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BALL LIGHTNING STRIKES TWICE*

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THIS article presents written accounts of two separate experiences with ball lightning by Mrs Patricia Townsend, a resident of Haymarket, Virginia, USA. These experiences are unique in that they occurred in the same room of a home in two consecutive summers, were observed by the same person, and in both cases, the ball lightning struck the person.

These incidents took place during thunderstorm activity in the summers of 1977 and 1978. Written accounts by the witness of both encounters were prepared within a week of the second event, following a phone conversation with the National Weather Service office in Silver Spring, Maryland. The exact date of the first incident cannot be recalled, although, according to the witness, it probably occurred in June and was definitely on a Sunday. The second event took place on 21 June 1978 at approximately 630 pm Eastern Daylight Time (EDT).

Mrs Townsend claims her recollection of the first event, which occurred approximately one year prior to her narrative, is better than of the more recent one "because I didn't know what it [the ball lightning] was and was more curious than frightened. The second time it happened my only thoughts were to get away from it if I could." She states that she had never seen nor heard of ball lightning or fireballs before these events.

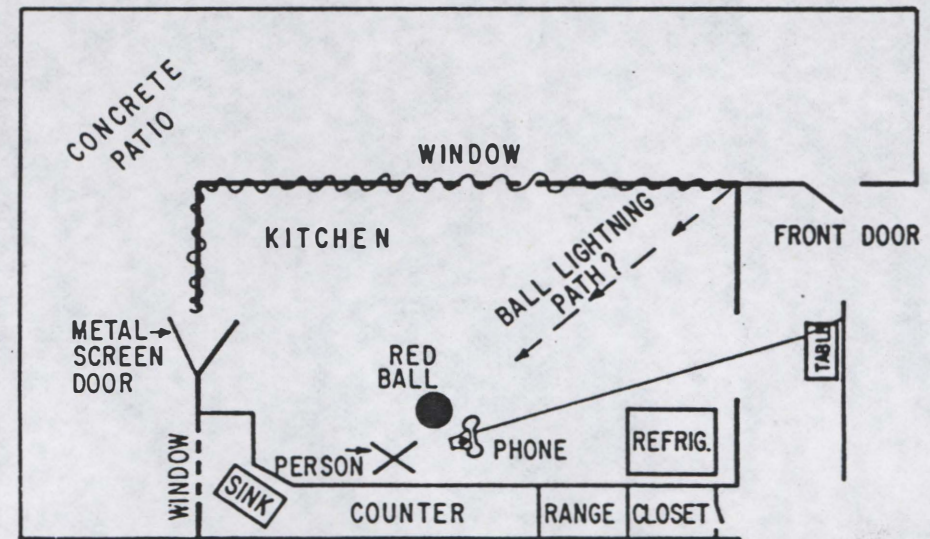
The following material presents the complete, unedited descriptions of the ball lightning experiences as prepared by Mrs Townsend. The figures were redrawn for publication from her hand drawings.

THE FIRST INCIDENT - SUMMER 1977

"As best as I can remember, the time this incident occurred was in the morning, a Sunday morning. My son had just left our church and I had called the mother of his girlfriend to double check the time they would be returning from the church buffet to be held after the services. At the time my son left, a severe storm was threatening. The girl's mother talked to me quite a bit longer than I had anticipated so by the time the lightning struck me the storm was in full force; wind, heavy rain, lightning and thunder. As I have indicated on the sketch attached, I was standing in my kitchen leaning against the counter between the sink and the range. I am indicated by the X. My phone has a thirteen foot cord and this enables me to carry it into the kitchen.

* As with many accounts of what are supposedly ball lightning events, one has here only descriptive information from a single person. The possibility remains that the individual has suffered illness, hallucination or some form of optical illusion, so the decision whether or not to publish articles of this sort is difficult. However, if ball lightning was present, its repeated occurrence in one location should not go unrecorded—EDITOR

INCIDENT NO. 1, SUMMER 1977



"Several things happened at the same time and the whole incident probably lasted no more than a few seconds at the most. While I was on the phone, I heard a tremendous crack, something like the retort of a high-powered rifle or the sound of a bat hitting a baseball. At the same time the outside of my house, meaning the outdoors, lit up brilliantly. A split second later or perhaps at the same time, I heard a loud swooshing or hissing noise and the phone seemed to come alive in my hand. Then my whole kitchen lit up like a floodlight. Lightning or electricity or whatever it was seemed to flow rapidly from the open kitchen door across the expanse of the far end of my kitchen at ceiling level as shown by the jagged line in my drawing. I'm not sure where the red ball came from but I have it depicted as coming from the jagged lightning on my ceiling. Anyhow, almost at the same time as the lightning zoomed across my kitchen and the phone started vibrating in my hand, a large red ball (with yellow and white somewhere) appeared in front of me and hit me on the chest with the force of a large man hitting me with his fist. I fell to the floor and I believe the phone was still in my hand. I'm still not sure if I was knocked unconscious or not. I couldn't swear I was and couldn't swear I wasn't. The ball hit me with the accompanying sounds of smacking and crackling, kind of like a string of firecrackers being set off.

"I remember being very frightened as I lay on the kitchen floor. I also remember sitting up and leaning against my kitchen cupboards approximately at the same X on the drawing. I sat for quite a while and when I gathered enough courage to pick up the phone, thinking I'd better call for help, I found the phone dead. I remember being quite dazed and disoriented and with a great effort I made it into my living room where I laid on my couch. I might have been in a kind of shock because I didn't feel any pain in my chest for a good hour or so after the lightning struck me. By the time my son arrived home from church, the pain in my chest was pretty bad. By the next day, the pain had subsided quite a bit but it didn't completely go away for several days.

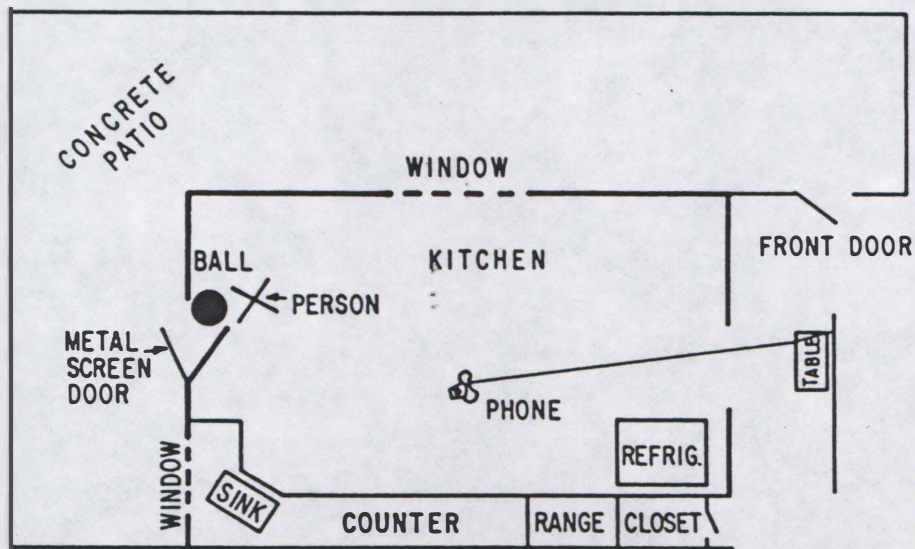
"I'd like to add that I don't remember what I was wearing and also that I don't remember if I smelled any particular odor in connection with the ball. I'd also like to add that the ball appeared to be made of a soft burlap type material with a fuzzy texture."

"My son had eaten earlier than myself and was preparing to run to a friend's place to play cards. I was standing in the kitchen preparing a light meal for myself when he left. It was already raining quite heavily at this time although the lightning and thunder were not that severe. When he left, he forgot to close the storm door and because the wind was pretty stiff, I wasted no time running to the kitchen door, stepping outside and pulling the door shut. The phone, although I wasn't using it, was in the middle of the kitchen floor, as indicated by my drawing. I was going to call my parents in Pennsylvania.

"Just as I released the storm door handle, and was still facing the patio around my kitchen, I heard a tremendous hissing sound, with crackling undertones and the outside lit up, again like a floodlight. I was already backing away from the storm door and about to reach for the kitchen door to shut it when this happened. At the same time a fireball somehow entered the kitchen and appeared in front of my face. It could have been any size, but my best calculations are that it was about a foot across with jagged yellow and white edges. This is probably erroneous because I had only a fraction of a second's time from the time I saw the ball until it hit me.

"I know I yelled just as it appeared and really didn't have time for anything else because as soon as I saw it, it hit me in the face with great force, sort of like someone hitting me in the face with an open hand. The sound it made when it hit me was like that of rifle fire. The sounds I heard inside my head were like crackling and spitting. My ears felt like they were full of fuzz and my whole head felt blown up and pressurized or something like that. Also my bones felt as though they had melted away and I started falling backwards. I didn't have any strength to break my fall and my whole body felt numb and far away.

INCIDENT NO. 2, JUNE 21, 1978



"I fell backwards onto the kitchen floor. I felt as though I was falling in slow motion and the complete silence after the fireball hit me was astounding. I think it may have affected my ears for a few minutes. I believe I must have had my eyes closed because when I opened them I could at first see nothing but black shadows lined in jagged white rims and the white rims were moving like little pieces of lightning. In a sort of daze, I

made my way into the living room and it was a good half-hour to an hour before I could see properly again. This time I felt only slight pain in my face, but the back of my head and my neck felt strained for the rest of the evening. I was very muddled in my brain until midday the next day. I found my speech very slow and slurred when my son came home and I tried to explain to him what happened.

"When this happened the only metal I was wearing were rivets and one button on my jeans and four metal hairpins in my hair.

"Again I don't remember any particular odor in connection with the ball. Thinking back on it now, I do seem to remember a peculiar taste in my mouth, kind of acidity or maybe sour and also that my throat felt dry and slightly sore. Again the ball appeared to be made of a fuzzy textured fabric, somehow dull surfaced yet luminous."

FOLLOW-UP INFORMATION

This investigator learned of and received copies of Mrs Townsend's descriptions, which were forwarded from the National Weather Service, in the autumn of 1978. This investigator prepared a number of follow-up questions and mailed them to her in December 1979, and her responses were received in January 1980. The following paragraphs summarize further information pertaining to the home's setting and the physical effects on the witness.

Setting: The house is in a wooded neighborhood in the foothills of a mountain. There is no antenna on the house nor other tall metallic objects adjacent to the house. The power line to the house runs about six metres from the kitchen door to a rear telephone pole, and connects into the back of the house. The house is not the highest object around.

The residence is a brick structure with metal storm windows and doors. The roof is asbestos shingled; the walls and ceiling are drywall; the kitchen floor is linoleum. Underneath the kitchen is the furnace and central air-conditioning unit.

Physical effects: There were no visible effects on her body or clothes. She was not examined by a doctor following either incident, although she spoke by phone with one following the 1977 event. The doctor did not really believe she had been hit by lightning.

After writing her narrative, Mrs Townsend recalled an odor associated with the 1978 event; that of a match that has just been struck.

A THIRD OCCURRENCE?

As a footnote to this investigator's questionnaire, Mrs Townsend hinted that a third ball lightning event in her kitchen could have occurred in the summer of 1979. Her unedited version follows:

"I didn't mention this to anyone before and I didn't want to mention it because I'm not really sure, but again this summer I believe lightning entered my house. I was upstairs cleaning my bedroom. My dog was with me and both of us heard loud crackling noises and a sort of muffled explosion coming from downstairs in the direction of the kitchen. This was during a very active thunderstorm. My dog ran to the top of the stairs. I wasn't so brave and stood in the doorway to my bedroom peering down the stairs. I can tell you I was scared to death I'd see another one of those things. I waited five minutes. My dog gave up long before that and went back into the bedroom to lay on my bed. I then went downstairs to check things out but could find nothing to indicate lightning had been there. Nothing was burned or looked out of the ordinary. Of course, nothing had been burned the two previous times either. No one else was in the house and I could find no explanation for the noises I had heard. I'm pretty sure it was lightning again but as I said before I hadn't seen it.

"I made a mental note not to mention it to anyone and consequently I've completely forgotten even the month it might have happened."