

The Devil and Don Decker

The Case of the Rain Boy Poltergeist—Solved

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“Where we have strong emotions, we are liable to fool ourselves.” —Carl Sagan

ON FEBRUARY 24, 1983, 20 YEAR-OLD DON DECKER of Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, was on a furlough from the Monroe county jail to attend the funeral of his grandfather, 63 year-old James Kishaugh. Decker, who was serving time for receiving stolen property, said he became distraught upon seeing the outpouring of sympathy for his grandfather, whom he despised. Witnesses claim that Decker soon entered a trance and was responsible for a mysterious indoor rain, that he floated and exhibited telekinesis (moving objects with his mind), as well as making a cross feel hot. Does the Decker case offer proof of paranormal powers or is there a scientific explanation?

This incident is among the most compelling claims of paranormal activity ever recorded and is supported by the testimony of no fewer than four police officers and a jail supervisor, and was featured on popular TV shows such as *Unsolved Mysteries* and *Paranormal Witness*. For decades, this case has been touted as defying scientific explanation. (Unless otherwise noted, the quotations within are based on interviews from the TV show *Paranormal Witness*).¹

The Episode

While on compassionate leave from the Monroe County Correctional Facility in the Pocono Mountains of extreme east-central Pennsylvania, on the evening of Saturday, February 26, Don Decker was staying at the home of family friends Bob and Jeanie Keiffer at 528 Ann Street. Decker said that he was in the upstairs bathroom washing before supper when he felt strange and confused, fell to the floor and had a vision of an old man wearing a crown, staring at him in a window. He then noticed three deep scratches running down his right wrist.

He got up, washed off the blood and went downstairs to eat with the family. When Bob Keiffer noticed the blood, Decker told him of the vision and attributed the wound to Satan. Soon the Deckers noticed water dripping from the walls and ceiling. The appearance of the “rain” coincided with a loud noise from above. Keiffer phoned his landlord, Ron Van Why, who soon arrived. The pair went upstairs to investigate the only plausible explanation they could think of: leaky pipes, but could find none. Keiffer said, “We thought there had to be some kind of leak but there’s no water in that end of the house [where it was “raining”] ... there’s no water lines in any place but the kitchen and the bathroom which were in the back of the house.”

Upon going downstairs, the men were startled to see Decker in a trance. Believing that the house was now possessed by an evil force, Mr. Keiffer phoned police. Officer John Baujan and patrolman Richard Wolbert soon arrived. Baujan said that not only was there “rain” but that “droplets would come from the floor...defying gravity.” After the police left, the Keiffers and Van Whys confronted Decker, accusing him of causing the “rain.” Suddenly, they said that pots and pans hanging in the kitchen began to clang and that Decker levitated off the ground and was flung against a wall. Decker said he felt a pain in his arm and saw deep, bloody scratches running the length of his forearm that formed the shape of a king’s cross near the joint of his inner elbow. By now the Van Whys and Keiffers were convinced that Decker was possessed by the Devil. Officer Baujan soon returned to the house and found an electric atmosphere with Mrs. Keiffer in the living room reading the 23rd Psalm of the Bible in an effort to “exorcise” Decker. Baujan said that he too now believed that Decker was possessed by the Devil. Adding to the eerie atmosphere, the mysterious “rain” remained confined only to the living room.

Later that evening Baujan and Wolbert brought Stroudsburg police chief Gary Roberts to the house. He was unimpressed that anything unnatural was occurring and ordered his officers to leave and not file a report. The next day Stroudsburg police officers William Davies and John Rundle visited the Keiffer home against their chief's wishes, and claimed to observe Decker's body being flung through the air. Davies said that when he handed him a gold cross, Decker dropped it claiming it burned his skin. "All of a sudden, he lifted up off the ground and he flew across the room with a force as though a bus had hit him. There were three claw marks on the side of his neck, which drew blood," Rundle said.

Decker was soon back in the Monroe Correctional Facility, but when he entered his cell the rain reportedly returned as water began to drip from the ceiling. His cellmate panicked and was moved to a separate block. Two guards then challenged Decker to use his "powers" to splash their shift supervisor Dave Keenhold with water. A short time later, Keenhold, who was in his office in a distant part of the jail, said he was struck in the chest by a drop of water. The incident convinced Keenhold that Decker was indeed possessed by an evil force and he summoned the jail's chaplain, William Blackburn, to perform an exorcism. The two were placed in a room where Blackburn performed a brief exorcism, during which they both said it began to "rain." Decker said he felt a great relief. After the ritual the strange events never recurred.

In the Eye of the Beholder

At the time of the events, Decker was under extreme stress, serving jail time and experiencing the death of a relative whom he loathed. While so-called trance states may be triggered by stress and do not necessarily denote mental illness or disorder, they are also easily faked. It is remarkable that Decker did not receive medical attention; instead, attempts were made to exorcise him. If the witnesses were so quick to assume a demonic explanation, their perceptions may have been affected by their willingness to interpret other naturalistic events within a supernatural framework.

The witnesses' actions are also inconsistent with the nature of the claims. Imagine—you are in a house where supernatural events are supposedly occurring; an indoor "rain" is moving upward from the floor, and a man supposedly levitates and can move objects with his mind. If documented it is a monumental event in the history of science, for it would defy the laws of physics as we know them and demonstrate the existence of paranormal activity. It was an event spanning several days and supported by numerous witnesses. So



Screen grabs from the television show *Paranormal Witness*

(Top to bottom) Don Decker recounts his story on *Paranormal Witness*; Decker's purported levitation is recreated for the camera; Recreation of rain dripping down the walls of the Keiffer home; Dramatization of Decker in a trance on the couch as rain falls inside the Keiffer home. Screen grabs courtesy of Maxine Shen of NBC Universal and the Sy Fy Channel.

why didn't anyone bother to record these happenings with a video camera or take photos? Decker's forearm supposedly had deep scratches and the bloody image of a king's cross. Why didn't anyone photograph the scratches and the image? These inactions are more consistent with events that became exaggerated over time.

On officer Baujan's first visit, he reported that a drop of water materialized out of thin air and flew horizontally through the room. So what does he do soon after witnessing this amazing event? He and his partner leave! Surely they had access to video equipment or a camera that could have documented this remarkable occurrence. Why not phone the local TV station to record this event? All we are left with are eyewitness accounts from excited observers with a worldview that includes the reality of the Devil.

Police are often touted as "trained observers" whose testimony is beyond reproach, yet they are not trained to detect trickery and they too can be fooled. Officer Baujan reported that water droplets were materializing out of thin air and flying horizontally through the room. Baujan said: "Droplets would come from the floor, absolutely defying gravity. It was truly amazing.... When all of a sudden this drop materializes.... It flies through the living room, through the dining room and into the darkness of the kitchen and out of sight." If it was so amazing, why not record it? Instead he leaves the house, then returns later with police chief Roberts (but still no camera), who did not interpret the "rain" as paranormal.

Human perception is notoriously unreliable even under ideal conditions. Stress can alter perceptions, and it is difficult to imagine few events more stressful than believing that you are in the presence of a man who is possessed by demonic forces. Shortly after the "rain" began, Bob Keiffer and his landlord examined the upstairs pipes for leaks but failed to check the most likely cause: the roof, because as Mr. Van Why observed, "it hadn't been raining outside for days." Mr. Van Why, Officer Baujan, Bob and Jeanette Keiffer, and Ron and Romaine Van Why all concluded that an evil force was responsible for the "rain." Ron said: "There was no shadow of doubt in my mind. I was in the presence of evil." Mr. Keiffer concurred: "I thought there was some kind of spirit controlling him. Some kind of demon in him." Officer Baujan even concluded at the time that the strange events were the work of "the Devil."

It is notable that Baujan said the same phe-

nomena that they witnessed, was witnessed by their chief. "When the chief got to the house, he was pelted with rain just as Rich (Wolbert) and I were." Yet Chief Roberts considered the water to be a natural event.² Roberts was called to the house on two separate occasions and saw nothing unusual. "Sometimes what people believe happens and what actually happens are two different things," he said defiantly.³ A skeptic regarding such matters, he was also an outsider and had moved to Stroudsburg three years earlier to take up the position of chief.⁴

Despite using firsthand accounts from many of the original eyewitnesses, the TV re-enactments were far from accurate. For instance, Mr. Van Why said that when he first arrived at the house he noticed nothing out of the ordinary, and that it was not until he sat in the living room that he first noticed very light rain coming from the ceiling. Yet on both *Paranormal Witness* and *Unsolved Mysteries* segments, Mr. Van Why arrives to see heavy "rain" pouring down.

Decker's Return to Jail

When Decker returned to jail the rain supposedly followed him. Yet before arriving, word had spread of his rain-making ability and many guards and inmates were expecting some type of rain event. "All the inmates heard what was going on at the house. They were all scared. The guards—they were scared too," Decker said. Keenhold noted that after looking at Decker's demeanour, "we felt that the supernatural was present." Keenhold told *Paranormal Witness* matter-of-factly: "Water was all over his cell. Water was going horizontal, vertical, climbing up the walls, defying the laws of gravity." Yet Keenhold told reporter Christina Tatu that he never visited Decker in his cell!⁵ How can he appear so certain of this event if he is relying on second hand accounts? At the very least, *Paranormal Witness* is guilty of giving the impression that Keenhold was there. What other selective use of evidence was employed? The documentary gives only one side of the story; there are no interviews with skeptics, and conspicuously absent is the testimony of then police chief Gary Roberts. Is the purpose of this show to uncover the truth or create the impression of a mystery when one does not exist in order to obtain high ratings?

If the evidence was clear and convincing, why not take a photo or video? Where are the other witnesses? Surely if one were to see water moving up a wall, you would summon others to observe this remarkable event. Why not contact the FBI or university experts in physics to investigate? The water in

his cell could have been thrown there from the sink or from a leaky roof. Instead of assuming a natural explanation such as an optical illusion, Keenhold calls on the jail chaplain because he assumes that Decker is possessed by the Devil.

In 2011, *Paranormal Witness* depicted Keenhold sitting in his office several locked doors away, when a massive droplet hit him “in about the center of my sternum about 4 inches long, two inches wide, I was just saturated with water.” In 1993, Keenhold told *Unsolved Mysteries* that he was unaware of having been struck by the water until a guard entered the room and pointed out that he had a wet patch on his chest and that Decker had said he would make it rain on him. It was only then that he attributed the moisture to Decker and became convinced that he was possessed by an evil force. It is not uncommon for people to sweat near their sternum. While Keenhold said he was “saturated,” the dampness could not have been too significant as he said he was not even aware of it until the guard noted it. Keenhold said his first thought was that he spilled something on his shirt, but he had not recently been around water.⁶ Yet in *Paranormal Witness*, Keenhold said that prior to the incident, he “had just finished with the evening meal,” a scenario that would have placed him amongst a variety of liquid sources.

An Extraordinary Coincidence

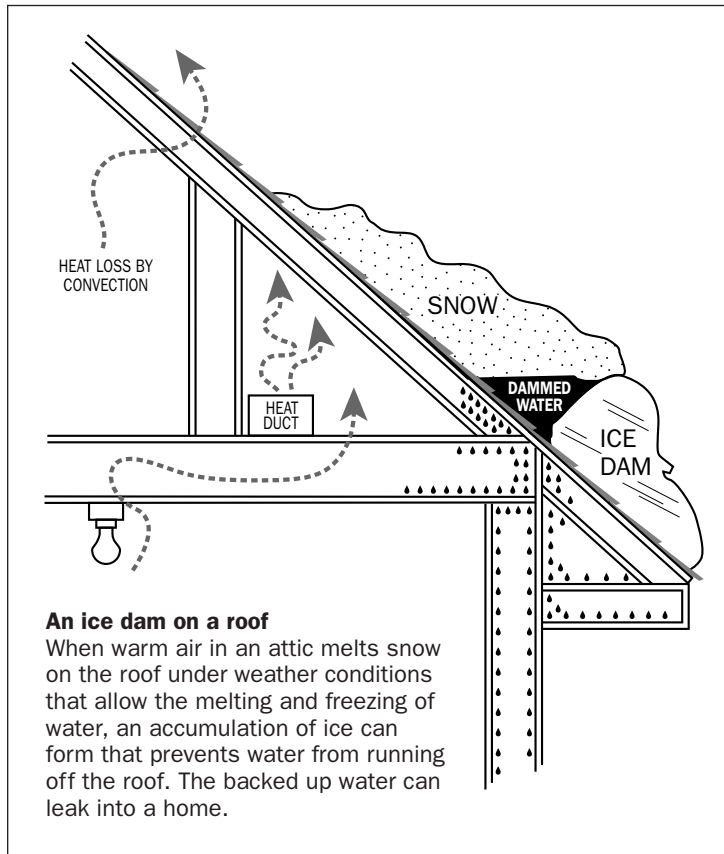
Assuming that something happened that calls for a natural explanation, according to a report on moisture problems in manufactured homes published by the Manufactured Housing Research Alliance, Pennsylvania is at “moderate to high risk for winter moisture problems,” with one of the most severe events being ice damming.⁷ This is caused by warm air entering an attic that melts snow on the outer surface of a roof, resulting in an accumulation of ice under which pools of water form and eventually leak. Ice dams are common after major snowstorms in areas where the temperatures rise above freezing during the day and fall below 32°F at night.

Such conditions were applicable in Stroudsburg, PA. According to the weather records for the nearby town of Scranton, February 11 to 28, 1983, 13 days before the strange indoor “rain,” there was a record snowfall across central and eastern Pennsylvania.⁸ Philadelphia measured its heaviest accumulation for any February storm with 21.3 inches.⁹ East Stroudsburg University measured one inch of snow on the 10th and 16 inches on the 11th.¹⁰ Scranton is the nearest weather station with temperature read-

ings, 37 miles from Stroudsburg. After the storm on the 11th, clear, cold weather settled in. Then between the 14th and 25th, the daytime temperatures were above freezing by up to 20°, and with 3 exceptions they were below freezing at night—ideal conditions for ice damming as the snow would have melted by day and refrozen overnight. Then on the fateful evening of the 26th, there was a mild cold snap with a daytime high of 26° and an overnight low of 20°.

One of the features that perplexed the occupants and officer Baujan was the “rain” being confined to one room. Patrick Huelman of the University of Minnesota is a specialist in environmental design and ice damming. He says that it is actually common for ice damming events to be limited to a small portion of a house such as a single room. But how does one explain Bob Keiffer’s remark that the “rain” dripping down the walls had a strange consistency? “It wasn’t water as you know water...it was a sticky, tacky feeling,” he said. Huelman says that water running down ceilings and walls often mixes with resins in the wood or residue from plaster, giving the water a tacky feel.¹¹

The first sign anything was amiss with the



house, according to *Unsolved Mysteries*, was that water was seen dripping down the walls and was shortly thereafter falling from the ceiling. Huelman observes that ice dam events commonly involve “symptoms beginning at the outer edge and working in toward the ceiling.” Just as the “rain” first appeared in the Keiffer home, the occupants reported hearing a loud crash from above. Such sounds are consistent with ice damming. Why would the ice crack on the 26th? As water expands when freezing it commonly results in popping and cracking noises accompanied by what could have been a section of ice cracking or falling off the roof, releasing the dammed water.

The occupants noted a damp chill in the house, particularly in the living room where the “rain” was falling. “Within seconds of entering that room I had this cold feeling,” said Baujan. One plausible explanation is that water began seeping into the insulation, causing it to become a poor insulator of heat. Combined with the cold water dripping from the walls and ceiling, this could easily make the indoor temperature feel several degrees cooler—and damp. In folklore, the presence of ghosts, spirits and demons are traditionally associated with a chill; this only served to enhance the belief that in a demonic presence at the house.

Enter the Poltergeist

The Decker case is an instance of allegedly paranormal high jinks that are popularly attributed to poltergeists (German for “noisy spirits”). Typically such disturbances—knocking sounds, thrown objects, outbreaks of fire or water, and the like—tend to center around a child or young adult who is emotionally disturbed. When such cases have been properly investigated by magicians and detectives, they usually turn out to be hoaxes: a little girl is caught on camera breaking an object, then scampering back to bed; or a couple’s 12-year-old adopted daughter is detected when tracer powder surreptitiously dusted on certain household objects is later discovered on her hands. The motivation turns out to be a need for attention, the release of repressed hostility, or the like.¹²

In many instances, “poltergeist” outbreaks soon evolve into “demonical possession.”¹³ Just this transformation happened in the case of the “true story” behind the 1973 horror movie *The Exorcist*. The teenage boy was always around when objects went flying, and in time scratches began to appear on his body as he showed additional signs of “possession,” including “trances” and other manifesta-

tions. An investigation and analysis of the case based on information in a priest’s diary, showed that all of the phenomena could have been accomplished by the teenager who was, indeed, actually observed on one occasion inflicting scratches on himself.¹⁴

Such cases illuminate the Rain Boy Poltergeist manifestations. How do we explain Lt. Davies’ observation that when he and two colleagues visited the house the next day, Decker levitated, and when he gave Decker a gold cross to hold, he dropped it on the floor complaining that it burned his hands? But Davies never said the cross was so hot that it burned him. “Not hot hot, but it’s hot,” he told *Unsolved Mysteries*. Sensations of hot and cold are very subjective. As for the levitation claim, it is worth recalling the context of the visit by Davies and his colleagues. Decker reportedly exhibits a variety of supernatural powers and the next day police visited the house to verify it; that was their explicit purpose for being there. Surely they would have taken a camera or video recorder; that they did not, immediately raises red flags. Perhaps the events were so unremarkable that the officers did not deem them worthwhile. It is more likely that Decker flung himself into a wall and this event became exaggerated with time. It stretches credulity that these officers did not think to videotape or photograph these remarkable events—if they were as remarkable at the time as we have been led to believe.

In 2012, both Keenhold and Mr. Van Why were asked by reporter Christina Tatu why they did not take photos. “He (Keenhold) said most people used Polaroids back then, which would have been too slow to capture the events. Van Why said people just didn’t carry around cameras back then.”¹⁵ Not true. Pocket cameras were inexpensive and plentiful at the time. The *1983 Montgomery Ward Catalogue*, for example, lists pocket cameras for as little as \$17.95.¹⁶ There is no reason why a Polaroid would have been too slow to capture the alleged events. The difference between a Polaroid and a conventional camera of the period was that the former produced no negatives and the image developed within a few minutes instead of waiting for it to undergo chemical processing. If these key witnesses failed to recall that cameras were plentiful at the time—and clearly they did—what else did they get wrong? Another example of how events likely became exaggerated over time are claims about the mysterious “rain” pouring down inside the Keiffer house during police visits. It could not have been

too perceptible as at one point police placed a bag over Decker's head to eliminate the possibility of his causing the "rain" by spitting.¹⁷ Yet in both the *Paranormal Witness* and *Unsolved Mystery* versions of events, those inside the house are drenched by a heavy rain.

Natural or Supernatural?

The most plausible explanation is that Decker feigned a trance while those around him—all of whom held deep religious beliefs—interpreted natural events within a Christian frame of reference. Where most residents would phone a building contractor at the first sign of a leaky ceiling, the Keiffers rang the police. Where most people would have sought medical aid for someone who was in a supposed trance, neither the police nor the Keiffers did so. Where most corrections supervisors who saw a prisoner with a "strange look" would have thought little of it, Keenhold assumed that Decker was possessed by a demonic presence. When most police go to a house and cannot explain something, they do not assume that one of the occupants is possessed by the Devil.

The most likely explanation for the "rain" is snowmelt seeping through the ceiling from the attic as a result of ice damming, in conjunction with psychological stress and human imagination.

Deception is also a distinct possibility. Decker could have augmented an existing phenomenon with tricks. As for Decker's purported levitation, it is worth noting a recurrent pattern in poltergeist cases: the central figure is often caught throwing objects or engaging in other trickery to convince those present of his or her powers. The one person who supposedly can make objects move and who levitates, has a criminal record. Three years after the episode, Decker was back in jail after pleading guilty to burglary.¹⁸ Then in October 2012, Decker was arrested again, and charged with arson and mail fraud.¹⁹ Decker claims that he was twice flung through the air. In the one instance where detail is provided, we were told that he travelled just five or six feet, landing against a wall. Did Decker hurl himself against the wall when no one was looking directly at him? That is the simplest explanation.

The Rain Boy case is seductive because if accepted at face value, it seems to provide modern-day proof of the existence of the Devil (and hence God), and ultimately, proof of life after death. Keenhold would later observe: "One of the officers actually told me, 'We were looking into the eyes of the devil. We didn't realize who we were messing with!'"²⁰ We would be wise to recall the words of Shakespeare: "Or in the night, imagining some fear, How easy is a bush supposed a bear!" ■

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