

Aunt Susie warned me!

by Kent Cummins

If only I hadn't bought the red one.

But who could resist a 1967 candy apple red VW Beetle convertible? Sure, it was more than ten years old, but like most VW Bugs, it had obviously been loved and cared for by the previous owner. I knew that it would be love at first sight for my wife, Margot, who loves convertibles.

But then I woke up, strangely confused. Have you ever had one of those dreams that seemed so real, that it lingered disturbingly? In my dream, I had just bought a red car, and I couldn't get it out of my head after I woke up.

You see, I would never have purchased a red automobile in real life...not even for my wife. I won't rent a red car. I don't even like riding in someone else's red car. My tricycle was yellow. My bicycle was blue. My VW Bus (the car of my dreams!) had to be orange. No, I'm not allergic to red cars. And I resent the implication that maybe I have some kind of weird phobia. I am as normal as you are.

I have an important reason to avoid red vehicles: Aunt Susie.

The story begins when I was just a small child, so young that I hadn't even had a tricycle yet. Three years old? Maybe four? Surely no older than that.

I may have been young, but I was old enough to remember certain dramatic experiences. I remember sitting in my high chair at my grandmother's house in San Antonio, watching her paint the kitchen with my mother's assistance. I particularly remember the trouble they had with

the big metal range hood, which they tried to paint silver. I guess it was more difficult to paint silver than the yellow that was all over the kitchen walls.

That high chair in my grandmother's kitchen was where I apparently spent a lot of time while Daddy was overseas, serving in the US Navy during World War II. (He never talked much about his military service, other than to say that they raced forklifts in a warehouse in Guam.) Mommy's parents also lived in San Antonio, but for some reason we were living with my father's parents. I became close to both sets of grandparents, but they were never close to each other.

My earliest memory is of my second birthday in that old house, sitting on my grandfather's lap in a big rocking chair. There were two candles on a large cake. I remember the Christmas tree in the background, which was still decorated and part of the living room decor through Epiphany: January 6, my birthday.

Maybe what I really remember is the black and white family photo, but it feels like a real memory to me. I definitely remember the mess in the kitchen during the painting project. There were no photos from that day!

We had an ice box in the kitchen. No, not a "refrigerator." It was definitely an ice box, with the ice changed every day or so. It was where we kept the oleo margarine, which had to be white when sold so it wouldn't be confused with butter. My grandmother colored it with something yellow, so it looked like butter by the time it reached the table. This is also where I was served soft boiled eggs in china cups. Later, I would find the whole idea of a not-fully-cooked egg disgusting, but it was my grandmother's house. And those egg cups were very cool.

I have lots of memories, real or imagined, or helped along by the little black and white photos. But these aren't the memories that keep me from buying or driving a red car. That happened after Daddy got back from the Navy. (By the way, photos show that I had a little sailor suit that I wore when Daddy got back. I must humbly admit that I looked adorable!)

I have so many memories from those days: the San Antonio River and the River Walk, which only had one restaurant, appropriately named Casa Rio; the Witte Museum with lots of arrowheads and a real doll house in the back; Brackenridge Park, where we rode a small train after driving our car through what seemed like a stream. Oh yes, and I was born in Del Rio, Texas, near San Antonio. Of course, I remember the Alamo!

But let's get to the heart of this story. I definitely remember an evening when my parents took me to my Uncle Vernon's church service. It wasn't anything like St James Episcopal Church, where we went on Sundays. My grandfather was from Kent County, England, so our family went to the closest thing to Anglican that San Antonio had to offer.

My uncle, Daddy's older brother, was the Reverend Vernon R. Cummins, Founder and Life President of the American Spiritualist Alliance. He headquartered in San Antonio, where he and my father had grown up, and where Daddy met Mary Lou Kent, the beautiful young lady who became my Mommy.

I know, I had "Kent" coming at me from both sides of the family!

This would have been in the mid-1940s, two decades after Harry Houdini had created a publicity sensation by exposing fake Spiritualist mediums for using magicians' tricks to separate gullible people from their money. If you went to their seance, you would probably hear "spirit voices" and might even see some ectoplasm, the mysterious substance of spirits manifesting in

this world. Seances were a popular form of entertainment, and apparently, they could be quite amazing.

But the people in my uncle's Spiritualist congregation were much like members of any small church, meeting regularly to share closely-held spiritual beliefs. They met quietly, and I never saw them produce any physical manifestations. Frankly, they were nowhere near as entertaining as the Episcopal church services, which were full of elaborate theatrical ceremony.

Spiritualist beliefs embraced the ability to find comfort by communicating with people who were no longer alive. It was this belief that first attracted Houdini to Spiritualism, since he missed his mother, with whom he had been almost morbidly close. But Houdini was never convinced that what he saw and heard was any more than trickery, and it both disappointed and angered him.

I don't recall anybody ever using the word "ghost" in the Spiritualist gatherings that I attended. I had been a member of the Episcopal Church (which worshiped the Holy Ghost), the Presbyterian Church (there was no Episcopal church in Del Rio), and ultimately the Unitarian Universalist Church (Margot and I were the first couple married in the Baton Rouge Unitarian Church), but I was never a Spiritualist. I don't believe in ghosts, no matter what they might be called.

I still have a book in my personal library called *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*. by F.W.H. Myers. While in high school, I had been buying books through the mail from University Books, mostly about the occult and other mysterious topics. I was already a magician, and I thought I should know about such things. This book was published in 1961, my

high school senior year, and it has a pencil notation that it was the 287th book in my personal library!

I read the book, but was not convinced. It seems to me that when someone dies, their spirit continues to exist in the memories of those whose lives they touched...not at tables in darkened rooms with everyone holding hands and a medium leading a seance. When a person's body dies, I believe that their personality is also extinguished, except in the memories of those left behind. And I'm okay with that.

But let me return to my vivid memory of that evening in San Antonio when we went to my uncle's Spiritualist church service.

Uncle Vernon's "church" was a simple room with simple furniture. There were no red velvet cushions on wonderful wooden pews like they had at St James. No beautiful stained glass windows depicting scenes from the Bible (the St James version of the Bible, of course). There was no choir in white robes, and no pipe organ. I don't remember if there was a cross. There might have been prayer books, though.

I can still picture myself sitting next to my mom in simple (probably folding) chairs, facing the raised platform. Small pieces of paper were passed around, on which people put their initials. These were collected in a small basket, I think, and it reminded me of the collection plates passed around on Sundays at the "real" church. I'm sure that there was also a collection at my uncle's church. Maybe people put their donations in the same basket. I really don't remember.

The Reverend Vernon R. Cummins no doubt got behind the pulpit and pontificated. I can't say I remember that from this particular evening, but I heard him many times as I was

growing up, and again when he and I were both much older. Uncle Vernon and I had a great relationship through the many years that our lives intersected.

Here is what I remember vividly. Aunt Susie, my uncle's first wife, was a Spiritualist Medium, apparently with an amazing sense of empathy and the ability to give "readings" that helped people make decisions with their lives. (Today I am reminded of Aunt Susie when I think of Deanna Troi from Star Trek, but that's yet another story.)

All of these memories keep flooding back when I try to tell this story. And it's a True Story, just as my memories are true as far as I can remember them. I would love to tell you more about my experiences with my uncle over the years, how when I was a teen, he had me do a magic show at his Second Annual Convention ("Don't do any spooky tricks!"); how he took me to a locksmith to remove the leg irons that I couldn't get off (I wanted to be like Houdini!); how I helped him run his convention years later, the year my dad was sick. I think these are all great stories!

But let's get back to that simple Spiritualist church service. Aunt Susie would pick up a slip of paper from the basket, concentrate, and then give some information or advice. She would then read the initials, and ask the person who wrote them to raise their hand.

I now know a magic trick that works in this scenario, but there was no "smoke and mirrors" here. Nobody had "taken a card, any card," and as far as I know, there was "nothing up her sleeve." There were probably no magicians in the room, either on stage or in the audience. It would still be a few years before Daddy gave me my first A.C. Gilbert Mysto Magic set. I understood that we were in a church, that these were sincere readings. In later years, my interactions with Spiritualists bolstered this belief.

Susie picked up a piece of paper, closed her eyes and concentrated. Then she said, “This person should not buy or drive a red car.” (Or words to that effect. Remember, this was nearly seventy-five years ago.) She then opened the paper and read the initials. “Who is KC?”

I raised my hand.

The congregation laughed, and I think Aunt Susie must have been flustered for a moment. But then she said, “...or a red bicycle!”

I am not a Spiritualist. I don't believe in the survival of human personality after bodily death. I eventually became a professional magician, so I am probably more skeptical than most people. I don't read my horoscope (I am a Capricorn, and we don't believe in these things). I don't go to fortune tellers. I don't believe in ghosts.

I know how the tricks are done.

I have never purchased or rented a red car...or a red bicycle. But there's no reason I can't! I dreamed about a bright red Cadillac convertible just last night.....