

April 3, 2018

Dear Jessica, Jeff and Kristin . . .

Jessica has asked me to document a story she heard in fragments during her childhood, which story came to me from my mother during my childhood. Here is my best to pull it together as best I can recall it. This happened in approximately 1944.

Just as I am starting to write this, no kidding . . . the 1931 (original) version of *Dracula* is running on Turner Classic Movies. Excellent!

During World War Two and while my father was in Europe with the Navy, my mother had to find housing for herself, Julie and Vicky. Julie was about four and Vicky was about one. Available housing was scarce, and my mother was grateful to finally get a cabin in a run-down resort at Lake Elsinore, in Riverside County, California. My parents had spent happy pre-war times there, dancing at places around the lake. Dancing used to be their main activity, and I know for certain that they frequented dance-friendly venues not just places at Lake Elsinore, but Balboa (the Rendezvous Club) and Catalina Island (the Casino), too.

The cabin she found was one of several in the resort. To call it a cabin is definitely generous, for it was really more of a shack than a cabin, but she was glad to have it and settled in.

One evening she heard a strange scratching at the screen door. When she went to see what it was, there in the shadows stood Bela Lugosi, scratching his fingernails up and down the screen as a sort of door-knocking substitute. It was scary, shocking and very, very creepy, as my mother described it.

Bela Lugosi at the time was famous for his role as Count Dracula. He was tall, dark and frightening in the sunshine and on a good day. You can imagine how scary it must have been to hear the screen-scratching and then find him there standing in the shadows. Factoring into his creepiness was the fact that he was infamous for having a raging morphine habit, too, which amplified how creepy the experience of being in his presence must have been.

My mother asked him what he wanted, and it turned out he was looking for his mother, who apparently occupied another nearby cabin at the same resort community. My mother directed him to his mother's cabin, he nodded his thanks and she never saw him thereafter. When my mother told me this story, I wished she had gotten his autograph, which, of course, she did not.

The lake would go dry for periods of time, particularly during the 1950s, which is when my parents would take Vicky and me there occasionally. The lake had good memories for them, but by the time I saw it, it was dry and depressing. We would stay at a little motel on the southerly former shore, where it was a hardened gray-brown clay bowl extending about a mile to the north. My parents would take Vicky and me to the old cabin where Bela scratched the screen, and I recall the place being very small, very sketchy and very much in need of being razed. I recall wondering how the heck my mother, Julie and Vicky could all have squeezed into that sparse space.

In recent decades the water is back, and the community is active again. The last time I was there was about 2009, when I had occasion to look at some property offered in trade for property I had in Oregon. Even with the Great Recession in full gear at that time, the community was much nicer than when my parents, Vicky and I visited there during the 1950s.

And now as I am finishing this, I see that *Dracula* has finished playing, and guess what is up next: *Mission to Mars*. No joke! I love you all!