
Title Tips by TUTE: Title Through the Interdimensional Portal

Description

It was All Saint's Eve and I was working. Pope Gregory (I forget if it was the III or the IV) would not be happy. This is supposed to be a day of prayer and atonement, one in which the restless spirits of the dead are calmed by the saintly behavior of the living, but my boss at Spectral Title had lost (misplaced, he said) a rush order with a hard deadline and it could not wait until after the Solemnity of All Souls.

Spectral Title is a niche provider. Most title companies only worry about liens and encumbrances — judgments, loans, restrictions, easements and the like. The founder of Spectral believed that land, like people, has karma of its own, and that karma has as much to do with the success of a project as the engineering, planning and esthetic design. Our examiners are specialists, highly empathic, capable of detecting the tiniest rifts in the supernatural (or sociological, it depends on who you ask) history of land. These "ghostly matters" he says, are signifiers of a presence which does not appear to be present, a reflection of a supernatural truth hidden in modernity's disdain of the supernatural. I am not the best dowser in the shop (to be honest, I am probably the worst, which I suspect is why I got the assignment — no dowser worth their salt would be caught dead dipping into the Inter-Dimensional flows this close to All Saints Day), but my boss said it would be fine, the heightened flow would compensate for my lack of sensitivity. And the customer hadn't asked for a full depth analysis, just a level one survey.

What is a level one survey? It is similar in scope to the first level EPA study — you wander around the title looking for signifiers of damage. The EPA looks for the results from toxic chemicals; we look for resonances from toxic behavior. How does that work? Heck if I know. It has something to do with the empathic senses, and something to do with evolutionary self-protection. Everyone is familiar with the latter . . . you go out in the woods and as you are walking down a perfectly clear path, you start to get nervous . . . and then you hear something in the bushes . . . and your senses tick the meter up to DefCon Two or One. Sometimes it is just the wind, and sometimes it is a nasty little critter. Humanity evolved by keeping the "fight or flight" response fine tuned to the threats of the era . . . my boss thinks the growing empathic sensitivity to the supernatural suggests there is a growing threat from that direction, and the species is evolving in order to protect itself. I can't contradict him on the science, but I hope he's wrong. There are some really nasty things on the other side and I'd rather they stay over there. I asked him once if our examinations weren't making it easier for them to cross over, thinking our trips back and forth (or up and down — whichever direction it is over there) weaken whatever makes up the barrier. All he said was the jury was still out on that question, but I figured it was not a coincidence that our examination room was locked behind three levels of security (that I know of). Most examiners carry personal protection as well, holy water, sacred relics, and the like. You just can't be too careful when your daily task can put you within reach of cold hearted villains, jilting lovers, and massacring armies.

Personal safety aside, how does this process work? We all know that title examination is limited to the words in the documents recorded in the land records. Psychic resonance has nothing to do with words,

but the agency founders invented some sort of doohickey (a technical term) with a holographic screen that when connected to the land records could sense something of what was â??between the linesâ?? and an operator with the correct empathic neural pathways can â??seeâ?? the story overlaid on top of the deed. It isnâ??t a time machine (at least I donâ??t think so) but some sort of a â??time viewerâ?? with the holographic projection representing the wall between the observer and the observed.

Given that this is 21st century America, most of the really interesting stuff is found well past the sixty year period of the typical title exam. You get the occasional murder on the premises that leaves an impression, but unless the victim (or the murderer) had a strong psychic sensibility, the traces are slight. Spectral does some work overseas, where the period of examination can go back 2000 years. That is out of my depth, but Iâ??ve heard some pretty awful stories from the medieval period. For this examination, the customer was primarily concerned with the residue from two periods: the 1860s and the 1620s. Plus any particularly vivid residue arising from some individual that touched and concerned the real estate . . . it might be the owner, a family member, or a visitor.

This project started off fairly well with a minor bump in the 1920s. It seems the owner of the property had remarried after his first wife died, but she (the first wife) did not approve of his choice and proceeded to haunt the family home. Not knowing exactly why his new wife was so uncomfortable, but being a reasonable man, he sold the property and moved on. The first wife, being a spectral apparition, was locked to the land and still made the occasional complaining appearance.

The customer was right to be concerned with the 1860s. Not only had the ownerâ??s daughter pined away when her beau never returned from Camp Douglas, but there had been two or three fairly brief, but fatal, skirmishes fought on the property, with troops still lying where they fell in the fields. I made a note that a more thorough archaeological investigation would be required to give the troops an honorable burial and began looking for the next link in the chain of title.

â??Youâ??ll never find it that way,â?? I heard a voice say. Iâ??ll admit I jumped in my seat. Iâ??ve never had the land records talk back to me. I looked through the screen and saw the ownerâ??s daughter, seated at the top of the stairs leading up to the shady veranda running the width of the house. â??Daddy canâ??t spell too well, and Grand-daddy was worse.â??

She was looking directly at me. This was not good. Iâ??d been told spirits on the other side could sometimes sense a viewing, but the system was not supposed to be a two-way link. Obviously, what I had been told was wrong, or, at the very least, was wrong today. There was no mistaking the fact that she saw me, or something exactly where I was manifesting.

â??Excuse me,â?? I said. â??I didnâ??t mean to disturb you.â?? I couldnâ??t say I didnâ??t mean to intrude, that was my job, but I certainly didnâ??t want to attract any attention while doing so. â??What is it I wonâ??t find?â?? And because I am terminally curious â??And what is it you can see? Can you actually see me?â?? I think my voice may have squeaked on that last question, but Iâ??m not sure.

â??Youâ??re looking for Grand-daddyâ??s deed. Iâ??ve seen the lawyers down at the courthouse do the same thing more times than I can count. Every time Daddy goes to the bank to get a seed loan. None of them can find it the first time because of the spelling. I swear Banker Branch sends the loan to a different lawyer each time just to keep them humble. He is such a character. Daddy sends me over to the County seat to do the shopping and â??help outâ?? the lawyers so he gets the loan faster.â??

“And if you are a scholarly looking gentleman, although, land sakes, you don’t dress like a gentleman or a scholar, sitting at a desk or table with some sort of glowing box in front of you, then, yes, I most certainly can see you. You seem to be behind a curtain with what looks like a deed on it. Although, if I may ask, how did your desk get on our land? Why is your desk on our land?” Her hand caressed a shotgun I just noticed lying on the veranda next to her.

“I’m terribly sorry, Miss,” I stuttered, watching her hands closely, and moving my right hand from the keyboard in the direction of the power switch (the solution to all computer errors). “I can’t explain the science of it, but I am not actually on your land, only a picture of me. Once I find the proper deed, my picture will move on.”

“That is good to know,” she replied, “Daddy is not fond of trespassers, and my fiancé would be disturbed should word I was entertaining company without observing the proprieties of civilized behavior reach him. He’s off north but I pray he’ll be included in the next prisoner exchange.”

This was weird. Our conversation tended to support the empathic residue I picked up, although still at some indeterminate time in the future. I really wanted to go home, but curiosity overwhelmed my good sense. “Have you had problems with trespassers?”

“Daddy chased off a Yankee scouting patrol last month. Well, he said he chased them off, but we’ve had no other visits since, and I think that is not the typical military response to losing a scout. Wouldn’t their commanding officer want to know what happened, and send someone else to look for them?”

“That is outside my area of expertise, but if I were their commanding officer, I would like to know what happened,” I agreed. “I see you are taking reasonable precautions, but suggest the shotgun be reserved for a true emergency. Not all Yankees are barbarians; but equally, not all are gentlemen. Keep it close to hand, but not so close you are perceived as a threat. But I do need to move on. As pleasant as our conversation is, I must continue with my assigned task. Do you recall the recording reference for your Grandfather’s deed?”

After thanking her for her company and entering the recording reference she provided, the screen faded to a new scene. As the forest began to materialize, I heard a “THWUNK” and suddenly an arrow protruded from the holographic screen. As I yelped in dismay my hand hit the power button, ending the examination with the 1620 era left unvisited. I noted “hostile Indian activity” in my notes, and left the examination room, locking all three doors on my way out.



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1. Columns

Date Created

2018/10/03

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