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THINGS UNSEEN

I'd like to believe in things I can't see—the unknown, spirits and all that. I'd like to, but I just can't. My wife says that I'm lacking in faith. I don't know if it's lack of faith or lack of evidence. The way I see it, if I can't see something, or hear it or touch it, how am I supposed to know it's really there?

Look, my mother died two months ago. After the funeral, we all came back to the house and when we came in, all the photos of my mother and my older brother, Jack, were face down. I saw this, but I don't know how the pictures got that way. There were all sitting upright on the mantel and the piano and the end table when we left, and there was nobody in the house while we were gone, but there they were—every single one face down. It was me and my wife and my daughter, Lucy, and her husband and her two kids standing there. The kids are only eight and ten, so we tried to act nonchalant about the whole thing, but it was creepy standing there in my mother's living room and having all the pictures of her and my older brother who's been dead for 40 years lying face down. No explanation.

I'm not a scientist or an engineer or anything, but I spent 32 years at the Ford plant in Brookpark, Ohio, building cars with my own two hands, so I know a thing or two about mechanics and all that. I certainly know that you need to have some kind of force to knock something over. Things don't just fall over all by themselves. Even a feather or a piece of dust has to get moved by something. Things don't move themselves. At least that's what I keep telling my wife. She wants to chalk the whole thing up to some kind of supernatural phenomena. You see, when my brother Jack died in Vietnam, they buried

him over at Veterans' Memorial Cemetery. I was only 13 when he died, but I remember him—a good guy, a good older brother. Signed up when he turned 18, went away to war, and was dead by the time he was 20. My mother never got over his death, even after 40 years. He died for his country and she thought he deserved the honor of a flag on his grave. So twice a year, on his birthday and Memorial Day, she'd go out to the cemetery and place a wreath and a tiny Stars and Stripes on his grave. I went with her to the cemetery every time until I moved out and started a family of my own. My mother never missed a visit. It never really bothered me, her making a fuss about him even after he was dead. It never seemed to bother my father either. The three of us used to make quite a picture, getting dressed up in our Sunday best twice a year just to visit a gravesite. I went because it meant so much to my mother. I guess my Dad did too. We went, all three of us together, for a long time. Then it was just my mother and father, and after Dad died, just my mother.

She never wavered in her devotion to Jack, either. She even tried to buy the plot next to his but she wasn't allowed because Jack's in a veterans-only cemetery. That's why when we walked into the house after the funeral and saw all the pictures of my mother and Jack turned face down, my wife said that my mother must be upset, that it must be a sign of some kind. She blamed the whole thing on my mother's ghost. I can't buy that. I know there's all sorts of reasons why the pictures could be turned down—an earthquake, one of the kids slamming the door on the way out, a heavy truck going too fast down our street—it could be anything. I know for a fact that they are doing construction of a new strip mall not four blocks from my mother's house; one of those trucks could easily have gone speeding down her street and caused enough vibrations to make the pictures fall face down. When I tried to explain this to her, my wife didn't want to hear it. I don't know why she insists that it be just this one thing when it could be so many other things.

We buried my mother in St. Benedict's, right next to my father. It's funny, because I don't have any strong memories of them together, just individual memories of them—like for instance, me going fishing or to the hardware store with my father, or having my mother bring me a lemonade after I mowed the lawn. I don't have a whole lot of memories of the two of them together, but there they are, lying right next to each other for all eternity. It's a shame that Jack isn't there, and I know it hurt my mother that she could never manage to arrange it so that she'd be buried next to him. She kept all those pictures of him around to remind herself of him. There's pictures of me too, of course, she didn't go overboard with the photos of Jack, but she always seemed kind of disappointed when she saw me, like somehow she was angry with me for growing older or changing. Those pictures of Jack never change. He's always 20 years old with a freshly shaved crew cut and a uniform and this cocky little grin. I tell you, there were a couple times through the years when I was almost tempted to turn down all those pictures of him myself, just to get away from his face. Don't get me wrong, I loved my brother—still love him, loved my parents. I never felt jealous or neglected or any of that crap you hear people spouting off about on talk shows. We were a solid family. I've got no complaints, none whatsoever. It's just that I already had mixed feelings about those pictures, so to see them all lying face down after the funeral threw me for a loop. But like I said, I can find explanations for the pictures. That can be explained with a little bit of rational thinking and logic.

If it was just the pictures, it wouldn't be so weird, but the pictures were just the first thing, and it was the second thing that really got me. You see, my wife and I went out to visit my mother's grave yesterday. We had been out there right after the funeral, but I wanted to go out and see it again, just to make sure that everything was okay and like she wanted it, you know? My mother and father are buried near a tree, not quite under it, since that spot was already taken when they tried to buy their plots, but it's close to the tree, in a nice spot. It's okay. Like I said, we were out there right after the funeral,

and I had visited the burial plot when we were making all the arrangements, and I've visited my father's grave enough, so it's not like I don't know the area. I know the names of all the people buried around my parents. I'm not trying to sound morbid or anything, it's just one of those things you notice. So my wife and I went out to visit the grave yesterday, and right next to my mother's grave was this new headstone, a tiny thing, a baby's headstone. According to the dates on the stone, the kid wasn't even two years old. But the thing is, his name was Jack. The name on the stone was Jack—no last name, just Jack. And I could even put that down as a coincidence, I could. Things like that happen all the time. Hell, I even saw my own name on a gravestone once, and sure, it chills your blood for a minute, but you know it's just a coincidence. The thing I can't explain though, is the little Stars and Stripes that was planted in front of the baby's headstone. It was just like the kind my mother always used to put on Jack's grave—the kind you put on a veteran's grave, not on a baby's grave.

I don't believe in ghosts and spirits and all that, but I can't explain this. My wife keeps insisting that this all means that my mother and my brother are together again and that they're happy. I guess she means they're in heaven, wherever that is. I don't know what it means. It if had been just one thing or the other—just the pictures or just the headstone or just the little Stars and Stripes, I could find an explanation for it. That kid just happened to be named Jack and just happened to be buried next to my mother. Coincidence. It could have been there for a while and I just didn't notice. Or someone put an American flag on a baby's grave because the father was a vet. That kind of thing happens. There are explanations when things happen by themselves, but all these things happening together make me wonder. A series of events ought to have meaning. Or maybe they're just a series of isolated incidents and we start connecting them together on our own. Like the other day, I was doing a connect the dots puzzle with one of my granddaughters, and she kept trying to connect the dots to make a picture that wasn't supposed to be there—she thought you could connect them any way you wanted to make your own

picture. She didn't understand that there was only one picture in there, hidden, and you had to connect the right dots in the right order to find it. I'd like to have these things mean something, to make some kind of picture. I'd like to believe in something beyond just dying and being put in the ground, but dying and being put in the ground is all I've ever seen until now. And I'm not even sure of what I've seen. It'd be nice if there was something more than what I could see, and I'd like to believe in it. I'm just not sure there is.