circle of Life up close. And I'm only on a nodding acquaintance with Mother Nature. So when I see dead things, gory things, or when people talk about their own bodily functions, I get more than a little squeamish ("squeal like a girl," is the phrase I often hear). I can't even touch my own eye when I put in contacts without going "Eww! Eww!" So as I stood there, holding this artificial eye in my hand, all I could think was "this was in her head, now it's in my hand." (In this woman's defense, none of this was her fault, and I don't want to get a laugh at her expense. It's not her fault that she fell in front of a wuss with the gag reflex of a novice sword swallower.) As I held the eye, I felt an electric tingling creeping slowly up my arm. It was the tingling you get when you touch a snake on a dare. "What do I do?!" I whispered to Brian. "I don't know. I've never seen that happen before," he whispered back. I stood there for what seemed like hours, but was really only a few seconds, when I finally realized why the woman wasn't standing up. She wasn't trying to find her purse or her cane. There was just one thing she wanted. I leaned down and whispered one of those sentences a person will only ever get to say once in a lifetime. "I've got your eye." She straightened up, relieved, and said, "Thank you, honey. I was looking for that." I put it in her hand. She gathered up her other things, stood right up, and went on her way. I stood there for a moment, staring at Brian, my hand still outstretched, and not knowing what to do. I finally said, "I really can't think of anything to say now, so I'll just say good-bye. I just need to-- I mean, I should -- that is, I'm gonna just, well, go." And I all but ran inside the hotel, found a bathroom, and washed my hands. Three times. By this time, the tingling in my arm had reached my shoulder, and didn't go away for two hours. I went back to my room with a severe case of the willies that didn't subside until I finally fell asleep. But as my head hit the pillow, I was able to comfort myself with a single thought. At least this wasn't a morticians' conference.

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