

TELLTALE

By Justin Hinder

Dedicated to Georgina Cue and Paul Hodges, Richard Lewer and Eden Menta, Katherine Hattam and Megan Sloan, Kate Just and Kate Knight, and Chili Philly and Mark Smith.

I arrived at Telltale Grande on a Tuesday morning. Looming over the railway station at the city's hub, Grande was built before the station was even a glimmer in the town planner's eye. Upon the advent of the steam train the city's main station began gradually to amass around and below this magisterial hotel, like peasants' hovel around the walls of a mediaeval castle. Telltale Grande took up a whole city block and was old, opulent and gothic; the only modern addition being the blaze of green neon that bore its name across the front of the building burning relentlessly day and night.

I was to be staying two nights as a reward for a job well done: a modest rest before I got back to reality and the regular motions of existence. Telltale Grande was known, both online and by word of mouth, to be haunted. It had originally been built by the Telltales - to be precise, by the presiding Mr Telltale's father's father's father's father - and the public had long known the hotel was phantasmal but Mr Telltale kept himself aloof from this fact, feigning surprise at any mention of paranormal goings-ons which would be additionally scoffed at by his wife, Mrs Telltale.

From a Google image search I'd discovered that Mr Telltale was a classically handsome man. Wikipedia said he would often mention his youth spent as the first male model to achieve fame, helping shape the profession as we know it today - a kind of Amelia Earhart of his first career. He was now a gentleman hotelier, his age frozen at just the point at which his creases and smile lines made him look rugged and well-lived yet refined, with salt-and-pepper hair always slicked back with pomade. Mr Telltale apparently only ever wore his shirts, suits and pocket squares freshly pressed, bearing the scent of imported cologne and

starched linen. He preferred cufflinks to buttons; the Cartier tank watch he wore was an heirloom from his grandfather.

Mrs Telltale was quite as beautiful as her husband was handsome. From online research, primarily conducted on gossip mag sites I had discovered that Mrs Telltale had come from old money; her chestnut hair was perfectly set 24 hours a day and her nails were always done within an inch of her manicurist's life. Mrs Telltale's preferences in clothing leaned to timeless, elegant garments that prioritised cut and quality of material over being current. Mrs Telltale only ever wore natural fibres and often wore a pair of jet earrings that had been in her family for generations. She would wear diamond necklaces and bracelets complemented by emerald rings. She was known to wear pearls with silk cashmere twin sets on weekends and always a fur in the winter. Mrs Telltale was profusely photographed and would presently appear in the tabloids whenever occasion called for her to set foot outside the walls of Telltale Grande. She only ever used an alligator Hermes Kelly bag which sat on her lap as she drove the British racing green Jaguar that had been gifted to her by her father on her eighteenth birthday.

The lobby of Telltale Grande was an open hall the size of a city block tiled in black and white marble with burgundy velvet runners showing guests the polite routes to navigate around the room. Five chandeliers - one massive, two huge and two large lit the lobby which was windowed around its entirety. Fringed lamps sat on gold and glass coffee and side tables. The lobby furniture was all green leather arranged in patterns around the room and the reception desk resembled a brown leather chesterfield complete with a polished brass bell and signs for guest's interest. On the wall behind the desk was Sir John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* which was by joined by a sign that pointed the way to the Health Centre which, according to the website, was complete with gym, sauna, pool and day spa. At one end of the lobby was a set of tiled stairs with a gold banister and velvet runner for the health conscious or when the lift was out; the other end housing a large gold gilt elevator. The lift was complete with operator and enough room to transport him, a luggage trolley and up to ten guests. Levels were numbered

inside in addition to advice about the Salon and Barber on Level 1, Ballroom on Level 2 and the Bar and Dining Room on Level 5.

Telltale Grande reportedly had two ghosts - one was an apparition referred to as Ned who only ever turned up on occasion during the witching hour and was known to pace back and forth in the lobby of the Grande, undecided whether to check-in to a room or not. Ned's inability to check-in to a room left him in eternal limbo due to the spectres mortality spent filled with indecisiveness. The second ghost was that of Veronica - the once sweetheart of Mr Telltale's grandfather's brother, William Telltale. Veronica was known to move and sometimes steal items of guests staying at the hotel. Her existence finally cementing public knowledge when several years' back she took a liking to a guest of the hotels Phillipe Patek, the same watch worn by her beloved William. This guest's watch was never seen again. The guest attempted to sue Telltale Grande but failed - the judge ruling that anyone ridiculous enough to spend that amount of money on a watch deserves and can afford to have it stolen. Veronica was thoughtful in her choice of item to move and steal; she would provide romantic clues to her existence and always cryptically reference hers and Williams love story. The one ruling in Patek vs Grande was that the hotel was to provide a disclaimer in clear view to guests checking in. The notice was to advise that items have and can be moved or go missing and that guests thereby forfeit any responsibility for moved or missing items by the hotel or any of its affiliates during their stay.

William Telltale was the eldest of the two Telltale sons and was to be the then successor of the Telltale Grande. William was in the Army and he and his sweetheart Veronica sent love letters everyday. Having met one week before William was called to action the couple concentrated a whirlwind affair into seven days. They spent every moment together and ended their spring fling with William waving goodbye to a tear brimmed Veronica with one hand and holding a scrunched up brown paper bag filled with snacks she had made for him in the other. After three years of service William returned and proposed to Veronica in the lobby of the Telltale Grande; dropping his bags and onto his knee in front of 1200 personal guests of the Telltale's, invited to celebrate the

return of the prodigal son. A spring wedding was arranged for five months time - whatever Veronica wanted she would get. Her future husband was home now and they could continue where they left off three years prior and build their nuclear 2.5 children family. The Wedding was chipped away at daily. With only five months to arrange a society wedding the staff at the Telltale Grande were given wedding duties in addition to their normal tasks to assist in the successful running of the upcoming celebration. To cut a long story short the wedding did not go on. William Telltale did not arrive to the ballroom of the Telltale Grande on his wedding day- instead he left Veronica and 2000 of his closest friends and family waiting for him while he left in the dumbwaiter with a bottle of Chivas, overnight bag and passport to take the Telltale private plane to Hong Kong - still as a bachelor and not as a groom. Ninety minutes passed until news was finally brought to William's mother by her lady in waiting that he had left and could his mother please deal with Veronica. Veronica was asked to leave and was assisted by William's mother to pack up her things and go back to where she came from. William spent his life travelling from one country to the next collecting women, stamps on his passport as well as discovering a multitude of sexually transmitted diseases. The Telltale Grande came into possession of his younger brother, Albert Telltale - the grandfather of our Mr Telltale. Rumour has it that when Veronica died, not having any closure with William, returned to the ballroom of the Telltale Grande. Veronica ensured the ballroom stayed intact and on one occasion, even when Mrs Telltale attempted to redecorate the Ballroom, first truly demonstrated her power. Mrs Telltale planned to paint the ballroom from its original drab dark green to a dusk pink. The next morning on all three attempts Mrs Telltale would arrive at the Ballroom on Level 2 to find the paint peeled and scattered all over the floor. Mrs Telltale persistent as always decided that perhaps she would try flocked wallpaper. That too the next day was found peeled off the wall and on the parquetry ballroom floor. When liquid nails did not work the ballroom stayed dark green, as it would have been on Veronica's wedding day. Whenever Veronica is about to appear *Ave Maria*, which was to be played as she walked down the aisle and was instead played at

her funeral as a spinster can be heard coming from the - found on Level 2 of the hotel Ballroom.

As I waited for the key to my room, Level 2, Room 5, I noticed a family including a Dad, Mum, big brother, little sister and an infant coming into the lobby. I named them Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa and Maggie and once my things were all in order and I was ready to be shown my room I noticed that they were staying across the hall from me. The Simpsons had taken the stairs - probably to burn off any excess energy of Bart and Lisa as opposed to my taking the elevator and we all arrived on Level 2 together. I acknowledged Marge with a nod and smile as I crossed the threshold into my room for the first time, feeling bad for a moment that I'd stereotyped the family into a clichéd working class domestic unit. When the Porter left I sat on the couch in my room and took off my shoes and slipped on the hotel slippers. The room was wallpapered with large white roses on charcoal grey. The rooms skirting was white and gold and the ceiling cornices decorative porcelain. I had a King size bed for the next few nights as well as the provided mahogany desk, fancy waste bin and minibar all complete with a window looking out onto the city below. The bathroom had a spa with shower overhead - the utilities all dark green and the floor mirroring the lobby but in a smaller black and white tile. I made a cup of tea that I drank while I unpacked my things and then moved onto reading the Hotel guest book and paraphernalia about local attractions. I fell asleep having been up since before the sun. I snoozed for about an hour and woke with an intense craving for festivities that could only be soothed by a bottle of Champagne. I called room service and ordered a bottle of Perrier Jouet, a dozen Oysters *Au Natural* and a bowl of shoestring fries. I had a shower and put back on the hotel slippers, now hugged by the hotel robe - the name of the establishment embroidered in green thread on the pocket. I plugged my phone into the USB speaker provided and paced around the room waiting for my Party For One to arrive. After 25 minutes there was a knock at the door, a blonde female in her early twenties entered with a silver trolley. Her hair was in a ponytail pulled between the brim and band of her hotel hat. She opened and poured me a splash of the Champagne to see if it was to my liking. I politely sipped the glass really just

wanting her to leave. I smiled and nodded politely and handed her the glass that she filled and then left- all in absolute silence. I drank half the champagne glass in one go and put it back on the table - paranoid that Veronica was watching me or I was being live-streamed to the staffroom for entertainment while employees had their breaks. I realised how ridiculous I was being and that I should slow down due to self respect and not blame my guilt on my own convenient hidden camera conspiracy theory or urban ghost story.

After two glasses of champagne, all the oysters and some fries I needed to go to the bathroom, I was about to break the seal. I topped up my glass - half way, to be sensible, before running into the bathroom with an embarrassing urgency that came out of nowhere. When I got back to where I left off the champagne I knew I had poured because I was thinking about getting back to it the whole time I was in the bathroom was now empty. Putting it to my lack of proper food, sleep and my initial gulping of French like it was Gatorade I figured perhaps I didn't pour the glass. I poured it again and took a refined sip, settling back into the couch.

When everything was finished I got ready for sleep - turning off the speakers and getting into bed with extra pillows I had pulled from the linen press on a whim during one of the many excursions to the bathroom that night. I checked my phone and turned off the light. As the room gently swayed back and forth, my drunken brain adjusted to being horizontal. The down quilt settled and my eyes and ears adjusted to my foreign dark environment - every hair stood on end as I heard *Ave Maria* coming from somewhere outside my hotel room door. The momentary dread knowing at check-in that I was at the epicenter of the haunting on Level 2 with the Ballroom came back to me. I'd thought about asking for a room on another level, If possible, of-course. But I hadn't. I'd made my bed and now I would actually have to lie in it. I kept playing the check- in over and over in my mind; also remembering tales I'd read of people who had experienced Veronica during their stay. Stories recalling interactions with her in interviews and on their blog, sometimes even with multimedia. Surely someone else could hear it? I hoped

that someone braver than me would come out of his or her room to see where the music was coming from. I realised eventually that everyone on my level was either a) dead asleep or b) were like Mr and Mrs Telltale and didn't believe in Veronica. After an hour of listening to *Ave Maria* over and over again laying stiff as a board, only my eyes moving - I eventually got to sleep thinking about both weddings and funerals that I had heard the song being played.

Waking in the morning I had a faint reminder of the bottle of champagne I drank to myself and thankful for the iron in the oysters. Showering, getting dressed and leaving my room for the day, I went down to the lobby. I wanted to enquire about dinner options and saw Mr Telltale with the infamous Ms Scott on my way out. Ms Scott was a long-standing guest of the hotel who had never left in 15 years. She took up residence in a suite on the 5th and last public access level of the building. Mr and Mrs Telltale lived in a suite that took up the entire 6th floor for their domestic dwelling. Ms Scott's grey hair looked like it had never been cut in her life and was piled on top of her head in a nest. Today Ms Scott was wearing a lavender silk blouse tucked into a pleated lavender silk skirt with a pair of sensible brown court shoes. She wore gold earrings and large diamond rings with a cameo brooch on her left breast and a grey Burmese cat in a copper cage held in her right hand. The cage was filled with balls of yarn and knitting needles - sitting beside Pookie the cat was a knitted duckling and egg filled with catnip. Tucked under her left arm was a simple brown leather handbag and in her left hand scrunched up was a piece of cloth. As I walked past Ms Scott she farewelled Mr Telltale, for the day looking smart in a navy suit, white shirt and black tie. Ms Scott slipped on her Persol sunglasses and placed the cloth over the cage, putting it on the passenger seat of her 1940s Peugeot waiting at valet. Ms Scott's cat Pookie was rumoured to be at least 30 years old and the love of Ms Scott's life. Ms Scott was famous for taking Pookie everywhere with her like a dog - covering his cage while they ran errands in the car to discourage him to run home. This method avoided Scott seeing the way they had travelled - a tip from her great aunts vet who treated her cat as Ms Scott treated Pookie, a fact Ms Scott advertised and was proud of. In addition to

treating Pookie as a dog Ms Scott also apparently had no bank account - instead preferring to deposit her money in stacks hidden around nooks and crannies around the Telltale Grande as well as various locations like under loose pebbles of fountains around the metropolis that she called her home. After leaving the gates of the Telltale Grande and into the streets of the city my stomach rumbled and I went to the nearby French quarter for pastries and coffee. I also bought a baguette for later that day which I planned to spend exploring the city. I went to the botanical gardens, museums, galleries, vintage bookstores and department stores. I found stores that specialised in idiosyncratic interests or hobbies - all niches catered and accommodated for. I bought flowers for my hotel room and a cheap and cheerful religious vase to put them in bought from a born again street vendor.

At the end of an entire day on foot I returned to Telltale Grande by train; taking the hotel escalator from the concourse as opposed to the exits pointing north and south of the CBD. Back in my hotel room, robe and slippers I lay on the couch half-heartedly watching the local news and reminiscing on my day while I looked at the talismans of my trip collected so far. Half an hour later I heard Homer, Marge and the kids coming up the hall buzzing with excitement from their day. I ran to the door and looked out the peephole to see the family towing animal shaped balloons. Lisa had a large plush giraffe and Bart had on a new cap that looked like a lion's head. These clues all had me guess that The Simpsons had spent the day filming at the City Zoo. I went back to reclining and could hear The Simpsons fussing about in the hall - I decided to take a shower and think about what I would have for dinner. When I ordered room service, freshly washed and back in the robe the hall was silent again. I started to read the newspaper left for me by housekeeping; the other signs that they had been were the fresh towels and bathmat as well as a toilet freshly cleaned and 'sealed for my protection' with a paper banner across the lid. Brushing my teeth so they weren't stained by red wine in the morning I started thinking about my unwanted lullaby the night before. After fluffing my pillow and steadying my breathing I heard it. Veronica was playing *Ave Maria* again. I ignored it thinking what would Veronica want from

me, what belonging did I possibly have that she would even want? I thought for a moment about the potential threat on my Saffiano Prada bag but really what would Veronica want with a Prada bag? I also don't think Prada was in operation when she was alive so she wouldn't get the irony and value of the bag. I was woken up at 2.30am, not thinking that I'd been asleep, by a woman's voice. Sitting up in the dark I tried to make out what was being said but it was too far away. As the source of the voice got closer, the words being spoken got clearer and louder, like thunder, until I could finally make out her call. "Oh. My Children". Covered in Goosebumps I still wouldn't describe how I felt as scared. The voices tone was not loud, aggressive or haunted. I would have instead described it as loving, gentle and seeking - even soothing. I listened to the voice call "Oh. My Children" clearer and more constant until it did the opposite; getting softer and fading until all I could hear was *Ave Maria* again.

Checking out the next morning, I packed my things once I got up from a ill-rested night's sleep, my imagination running away with a million different reasons for what had gone on the night before. I planned to leave the Telltale Grande as soon as I reasonably and calmly could. Downstairs Mrs Telltale was at reception with a selection of staff. Groups of hotel representatives were standing with Homer comforting a visibly distressed Marge. Getting closer to the desk Mrs Telltale quickly talked over the top of Marge with a forced grin. Mrs Telltale came out from behind the concierge desk and placed her hand just near but not touching Marge's back "Why don't you and your husband go back to your room and I'll send you up a Champagne breakfast with croissants, fresh fruit, sparkling spring water and all the trimmings - would you like that?" Homer said that they would, Mrs Telltale continuing "Fantastic! We have crates and crates of Perrier Jouet, we should be the distributor - ever since my husband's grandfathers brother left his bride to be at the altar the family has had cellars and cellars of the stuff just laying around. I personally prefer Krug; I think Jouet is only good to marinate the fish. However I can only presume you have never had Champagne in your life so you will love it! We will find your children and while we do you two enjoy the "bubbles" and have a second

honeymoon – of course momentarily!” Homer took Marge upstairs and a now stone faced Mrs Telltale looked me up and down and walked away - snapping her fingers at the closest staff member and pointing in my direction. I checked out with no one in the lobby saying a word except the concierge and myself. All guests were silent as Mrs Telltale walked the length of the room. Silence broke into scattered whispers once the elevator carrying Mrs Telltale left the lobby. Eventually the room was littered with whispers about some children who went missing on Level 2 the night before. The tales got progressively louder as I left the concierge desk and the building - using the street exit to get some fresh air.