

Hanging with Mr. Cooper : The Cooper Family Photo Urban Legend

Come with me for a second to the world of imagination.

You're in the 1950s.

You're the wife in a young family in Texas in the 1950s.

You're white, so times are good.

So good, in fact, you're buying your first house.

You move in, you're getting the furniture situated.

You work all day at the move, and then you head to the kitchen to get dinner together.

Your first meal at your new house, your mother came over to help with the move.

You do it up to thank her, light some candles, break out the gravy boat, make some jelly with hotdogs and peas in it.

After dinner you're hanging out at the table, your kids are sitting on you and your mothers laps.

Real Norman Rockwell shit.

Your husband decides to capture the moment.

And you go on with your evening.

The move goes on without a hitch and you're settling into your new home.

A few weeks later, you've filled up the camera roll with memories of your first home-buying experience.

Your husband takes the film in to get developed.

You wait a couple of days, life goes on, you're loving the house and the segregated neighborhood you've moved into.

You get the envelope, you're excited to see the pictures, you're already thinking about frames and how you'll eventually fill up an entire wall with family photos.

You open the pictures and you're admiring the life you're building reflected back at you.

Smiling faces, excitement at making a change.

Then you notice something strange in one of the photos.

Something that doesn't belong.

It's the photo of you and your mother at the dining room table.

There you are with your kids, all smiling for the camera.

But next to your grinning faces is the dangling, upside down body.

The face is a featureless black mass, but the hair appears to be swept, as if the photo caught them mid swing next to your dinner table, their head brushing the candles flames.

Who are they? Were they alive? Was someone really there? No one saw the body at the time, but its faceless form haunts you, and likely the house you'd been trying to make into a home.

So JD, here's the [image in question](https://external-preview.redd.it/LAiGocnF5RcjXMSOPyrW5-dwBCutwl3bLEWZ6Gmss7s.jpg?auto=webp&v=enabled&s=b5e70a71dc2699e5b9e8e7a7beb5c3a401f222ed):

<https://external-preview.redd.it/LAiGocnF5RcjXMSOPyrW5-dwBCutwl3bLEWZ6Gmss7s.jpg?auto=webp&v=enabled&s=b5e70a71dc2699e5b9e8e7a7beb5c3a401f222ed>

You can see we've got two women seated at a table, each with a child on their lap, they're on the right side of the frame, and then on the left side there's a figure who appears to be falling through the roof, there's not a super clear face on the figure, they're hanging upside down and the edge of their figure looks blurry, almost like they're still in motion.

Have you seen this image before?

It's been a fixture of the internet paranormal space since at least 2009, so it's really been a part of my virtual life since I really started going online.

It's been a real mainstay of listicles, so if you spent a lot of time on Cracked, I can almost guarantee you've seen it.

We love a listicle here on ISYM, obviously, and when you're writing one up, having something like this photo, and the story that goes with it is a real time saver.

But the story that I covered is only one version of events.

There's two main versions of the story: the one I covered is a slightly zhuzhed up retelling of what we're going to call "the Cooper Family Ghost Photo" version of events.

The other story covers a lot of the same beats, a young family moves into a new house.

They're posing at a dinner table for a photo when all of a sudden a dead body falls through the ceiling.

This one is usually called "the Cooper Family Falling Body Photo"

So JD, based on your own preference, what do you think is more compelling as a horror story? Buying a haunted house, or buying a house and getting party crashed by a corpse?

I think, based on the highly scientific method of comparing Google results, that the Ghost story is more popular.

And personally, I also find it more compelling.

I think this is because there's more holes to poke in the story if it features an actual cadaver.

Why was that not in the news at the time?

How was there no reaction from the people in the photo?

Why is there not shit all over the perfectly set table if a body just dropped through the ceiling?

But if we're talking ghosts then c'mon, all that critical thinking will only get you so far.

But aside from the backstory, I wanna look for where this photo itself came from.

The earliest instance of this photo that still exists was posted in 2009 on Ligotti.net, which is a website dedicated to the horror author Thomas Ligotti.

Side note: I've never read Ligotti's fiction but I did read *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, which is a good read if you're feeling a little too positive lately.

There isn't much metadata info to really dig into on the Ligotti image.

The upload date was November 14, 2009.

We have the uploader's username

We have the title the user assigned the image: *Family Gathering*

And we have the filename: familywithhangingman.jpg

So, what do we really know about the image beyond this, not a whole lot.

I was able to find the user who uploaded the photo to Ligotti.net.

He denies having anything to do with the creation of the photo and says that he just found it and shared it.

I couldn't find an earlier version of the photo, so the original upload is pretty much lost to time.

There's some claims that the photo has been online since 2000, but I can't find anything to back that up.

There's also some claims that this is a paranormal photo that was circulated in the paranormal community in the pre-internet era, but again, I couldn't find anything that would back up the claim.

I think it's most likely that the photo was uploaded around 2009.

It seems likely that it was an image board creation, probably first posted on somethingawful.

There's a thread from May 2009 preserved on the internet archive where users discuss and work on creating convincing paranormal hoax photos.

Something awful is also where the GOAT of internet-cryptids was created, Slender Man.

The entire thread was focused on creating images for trolling purposes, so with the five month timeline between the thread and the earliest known version of the photo, I think there's a decent chance the creator was aware of the thread and used some of the tricks suggested.

The story of didn't appear until four years later on October 15th, 2013, on two separate websites:

Here's the version of events on Acidcow:

"As the Cooper's move into their new home in Texas, they take a photograph of the family sitting together, but as the photo is taken, a body falls from the ceiling. The OP said he wasn't sure if it was real, but he thought it was real creepy."

And there was a Russian version posted to playground.ru, here's the translation of that:

"The Cooper family has just moved to their new home in Texas. In honor of the house-warming was laid festive table, at the same time decided to make some family photos. And when the pictures showed, they showed a strange figure, it seems that someone's body is either hanging down or falling from the ceiling. Of course, nothing like this during the shooting Coopers did not see."

So, I have no way of proving it, but given that these were posted on the same day, I could see this coming from the same poster on both sites.

Anyway, by 2014 there were versions of the photo circulating online which were edited to include the caption: "A photo taken of a family's new home. As it was taken, a body fell from the ceiling."

It's difficult to say exactly where the distinction between it being a ghost or it being a corpse came into play, I read some comments that made it seem like it's the ghost in the form of a dead body, which is a really shitty deal for a ghost.

In any case, it's still getting posted regularly, I came across it in multiple scary photo listicles published within the last couple of years.

But, I'm pretty convinced its a hoax, even though there's some disagreement online in the debunking community about how it was faked.

There's one camp that claims that the image is analog.

We'll call them the old heads, and the old heads are convinced that the photo was created in the 1950s.

They base the timeline on the clothes in the photos.

They believe that the photo was created via a double exposure.

Double exposure is a technique that layers two different exposures of film onto the same frame, essentially combining two separate images.

So these people believe that this was either an intentional double exposure, whereby the photographer layered these two photos together.

Creating the illusion that a person was falling through the roof in the left part of the frame.

They'll frequently use this to explain away why the photo was taken with the people right of center.

And then there's a sub-group who believe that it was an unintentional double exposure.

Where the photographer, the presumed husband/father, dropped the camera and it took a photo as he happened to be throwing his hands up in the air in exasperation?

But the double exposure believers tend to agree that the photo existed as a paranormal photo long before the internet and that it's a relic that was unearthed and gained popularity online.

Again, the earliest I was able to find was 2009, and I personally think that it was a digital creation, because I've got a little secret.

JD, what if I told you we know who the boys are?

I found a thread on metabunk that was focused on debunking this particular photo, and in the thread there was a commenter named Robert:

"When my older brother sent me this link I was floored. We are the two boys in the picture. Well we were back in 1959. I have many pictures like this one, but not this one. My mother had a habit of throwing away pictures that she didn't like.

Eventually the ones she kept were passed along to me. What annoys me is that somebody got hold of a family photograph. The story is almost entirely fiction. Our last name is Copper, not Cooper. Does anybody know who did this?"

Now, the people on Metabunk weren't immediately convinced, but Robert had receipts, and he shared some photos that I think help prove that Robert is who he claims, and that the ghost photo is a digital manipulation:

JD, take a look at this and tell me what you think:

<https://www.metabunk.org/sk/20150528-084036-42gb5.jpg>

Key points that prove that Robert is probably who he claims

- The boys are a pretty close match
- The candles match well
- The pattern of the tablecloth is a decent match
- The cup on the table seems to be gold rimmed and a match.

Key difference that shows that the Cooper Family Ghost Photo was digitally altered

- The photo that Robert provided is in color.

So, let's think back to that Something Awful thread on creating convincing paranormal photos:

The OP in that thread recommended flipping color photos to grayscale, altering the levels of blacks and whites to lower contrast in the photo, adding vignetting, noise, and exporting the photo as a lower quality version to hide visible editing goofs behind a layer of pixelation.

The Metabunk poster used this methodology on the photo that Robert provided.

So here's the altered version of the picture for you JD:

<https://www.metabunk.org/sk/20150528-091334-ji42w.jpg>

If we're willing to accept that Robert was one of the boys in the picture, I think the differences between the photos is enough to indicate that the Cooper Family Ghost Photo had to have been altered.

I personally think the digital explanation is more likely, and there's also some speculation about where and how the body got into the photo.

There's no exact match, but given the hand positioning, the Metabunk community determined that the image used for the hanging corpse is likely a ballerina.

There's some solid evidence of this, if you look closely at the hanging body, you see what appears to be a necklace and earrings defying gravity.

The users pointed to the popularity of ballet in the 1960s and 70s and a trend of taking photos of ballerinas performing dance moves in their street clothes.

So the hand positioning, the way the neck is turned up, and the still visible necklace all give some credence to the idea that the body was a photoshopped dancer, likely from some 1950s-60s profile.

There are still questions of course, Robert posed a couple himself:

"Does anybody know who did this?"

"How would I no that this wont happen again?"

Unfortunately, the answer to Robert's old man questions are:

We really have no way of knowing who made these photos, and we have no way of guaranteeing this won't happen again to Robert, or anyone else.

Some people clung to Robert's claim that his mother had a habit of disposing photos that she didn't like, accusing him of trolling himself and trying to seed a larger conspiracy about the photo.

But personally, I don't see it that way.

I think that in the digital age we've become more conscious, or we should at least work on being more conscious, of the evidence of ourselves that we leave behind and who has access to it.

However, people have always left evidence of themselves behind.

I could walk into a thrift store and I'm sure that I could find someone's family photos for sale.

Making fun of people's family photos is a part of internet culture.

The website Awkward Family Photos started in May 2009, the same month as the SomethingAwful thread about faking people's photos.

I'm not saying there's a conspiracy there, necessarily, but the energy of the 2009 internet was ready to take full advantage of people's openness with their personal photos.

It was a year later, in 2010, that the revenge porn website Is Anyone Up? Here's a quote from all-around piece of shit and founder of the website, Hunter Moore:

"No one put a gun to your head and made you take these pictures. It's 2011, everything's on the Internet."

As someone who lived through the 2010s, I don't think that viewpoint was unique to Hunter.

I think that the Cooper Family Photo is a solid entry in the 2009 internet time capsule.

Awkward Family Photos is viewed with a lot of nostalgia as a piece of late 2000s internet culture.

And I think that the longevity of the Cooper Family Photo speaks in some ways to this same nostalgia.

It's an old family photo hit with an old school photoshop job.

But it also speaks to the general attitude of the time, that if something is on the internet, it really is for anyone.

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