



In the Zone

BY RON WOLFE

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You open this door with the key of imagination. But what if you've lost the key?

Keys disappear, and even stranger things happen at home. Rod Serling knew. His classic TV series, *The Twilight Zone*, claimed to be set in the fifth dimension. But some of the creepiest episodes deal with things commonly found around the house: mirrors (that show something out of place), telephones (that speak for themselves), children's toys (that come to life).

"I believe Serling himself thought of home as a haven," says Andrew Polak of the Rod Serling Memorial Foundation in Serling's hometown of Binghamton, N.Y. But in many of the stories that Serling and other writers imagined for *The Twilight Zone*, the house "was a convenient place for things to go wrong."

Serling generally set his stories in the most ordinary circumstances. Home, especially, made the unexpected all the more, well - *Twilight Zone*-ish.

"The strangeness of the known, rather than the unknown, can be very effective," Polak says. Viewers "could put themselves in the situation, driving the impact home."

In "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street," for example, good neighbors turn against each other when the electricity goes on and off at random. One house has lights, but the place next door doesn't.

The power company might explain what happened: houses on different circuits, repair crews doing the best they can. But Serling attributes the trouble to aliens, who discover they don't have to conquer the earth with war machines. All they have to do is play tricks with people's lights.

This year is the 50th anniversary of *The Twilight Zone*. The show produced five seasons of eerie tales that endure on DVD and on cable television's Sci Fi Channel. The latest addition to the mythology is *Rod Serling and the Twilight Zone: The Official 50th Anniversary Tribute* (Barricade Books, 2009) by Douglas Brode and Carol Serling, the late writer's wife.

Rod Serling's home was in Southern California, and he built a house on Cayuga Lake in upstate New York. But anyone's living room - any room in the house - is apt to feel like

The Twilight Zone now and then. Anything could happen just the other side of the door.

And where's the key? Oh, for the! - it was right here. It was on a clump of keys the size of another dimension. How could a whole set of keys just disappear?

Twee-dee-dee-dee ...

Many things go missing in The Twilight Zone. They slip back in time, into clouds, like the jetliner that goes back to prehistoric dinosaur days in "The Odyssey of Flight 33."

Missing objects are explained in the episode "Matter of Minutes" (1985, when The Twilight Zone came back for a season.) It discovers the world is rebuilt from scratch every minute by a team of guys with blue faces. They have so much to think about, no wonder they forget a little something here and there.

So! - that's why you so often find a lost thing in plain sight, right where you couldn't find it a minute before: The blue guys put it back.

The unique guide, How to Find Lost Objects by "Professor Solomon" (Penguin, 1995), offers another explanation. It pooh-poohs the notion that "supernatural forces" are to blame for things that vanish. A used copy is worth finding (sources include Amazon.com) for advice on how to search for lost keys, checkbook, glasses, tickets, scissors, ketchup ... without ransacking the whole house. The professor's tips include:

"Wait until you have some idea where to look."

The first place to hunt for a missing object is where it belongs. Even if you misplaced it, somebody else might have found it and put it back. Then again, somebody else might have taken it.

Chances are the elusive thing will turn up within 18 inches of where you left it. It might be hiding under something else. Among "the most common offenders" to look under: the newspaper.

YOU AGAIN!

The peculiar opposite of losing something in the house is to find you have two of the exact same object: two cartons of milk, both fresh from the grocery store; two identical screwdrivers (neither the right size), two copies of the same magazine that nobody reads.

One seems to be a doppelganger, a duplicate from whoknows-where. The Twilight Zone episode "Mirror Image" takes up just such a mystery. A woman in a lonely bus depot comes to fear she has a evil twin.

Stranger still is the appearance of a second bottle of Tabasco sauce in the kitchen cupboard when the first bottle still has an eighth of an inch left.

NOTHING EVER CHANGES

A man goes back to the house where he grew up, only to find the place exactly the way it was in his childhood. The eerie endurance of the past chills the Twilight Zone episode "Young Man's Fancy."

But every house has things that never change. Like these:

The kitchen junk drawer that holds every loose screw, rubber band and safety pin, battery that might or might not have any juice, spring out of something-or-other, washer that fits the old faucet (not the new one), matchbook with one match left, earring all by itself ... and no one dares empty it.

The bedroom's original deepblue wall color that still shows through the primer and three coats of new Bavarian Cream White.

Bread that never gets moldy. It must be two, three weeks old. Older? Who knows? It looks fresh. It has the golden glow of corn syrup and whatever-else-they-put-in, but it's too weird to eat. It's like the Twilight Zone episode "Long Live Walter Jameson," about the man who never ages. All of a sudden - ka-poof! - he crumbles to nothing but dust.

But don't bring home any more bread. We've still got some.

CRASH LANDING

A woman at home is terrified by little creatures in the Twilight Zone episode "The Invaders." Something breaks through the roof into the attic. The first fright alone is enough to horrify any homeowner: a hole in the roof. And even worse, the sound they make: Skitter-skitter! ...

Something's scrabbling around up there. What could it be?

Little men from outer space is Serling's answer. Rats, bats, mice, pigeons and squirrels, according to the University of Arkansas Extension Service at www.uaex.edu.

Outwitting Mice by Bill Adler Jr., Total Critter Control by Don Sedgwick and Environmentally Friendly Pest Control by Robert H. Stauffer are among how-to books available through the Central Arkansas Library System - and, just in case, UFO: The Complete Sightings by Peter Brookesmith.

DON'T LOOK!

Strange things happen under the bed. In the Twilight Zone episode "Little Girl Lost," a girl and her dog simply vanish in the small space beneath the mattress. Under the bed is a gateway to ... somewhere else.

"The fourth dimension? The fifth?" Serling comments. The girl comes back, but the bed

remains a mystery "despite a battery of research physicists equipped with every device known to man."

Here's the answer to where dust bunnies come from: They slip under the bed from another dimension. The prolific fuzzballs multiply in dusty warrens to the disgrace of the best housekeeper.

But today's under-the-bed explorer comes equipped with new devices to solve the problem:

The Swiffer long-handled sweeper with dry cleaning cloths is a handy way to spiff the hardwood or tile floor under the bed. Extraterrestrial bunnies, be gone. (About \$20 for a starter set at cleaning supply outlets; information at www.swiffer.com.)

Stor-n-Slide Underbed Boxes fill the space under a standard bed frame. Gain storage and close off any portals to a parallel universe at the same time. (From \$14.99 to \$19.99 at The Container Store, www.containerstore.com. Other options: under-bed boxes on wheels, under-bed tote bags, under-bed shoe organizers.)

A "captain's bed" rests on top of a solid chest of drawers. Various kinds of captain's or storage beds cost anywhere from a few hundred dollars for a child's version to thousands for a customdesigned bunk with dozens of drawers (at www.shopgetorganized.com) - the place to stash a pair of socks, if not a paradox.

HOME, HOME ON THE STRANGE

Serling wrote the longing he felt to go home into one of the best episodes of The Twilight Zone, called "Walking Distance." A man escapes from his pressured life into the past. He knocks at the door of the house where he lived as a boy in the happiest summer of his life.

It's something "all men try at some time," Serling muses in the show's narration - "trying to go home again."

The house stands. But a house alone can't welcome a traveler. Sometimes the memory of when he lived there is all that's left. He lived in the house - now, the house lives in him.

Too bad? Maybe so.

But to wish for something different is "just an errant wish," Serling ends the story "some wisp of memory, not too important really, some laughing ghosts that cross a man's mind, that are a part of ... the Twilight Zone."

Serling's boyhood home in Binghamton "is in the middle of a quaint neighborhood," Polak says, "and lived in by an unassuming family."

Coming next week:

There are lots of ways to spend less money and still take care of your household. Marcia Schnedler goes beyond the obvious measures to reveal some ideas you might not have considered.

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Contact: webmaster@nwanews.com