

A dark, atmospheric illustration of a bedroom at night. A person is lying in bed, looking up with a terrified expression. The room is dimly lit, with a window on the right showing a dark sky. A ghostly, pale figure is visible in the shadows on the left side of the room. The overall mood is eerie and unsettling.

NIGHTMARES AT 3 AM

JAKE WIKLACZ

12 TERRIFYING TALES

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Introduction

Jake Wiklacz

I remember the recurring incident clearly. There I am, once again; five years old, lying in bed with the sheets pulled halfway up my face at the witching hour, awakened by a nightmare. But in my wakefulness, the nightmare has only just begun.

Now comes the feeling of dread, the fear that something is going to emerge from my closet, or from under my bed, or from the staircase right across from my bedroom. I can remember fixating on that staircase, which seemed to leer at me through my bedroom doorway. Many times, I pictured some sinister boogeyman walking up those stairs and making eye contact with me when it reaches the top.

As a child, my anxiety about boogeymen, the dark, and the paranormal was quite severe. During the worst bouts, I would dread the night as early as five o'clock, when it became apparent that the sun was getting closer and closer to the horizon. *Please don't let night come*, I would think to myself in futile protest. Needless to say, the sun never took pity on me, and nighttime always inevitably came. Many nights, I lied awake in bed, tormented by fears of the supernatural, haunted by visions of death.

I recall one evening that I stayed the night at a friend's house across the street. It was October, and thus AMC was airing horror films late at night. I unwisely landed on AMC while they were airing *Poltergeist II: The Other Side*. After watching the scene where Craig T. Nelson vomits a python-sized worm—which then morphs into a goblin-like imp—that familiar feeling of dread coursed through me as I realized I would not be sleeping peacefully for a while.

During the weeks that followed, I was unsurprisingly hard pressed to get a good night's sleep. And during this bout of anxiety—this one lasting about a month—I asked myself, *why?* Why, as I flipped through channels, did I choose to land on the station that was playing a horror film, knowing very well that it would land me in another heap of anxiety? I was angry with myself. I had brought this upon myself, and I felt I deserved it. No one forced me to watch these horror movies, after all. In fact, my parents always warned against it. But every once in a while, curiosity would get the best of me, and I regretted it every single time.

It wasn't until many years later that I was able to answer my question. In high school, my fears of monsters and the dark and the paranormal gave way to more typical adolescent fears. Thus, I began watching horror movies in full, and I liked them. And not only that, but I soon found myself *writing* horror screenplays and horror short stories. That's when it hit me.

When I was a little kid and was going through one of my bouts of anxiety, my mother said to me, "Maybe you're going through this so that you can help other people in some way." I didn't really understand it at the time, but now, it makes perfect sense. Because my imagination got so carried away as a kid with thoughts of monsters and the paranormal, I could now harness that very same imagination and use it to my advantage.

What you are about to read can best be described as my confession. It is my fears and my anxieties put down on paper. When you read it, you will be offered a look into my childhood mind, and you will see all of the things that scared me as a small child, and some of the things that may even still scare me to this day. Hopefully, these stories will not *only* serve to scare, thrill, and entertain you, but also to offer you a sort of catharsis, one that I definitely needed as a child.

Before we begin, I want to take this opportunity to say *thank you*. If you are reading this right now, then you are committing the greatest act of kindness to me possible: bearing witness to my creativity. By absorbing the words I have written in this anthology, you will know me better than you ever could if you simply just had a conversation with me. Therefore, to you, I offer my deepest gratitude. And now, we begin...

CREATURE IN THE CLOSET

by

Jake Wiklacz

The first thing nine-year-old Bobby associated with that old farmhouse was this weird, musty smell. That was the end of him growing accustomed to the place, at least for a while. His uncle purchased the house because of the price and because of the economic opportunity the surrounding farmland provided. If he had bought it based on looks, one would have to question his taste.

The Kentucky farmhouse was about a hundred years old, and at least three families, one from Romania and two from the states, had lived in it since it had been built. Not even the previous landowner knew much else of the history surrounding the old place, he only held onto the property for as long as he could put the land into tiptop shape in order to turn a profit. The man barely touched the house itself, save for a new paint job on the worn wooden exterior.

Bobby could already picture that dank scent as he and his uncle pulled up to the front of the house. The car was packed to the brim, to the point that Uncle Todd could barely see through the back window.

“And here we are,” said Uncle Todd, in his typical casual tone. For Todd, everything was done out of a certain level of obligation. One could reckon that he took on this attitude when Bobby’s parents passed in a car accident. But his attitude didn’t quite match his actions, as he was anything but a supportive guardian.

All Bobby could think about was the smell of that house and of how just about every floorboard wailed when stepped on.

“Let’s go,” Todd continued, “get your shit.”

Bobby got out of the car and began grabbing bags. Todd would periodically scold him, giving him a mini-lecture on the proper way to carry bags. Bobby second-guessed everything he did, and it was no wonder as to why.

When Bobby entered the house, that musty stink blasted its way into his nostrils. He could swear he saw a mouse scurry across the floor, but he would say nothing of it to Todd, who would likely slap him around a bit for making things up. He could already hear what Todd would say, something like: Complaining about a little mouse, you ingrate?

“Your room’s upstairs,” said Todd, motioning to the staircase. Todd’s room was downstairs, next to the living area.

Bobby started up the stairs. Each one echoed a long and drawn out creak upon each one of Bobby’s steps. Bobby couldn’t stand that noise. He feared hearing those creaking noises while he lay in bed. In fact, he dreaded the thought, for it would surely mean that his Uncle Todd was on his way upstairs. It wouldn’t have been the first time.

Bobby entered his bedroom. Across from his little bed was a closet, but the door had no doorknob, and so the door just hung open, leaving the dark void of the closet agape. To the right, on the adjacent wall, was a window that looked out at the cornfields. At the moment, there was a glorious view of the sunset. Bobby hadn’t the time to appreciate it, though. This place made him uncomfortable.

Bobby spent that evening choking down some canned green beans, awkwardly avoiding eye contact with his uncle. If Todd so much as suspected Bobby of being grossed out by the beans, he'd snatch him up by the back of his neck and make his belt sing.

"How do you like the new place?" Todd asked.

"It's good," Bobby quickly replied.

"Good', huh?"

"I like it."

Bobby crammed more green beans into his mouth so that he wouldn't have to say anything more. Todd glared at him. It took every ounce of Bobby's strength to avoid gagging as the cold and slimy beans slithered down the back of his throat, but he managed. One gag and he would be seeing the back of Todd's hand flying straight toward his face.

"We're gonna need to be up at three A.M.," said Todd. "We gotta beat the sun, at least that'll give us a few hours of cool air to work. We gotta get to plantin' out in the fields, fertilize the soil, all that."

Bobby nodded obediently.

"I'm gonna show you how to plant the corn and the soybeans," Todd continued, "In the fall, we'll harvest 'em. But first, I gotta show you how to work the trencher." Again, Bobby nodded. He feared that anything he said would sound stupid and piss off Todd. Todd looked back at the clock, and followed this by standing up.

"Best get to bed," he said. Todd started to walk off, but then stopped and turned around.

"Oh, and I don't wanna have to wake you up in the morning, got it?"

Bobby nodded.

“How’s that?” Todd asked, rhetorically.

“Yessir,” Bobby quickly replied.

“Set your alarm. Three A.M. If it’s 3:02 and you’re not up, I’m comin’ in there and makin’ my belt sing, you hear?”

“Yessir.”

“And that’ll be no way to work the rest of the day, with a sore rear end.”

“Yessir.”

Todd exited the kitchen. Bobby brought his fork to his plate, but quickly realized that he had eaten the last of his green beans. Todd’s anger was a powerful motivator, indeed.

At around 11 P.M., Bobby awoke with a full bladder. He quickly sat up, counting his lucky stars that he hadn’t wet the bed and drawn Todd’s wrath. However, just as he was about to lift his feet out from under the covers, Bobby froze as he found himself gazing into the dark vacuum of space that was his closet.

His vision was fuzzy from sleep, and so he could see dancing shapes within the darkness of that doorway. For the first few seconds, he could have sworn the shapes he was seeing were really there, but after a moment, even his nine-year-old mind understood they were just the product of sleepy eyeballs.

But then, Bobby began to notice a very distinct shape in the doorway. It was circular in form, very pale in color, and had a slight neon tint. Bobby rubbed his eyes, but the shape still lingered there. He blinked a few times, but still it stayed.

Bobby stared at the shape, and then he began to pick up on other features. The shape had two pitch black dots on its surface. And that was when Bobby realized that it was a face. He

couldn't quite believe what he was seeing, but it was real. He quickly hunkered back down under his covers, pulling the sheet up to the bridge of his nose. He didn't dare take his eyes off of that face. He feared that if he did, he would look back to see it right in front of him.

A few minutes passed as Bobby continued to stare at the face. He hadn't pulled the covers away from his own face, and now there was a light rug burn on the tip of his nose because of it. The room was so dark that Bobby could not even see the rest of the being's body, just the face. As he continued to watch it, the face's mouth began to slowly move upward in a ghastly grin.

Bobby wanted to get out of bed and run, but there was no way he was mustering up the courage to do that. He had thought about calling for his uncle several times, but that may have brought problems of its own, either from his uncle's anger, or maybe from the thing in his closet. Still, it was starting to seem like a better option than lying there and having that face stare at him all night long.

"U-Uncle Todd," Bobby stammered out. It came out as a small squeak that was just barely above a whisper.

"Uncle Todd!" Bobby yelled this time, and then waited. The face's hideous grin grew wider, as if watching Bobby cry for help gave it some sort of sick satisfaction.

"Uncle Todd!"

Even on the third try, Bobby could still make out the faint sound of Todd's woodcutter of a snore, downstairs. The rest of the night, Bobby drifted in and out of consciousness as that face stared him down.

"What the hell is this?"

Bobby blinked, and the next thing he knew, it was three A.M., and he was looking up at a very angry Todd, who was furiously tossing Bobby's piss-soaked sheets across the room. It wasn't long before Bobby felt Todd's viselike grip on his wrist. Todd yanked Bobby out of bed and to his feet. Any more force and Todd would have ripped Bobby's shoulder right out of its socket.

"Not only do you not wake the hell up when I tell you," yelled Todd, "but then you rub salt in the wound by pissing the bed like an infant!"

"I'm sorry!" Bobby shouted. "There was a..."

Bobby's voice drifted off. Todd stared him right in the eye, expectantly waiting for an answer, or better yet, an excuse so he could start hitting Bobby.

"There was what?" asked Todd.

"There was something in my closet," Bobby said.

Todd grimaced at Bobby for a long moment. He followed this by slapping Bobby right to the floor. Bobby lied on the floor, clutching his face as Todd began walking out of the room.

"Now get dressed," said Todd. "Tonight, you're gonna wash those sheets. Actually, no, you're gonna just sleep without sheets."

Todd stormed out of Bobby's bedroom, slamming the door behind him. Bobby immediately forgot about the bruise on his face and glanced over at the closet. Thin streams of daylight seeped into the doorway of the closet, and Bobby could see that there was nothing there now but a worn wall and a bar for clothing hangers.

Bobby's day was mainly spent getting screamed at by Todd. Just about everything Bobby did was followed up by an angry barrage of choice words from his uncle. His previous night of

interrupted sleep only made matters worse. At times, Bobby was shocked simply at the pure longevity of his uncle's anger. How could somebody be angry this much?

That evening, Bobby dreaded that walk up the stairs. The creaking of the steps no longer bothered him too much, and neither did the house's smell. All he had time to dread at this point was that face in his closet. He had tried to rationalize it with himself, hoping and praying that it had just been one of those half-asleep, half-awake hallucinations. He remembered how his dad used to say that, when he himself was little, he would see tiny little fingers moving around in the carpet upon waking in the middle of the night. Still, no matter how much Bobby tried to rationalize it, that face had just looked too real.

Bobby made sure to drain his bladder before going to sleep. He had to shut the bathroom door, because if you looked closely at the corner of the mirror, you could see one half of that closet. When he left the bathroom, Bobby full-on sprinted over to bed, leaping into the air and diving onto the mattress. He decided to sleep with the light on, tonight. He could have sworn there was no way in hell he'd fall asleep, especially since he shivered as he lied there freezing without a blanket. But deprivation set in, and soon, Bobby was lights out.

Upon waking that morning, Bobby was thankful that he hadn't woken in the middle of the night. Granted, Uncle Todd's ascending footfalls were not the most reassuring thing to wake up to in the morning, but anything was better than that ghastly face.

As he listened to Todd coming up the stairs, Bobby felt a very strong itch on his forearm. As he scratched away at it, the itch began to grow in intensity, and soon, it began to burn. Bobby glanced over at his arm, and immediately was filled with unease. On his arm was a thin marking, clearly a bite mark, that much was apparent, even to nine-year-old Bobby. There were two

distinct markings that were a part of a larger bite. The two marks looked like they had already begun to heal, which was strange.

Bobby's examination of his odd little bite mark was interrupted by Todd's hasty entrance into his room. Todd knocked on Bobby's already open door, snapping him out of his thoughts.

"Let's get," said Todd.

Bobby planted corn and soybeans as far away from his uncle as possible. He constantly checked over his shoulder, hoping that senile old man would keep his distance. Every few minutes, after checking to make sure Todd wasn't watching him, Bobby would examine the bite mark on his arm. Oddly enough, it burned and itched even more in the sunlight. The bite was not from any sort of insect, Bobby knew this much. It looked like it had been left from a human mouth.

A short time later, Bobby realized that his bite mark was not the only thing that was itching and burning. No, his entire arm felt like it had received the worst sunburn ever known, and yet there was no indication of a burn upon it. The skin on his arm was tan and unburnt, not a tinge of red.

Bobby did his best to ignore the burning sensation. Any one complaint would have Todd kicking his ass up and down the field. At eight o'clock in the morning, ignoring the pain was tough, but doable. Every time Todd would walk off to take a piss or to grab another piece of equipment, Bobby would take it as an opportunity to rest in the shade. Upon doing so, the burning sensation in his arm would cool off a bit.

But as the sun rose higher and higher in the sky, so the shaded areas became more and more sparse. Soon, Bobby found himself taking refuge in the only shaded spot he could find, a

little patch of shadow from the woodshed, which was in direct view of just about anywhere on the farm.

“Hey!”

Bobby nearly had a heart attack as he heard Todd’s voice echo across the fields. He looked over his shoulder to see Todd standing about a hundred yards away, one hand on his hip and the other on his forehead to shield his eyes from the sun. He was looking right at Bobby, who was hanging out in the shade, scratching away at the bite mark on his arm.

“The hell you doing, boy?” Todd said. Bobby struggled to think of an answer.

“I have a bite on my arm,” Bobby replied.

“You’re about to have a welt on your arm if you don’t get back to it. A little bug bite’s stoppin’ you from workin’?”

Bobby reluctantly stepped back out into the sunlight and continued planting seeds. Uncle Todd was onto him, now. He’d be keeping a close eye on Bobby the rest of the day, Bobby was quite sure of that.

As the sun rose nearer to its midday position, the burning sensation in Bobby’s arm began spreading toward the rest of his body. His skin was on fire, now. It was just about unbearable. It was as if he had been sunburned from head to toe, but again, there was not a patch of redness on him. Still, the pain was excruciating, and Bobby wasn’t sure how much longer he could bear it. There weren’t many things that scared him more than Todd’s belt blows, but this pain within his skin was as frightening as it was inexplicable.

While the pain atop Bobby’s skin grew more and more intense, the bite mark began to ooze and fester, sort of like poison ivy. Bobby had gotten poison ivy before, but the discomfort

that arose from the bite mark was on another level. It itched and burned, and the more he itched it, the more it burned, and the more it burned, the worse the itch. It was a lose-lose situation, especially with Uncle Todd expecting another few hours of work from Bobby.

It was about half past ten o'clock when Bobby knew he couldn't go on like this. Some part of him knew that the itching and burning would lessen if he got out of the sun. It was strange and it didn't make sense, but Bobby had realized it through a morning of trial and error. He figured that his uncle—who was now somewhere deep in the cornfield—was a problem best dealt with later. For now, the pain was just too much. Bobby would have killed someone just to cease it.

He dropped everything and broke into a run for the house. Even the fabric of his shirt brushing against his skin burned like hell. It was the longest jog of his entire life, even though the farmhouse was only a few hundred yards away.

Bobby burst inside the house, taking care to close the door quietly so Todd wouldn't hear it. He panted like crazy, wincing from the pain. But just as he had suspected, it quickly began fading away the moment he was back inside. In just thirty seconds, the burning sensation was completely gone, and it was as if it had never been there in the first place. Bobby stared down at his arms with pure confusion. He pressed two fingers to one and pulled them away, the standard visual test for a sunburn. There wasn't one.

Bobby continued to glance out the window in paranoid fashion. After just a few minutes, his heart sank as he saw Todd angrily pacing the farm, searching for him. Bobby began shifting around, trying to think of what to do next. If he stayed inside, Todd was bound to come looking

for him. But he simply couldn't deal with that burning pain, not again. He had to think of something, and fast, because Todd was now on his way toward the house.

Bobby ran into the kitchen, grabbed a glass, and poured tap water into it. As he began sipping from the glass, he heard the front door open.

"Bobby?" Todd shouted in a so help me if you're in here manner.

Bobby hesitated as he continued to gulp down water. He pulled the glass away from his lips, making sure his voice reflected that he had just finished drinking water.

"In here," he said, "getting water."

The sound of Todd's approaching footsteps followed. He entered the kitchen and stared Bobby down.

"Why don't we get you a jug?" said Todd. "Here, let's get you a jug. I don't need you passin' out on me."

Great, thought Bobby as he watched Todd sift through various items in the pantry. He couldn't go back outside, he just couldn't do it.

"Uncle Todd," said Bobby.

"What?" Todd replied.

"My...my skin's hurtin' me."

"Pardon?" Todd stopped what he was doing and aimed one ear at Bobby.

"My skin's burning," said Bobby.

"Where?"

"Everywhere."

"Did you get poison ivy?"

“I don’t know. It only hurts when I’m in the sun.”

Todd backed out of the pantry and approached Bobby, kneeling down on the ground and scrutinizing him.

“That don’t make sense,” said Todd.

“It burns so bad,” said Bobby, “I can’t take it.”

Todd huffed in irritation, staring down at the ground as he thought of what to do.

“Well...” said Todd as the wheels inside his head turned. “I guess if you ain’t gonna work then you ain’t gettin’ supper. Right?”

“I guess,” Bobby timidly replied.

“Get upstairs. I don’t wanna see you ‘till tomorrow mornin’. And you better not scratch, it’ll make it worse.”

“Yessir.”

Todd stormed out of the house, and now Bobby was confronted with the idea of once again going upstairs by himself. That bedroom of his had a presence that was beyond ominous. But now, Bobby was beginning to realize that the sunlight pouring in through the kitchen window was causing his skin’s burn to slowly return. And with that, Bobby began booking it toward the stairs.

When he entered his bedroom, the first thing he did was shut the blinds on his window. Bobby flipped on the light, keeping a watchful eye on the closet, which looked like a gaping mouth that was ready to devour him.

He plopped down on his bed. At the foot was a pile of now-clean sheets that thankfully no longer smelled of piss. The burning of his skin faded away once again.

Bobby's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. The sounds thoroughly startled him since he hadn't heard anyone enter the house. He was sure he had watched his uncle walk outside, so why hadn't he heard him come back in?

Bobby braced himself as the footsteps grew nearer. He hunkered down in his bed, rolling over on his side with his back to the door, shutting his eyes and pretending to be asleep. The footsteps halted for a moment or two. Bobby tuned his ears, the sudden silence deafening.

What he heard next could best be described as several fingertips making contact with his wooden door, pushing it slightly open. This was followed by more silence, which greatly unsettled Bobby. Curiosity got the best of him, and he rolled over to see just who was at the door. What he saw next made his heart jump to his throat.

Two pitch black eyeballs peered at him through the doorway. They were attached to that pasty white face he had seen in his closet two nights ago. Bobby was frozen with fear for several moments. The black eyes did not even blink, and their owner was completely unmoving.

Snapping out of his fearful trance, Bobby leapt up and dove for cover on the side of his bed. He propped his back up against the side of the mattress, panting like a winded animal. His wide eyes darted all over the place as he listened for more sounds. There was silence once again.

Bobby slowly worked up the nerve to peek over the mattress. When he did, there were those eyes, still in the same place, staring back at him from the bedroom doorway. Bobby squeaked with fear and hunkered back down behind the bed.

A few moments passed, and Bobby heard the sound of his door creaking as that closet creature pushed it open. What followed were its footsteps. Bobby could hear it as it walked across the wooden floor, and he began to pray that it was not on its way to the side of the bed,

where Bobby was hiding. Though, hiding was not quite an accurate description, that thing knew he was there.

His forehead beaded with perspiration as the steady rhythm of the creature's footfalls continued. He could see its shadow stretching across the wall next to him. The shadow was humanoid in shape, albeit still ghastly in form.

"Please, God," Bobby murmured under his breath, "I love you, God, with all my might. Keep me safe a-all through the n-night. I love you, God, with all my might. Keep me safe all through the night..."

With his eyes closed tightly, Bobby repeated this prayer over and over again, until the words exited his mouth so fast that they sounded like they were all one long, made-up word.

He wasn't sure how many times he had repeated the phrase or how many minutes had passed, but he soon opened one eye and glanced to the side to see that the shadow was no longer there. It was going to take many more minutes before he had the nerve to peak around the corner of the mattress, or to even move a muscle.

Minutes passed, and Bobby slowly crawled over to the foot of the bed, cautiously peering around the corner of the mattress. The figure was not there. All that was left was that same gaping closet doorway, which Bobby was sure the creature had gone into.

He felt cornered. If he went outside, he'd surely be in pain again. If he stayed inside, there was a chance he'd see that creature again. So, Bobby did what any other child would have done. He crawled under the bed and hid there.

Bobby opened his eyes to darkness. He could feel a stream of drool drizzling from the corner of his mouth and into a little puddle on the hardwood floor he had been sleeping on for

who knew how long. It was nighttime, now, and Bobby was still hunkered down under his bed, the wooden panels beneath his mattress sandwiching him between the bed and the wood floor. He was unaware of the time, but his heart soon sank as he heard footsteps coming up the stairs. At first, he didn't know which it was—his uncle, or the creature—but he soon had his answer when he heard the distinct and disgusting sound of his uncle clearing his throat.

Bobby quickly crawled out from under his bed and plopped down on the mattress, rolling over and pretending to be asleep. His bedroom door creaked a bit as Todd pushed it open.

“Psst,” Todd whispered, “you asleep?”

Bobby did not answer, and in this moment, he became terrified as he hoped to God that Todd wasn't up here for a reason other than simply checking on him. The next thing he heard was the sound of Todd slowly pacing into his room. Oh, God. Bobby braced himself for the worst. He could hear Todd circling around the foot of the bed.

But a slight relief set in when Bobby heard the sound of Todd fiddling with the clock on the night stand. Through squinted eyes, Bobby confirmed that this was what Todd was doing, just checking to make sure the alarm had been set. Bobby knew he had forgotten to set it, judging by the curses Todd muttered under his breath.

Soon, Bobby could hear Todd circling back around the other side of the bed. All right, now just leave, Bobby silently prayed. Just leave and go to sleep. The footsteps suddenly ceased, and Bobby silently panicked when he did not hear Todd walking down the stairs. He was sure of what was going on, now... Todd was watching him sleep.

Should I fake snore? But then, Bobby feared that it might actually sound fake. He wasn't even quite sure if he snored while he slept. He knew Todd did, and that was the only comforting

sound that Todd had ever made, a sound that signaled he was asleep and therefore unable to slap Bobby around.

Bobby thanked the heavens when the sound of Todd's footsteps started back up, and then he further thanked the heavens when those footsteps were echoing off of the stairs and causing that loud squeaking sound. Never had the creaking of stairs been so comforting to Bobby.

When he was sure that Uncle Todd was gone, he rolled over and was about to hop out of bed to crawl back under it, the only place he felt safe. But once he rolled over, he found himself not looking up at the ceiling, but into those all-too-familiar pitch black eyes of the creature in the closet.

Before he even had time to scream, Bobby's entire body went into a state of paralysis, and the only sound he could utter was a weak little wheezing noise from the back of his throat. All he could do was lie there and stare up into those beady, taxidermy-type eyes. They stared angrily down at him, and his own eyes were magnetized to them. And then, as if inhaling laughing gas, Bobby fell unconscious.

Bobby's three A.M. alarm woke him that morning. It took a few seconds, but Bobby soon had no trouble recalling what had happened the previous evening. He wasn't sure how much longer he could stay in this house. He didn't even want to reach over and shut off the alarm. That bed was now the only safe haven for him, and even being atop the bed was not ideal.

The second Bobby lifted his head, he felt a sharp pain coming from his neck, an excruciating soreness within the tendons of his jugular. He brought his fingertips to the area, but immediately winced upon touching it. He already knew what it was, and it would be hackneyed at this point for him to wonder what it might be.

Bobby rushed to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. There on his neck was a massive bite mark, much like a hickey, except for several clear puncture marks that had been made by teeth. It looked mysteriously healed, just like the other one, but Bobby didn't want to know what this one would feel like upon stepping out into the sun. He could only imagine all of the horrendous ways it would burn, crack, ooze, and fester.

“Come on boy, let's get!” shouted Todd from the bottom of the stairs.

The sun would rise before 7 A.M., so Bobby had three hours, more or less, before he simply had to go inside. He already knew what would take place if he stayed in the sun. It was the same sort of bite as the one on his arm, and it would produce the same effect, of that he was certain.

Breakfast that morning was most unsatisfying for Bobby, specifically because he found that he did not want to eat. He was hungry, but had no desire for the food on the table. He couldn't even force it down this time, it was as if every fiber of his being was rejecting the eggs and toast he had eaten all his life. He craved something else, but he didn't know what. It drew Todd's wrath, but nonetheless, Bobby simply could not eat it.

Bobby kept the most watchful of eyes on the horizon while he worked. At the first solitary ray of sunlight that he saw peeking up over the skyline, Bobby was getting out of Dodge. The bite hurt bad enough as it was.

Sure enough, as half-past six rolled around, two tiny rays of sunshine peeped up over the horizon and shot straight for the bite on Bobby's neck. Almost immediately, the bite mark began to peel and seep with pus. His skin began to feel sunburned again, and he immediately dropped

everything and began walking toward the house. He didn't even check to make sure Todd wasn't looking, and evidently Todd was looking, for he soon yelled across the field at Bobby.

"The hell you doin', boy?"

"Going inside," Bobby said without even turning around.

"Boy..."

Bobby heard the sound of Todd dropping the rake he was holding.

"I'm kickin' your ass."

As Bobby began booking it for the house, he could hear a sickly crazed chuckle emanating from Todd's mouth.

"Oh, man," Todd snickered, "I'll tell ya what, boy, you're done!"

Bobby quickened his pace, running up the doorsteps and bursting into the house. The burning feeling immediately calmed down. He looked through the window and saw Todd eagerly making his way toward the doorsteps. Bobby locked the door. The mere clicking sound of the lock seemed to anger Todd, who broke into a full fledged sprint up the doorsteps and then began banging on the door like a caged animal.

"Open this goddamn door!" Todd barked. Bobby shook his head, which made Todd angrier.

In a split second, Todd froze and contemplated his next move, and then, in one additional second, he ran down the doorsteps and rounded the corner of the house. Bobby began sprinting for the backdoor. He had to lock it before that bastard got in. If Todd got inside, it was over.

Bobby ran and ran, but the sound of the backdoor opening was enough to send him running back the way he came.

“You’re done, boy!”

Bobby booked it for the stairs. He thought of going out the front door, but he just couldn’t face the sunlight, not again. He ran up the stairs. About halfway up, he looked over his shoulder to see Todd begin his own ascent upstairs.

“Where you going?”, Todd asked maniacally. “Where you gonna go, huh?”

Bobby burst into his room and slammed the door shut, locking it just in time. The doorknob began wiggling wildly as Todd tried to open it.

“Open this door, now! Open it!”

“Go away!” Bobby shouted.

“Boy...I’m a kick it down!”

There was silence for a moment as Todd seemed to be giving Bobby some sort of choice to open the door. But at the heart of it, there really was no choice. Bobby was gonna have to face the music.

“All-righty, ya little shit!” And with that, Todd knocked in the flimsy wooden door with one mule-like kick. He immediately lunged toward Bobby. Bobby hopped up onto the bed and over to the other side. It was now a game of cat and mouse. Todd circled around the foot of the bed, and when he did, Bobby jumped up onto the bed and went to the other side. This repeated several times, but it couldn’t last forever, Bobby knew that much.

“I can do this all day!” Todd exclaimed.

Bobby was now on the far side of the room, and he started eyeballing the doorway. Todd was by the corner of his bed, at the foot. The second Todd took one step around that corner, Bobby was gonna leap for that door. Todd did a little fake lunge, and Bobby almost leapt onto the bed, catching himself at the last minute. Todd did a few more fake lunges, and then stood very still, waiting to see what Bobby would do. Bobby stayed patient, however, and soon, Todd rounded the corner and ran for Bobby.

Bobby jumped up onto the bed and bounded across the mattress, landing on the wooden floor. But Todd was fast, and he quickly reversed back to the other side of the bed, catching Bobby's shirt.

“Gotcha!”

Todd yanked Bobby onto the bed. Bobby let out a horrible choking noise as his shirt collar tightened around his neck. Next thing he knew, he was thrown down onto the mattress. He tried to wriggle away, but Todd was too strong. Todd firmly grasped Bobby's ankles and began tugging at his pant legs.

“Best don't kick, boy,” said Todd.

Bobby's eyes widened as Todd began yanking hard at Bobby's pant legs. He knew what happened next. It had happened twice before.

“No, stop!” Bobby begged. But Todd kept at it.

Suddenly, however, Bobby's fear quickly ran dry. He was now seeing red, both in the traditional sense of being angry, but also in a literal sense, as well; a dark, syrupy red. And the next thing he heard, right before blacking out, was the sound of Todd screaming in pain.

When Bobby came to, he found himself standing in his bedroom, completely alone. It was almost dark outside, now, the sun nearly finished dipping below the horizon. Bobby didn't know what had happened or why he was here by himself, but he felt not a single trace of fear, and so he began descending the stairs.

Bobby entered the kitchen, and the first thing he saw was Todd, lying on the table with his throat torn wide open and his voice box hanging out. His skin was jet white, and not a single drop of blood was on the floor below. And as Bobby smacked his lips and moved his tongue around in his mouth, he tasted the strong flavor of blood. Both the tang of the blood and the sight of Todd's corpse made Bobby grin.

Feeling a presence behind him, Bobby turned around to see the creature from his closet, looming over him with its pasty white face, razor-like fangs, and black cloak. But this time, its presence didn't frighten Bobby in the very least. In fact, nothing frightened him now. And as he took the creature's clawed hand and began walking with it into the darkness, he felt safe and sound, for he would never have to step out into the sunlight, again.

Prelude - *The Mummy's Voice*

I was five years old when my parents and my grandparents took me to the museum. It was a Saturday in October, and the air had reached that perfect autumn crispness that I had grown to love, even at such a young age. This is a day I often look back on very fondly. I remember how my dad played a Beatles CD in the car, and how my grandmother sang along to the songs with me.

What I remember most about this particular day, however, was one of the museum's exhibits. Of course, I loved the dinosaur fossils and the mammoth replica, as I was a massive dinosaur nerd at the time (still am). But the exhibit that really stuck with me had to be the mummy exhibit.

I remember entering a large room, which was decorated with treasures from Ancient Egypt. The first thing I saw was a large, golden sarcophagus, a gold-plated face chiseled into it. The crown that rested upon the sarcophagus immediately struck me. It was unlike any crown I had ever seen before.

The part I remember most, however, was the 3,000-year-old mummy that lied in a coffin nearby. I remember looking down at it, my dad by my side. I asked my dad if it was just a statue, like the rest of the museum's exhibits. My dad kindly informed me that this was, in fact, a corpse, thousands of years old, and that when this person died, embalmers shoved a hook into his nose

and ripped out the brain. They followed this by removing all of his organs, drying out his skin, and wrapping him up in bandages.

On the ride home that night, I wondered why anyone would mummify a dead body. Having seen the final, 3000-year-old product, it did not seem to yield pleasant results. I remember sitting in the car on the way home, staring off into space. My grandmother seemed disappointed that I was no longer interested in singing along to Beatles songs with her. She attributed it to tiredness. But the truth is, I simply could not get that mummified face out of my head.

THE MUMMY'S VOICE

by

Jake Wiklacz

Ben was never much for getting the creeps during the graveyard shift at the local museum. All of those figurines and statues and witch doctor masks, he never saw anything in them besides wax and stone and wood. He liked the solitude in the museum at night. He liked hearing no one's voice. He liked hearing nothing at all. Being a nighttime security guard brought on solitude that Ben had always appreciated. He found comfort in his job. That was, of course, until a 4,000-year-old corpse named Prince Khafre arrived at the museum for the month of October.

The mummy of Prince Khafre III was a traveling exhibit. If it were permanent, Ben knew he would've had to see about quitting. From the moment Prince Khafre's malodorous corpse arrived, Ben felt an unease that he hadn't felt in a long time. He wished they could have at least placed glass over the sarcophagus. But the sarcophagus was wide open and it exposed the prince's corpse to the open air.

The mummy was wrapped in gauze that was now rotted and withered by the hand of time. The head was exposed. It was a sickly brown color. The face was skeletal and yet still had the components of a human face. There was half a nose and shriveled ears and even a couple teeth. What the mummy's face was missing were its eyes. Instead, two empty, void-like sockets glared upward at nothing but simultaneously at everything, and they looked as though they lead into an eternal and bottomless abyss.

Perhaps the most unsettling aspect of Khafre's anatomy was its mouth that hung wide open, agape in a never-ending and silent scream. The distressed appearance of the facial muscles only added to the impression that this poor prince had been buried alive, something the experts were looking into.

It was Ben's third shift with Prince Khafre resting under the same roof, and he already couldn't wait for the month of October to be over. It was only the fifth, too. Ben wasn't too sure how much more of this he could take. He was like a child with a creepy doll in their bedroom. No matter what room he was in, what floor he was on, what exhibit he was near, he could feel those lifeless eye sockets leering at him through the walls. When he used the bathroom and approached the sink to wash his hands, he felt abashed when confronted by his own reflection, because his reflection displayed unease that was childlike and irrational and foolish.

That thing is here.

It's upstairs.

Right above my head.

Maybe it knows I'm here, too.

And in the afternoon while Ben slept he saw Prince Khafre's ghastly face in his dreams. The facial features of the mummy were even more exaggerated in dreamland, cartoonish almost, but still grisly. And in Ben's nightmares, he would look down on Khafre's horrid face as the jaw inched open and shut, open and shut, open and shut, and with each movement would utter a futile grunt like someone in sleep paralysis attempting to cry for help. Ben would always awaken with a jolt, shaking his head around, trying to get the image out.

Ben arrived at the museum the next evening to see Henry, the museum director, standing in the lobby waiting on him with his arms crossed and his head cocked sternly to one side. He looked like a schoolteacher who was out to rectify the behavior of a disobedient student.

“Henry?”

“Ben. Take a walk with me.”

“A walk?”

“Yes, a walk. Follow me.”

To Ben’s puzzlement, Henry lead him to the second floor, to Prince Khafre’s exhibit. They approached the sarcophagus, something Ben hated having to do. Henry pointed down at the mummy and looked at Ben and said nothing.

Ben shrugged. “Yeah, I uh, I give up.”

“Look at the arms.”

The very second after those words were uttered, Ben felt his veins turn into rivers of ice. Ben saw it, too, saw the arms of the mummy, which were now down by its side, rather than crossed over the chest like they were supposed to be.

“I, uh, I...” Ben couldn’t find his words.

“Is that funny to you?” Henry asked rhetorically. “Because let me tell you, it’s not funny to me.”

“I didn’t do that,” said Ben. “Couldn’t it have been some kids messing around?”

“Do you see any kids around here? It’s Monday. Place is closed.”

“Maybe they moved them yesterday.”

“But you guarded it last night, did you not? Wouldn’t you have noticed?”

“I, I...”

Ben had passed by the exhibit once—and only once—the previous evening and never noticed anything off about the arms. In fact, he faintly remembered the arms being crossed over the chest, but there was no way to be certain.

“Look,” said Ben, “did you talk to Jimmy?”

Jimmy was the daytime guard, a real prankster. He and Ben had always enjoyed playing jokes on each other. This one was a step too far in Ben’s mind.

“Yesterday’s daytime guard was Thomas, the new guy,” Henry replied, “and let’s face it, he hasn’t joined your little circle of pranksters, yet.”

“Well, I -

“Move the arms back, please. And don’t let it happen, again. I don’t care who did it.”

“Move the arms...back?”

“Yes. But wear gloves, or something.” Henry walked off. Ben looked down at the mummy.

It’s just you and me, now.

Ben took out latex gloves and slapped them on and cringed as he imagined touching the mummy. Standing this close enabled him to smell the stench of Prince Khafre’s corpse. He used one hand to pinch his nostrils shut and the other to grasp the mummy’s wrists one at a time and move them back to its chest. The wrists felt like little branches in Ben’s grasp, and he hated the crinkling sound the bones made when moved. Through the latex gloves, he could feel the icy touch of death that radiated from the mummy’s rotted flesh.

For the next hour or so, Ben thought about it more, and the more he thought the more he realized that Khafre's arms had been crossed over the chest. He could picture it. He certainly didn't move them. He'd never have touched that thing by choice.

And so, later that evening when Ben was alone in the place, he pulled a steel chair up to Khafre's sarcophagus and sat down. He would sit here and watch the mummy. Any sign of movement, any sign at all, even the slight twitch of a bony finger, and Ben was *out*. Plenty of places without mummies needed security guards.

Come on, give me a reason to quit.

Just move, just once.

Come on, November!

As Ben sat and kept his eyes trained on the mummy, his sleepless afternoons of mummy nightmares began to catch up to him, and Ben was soon sound asleep with his mouth agape and drool drizzling down over his jaw.

"Benjamin!"

Ben woke with a jolt. He stood up with such force that it knocked the chair backward. He grasped the handle of his pistol. His head was on a wild swivel as he glanced all around, trying to pinpoint the source of the voice.

It soon occurred to Ben that what he had heard was a half-awake, half-asleep hallucination. He sighed with relief as his heart palpitations slowed to a crawl. He removed his hand from his pistol.

"Benjamin!"

There it was, again. Ben was so startled that it felt like a shotgun round had just penetrated his gut.

“Who’s there?” Ben shouted.

“It’s me, Benjamin.”

The voice was low and metallic, but also slightly debonair, sort of like a James Bond villain. Ben found it difficult to pinpoint the source.

“Where are you?” Ben asked.

“In here,” the voice replied. “In my sarcophagus.”

Ben’s heart sank as he drew his gun and slowly approached the mummy’s coffin.

“No, that’s impossible,” said Ben.

“One would think,” the voice replied.

“Jesus Christ.”

“Not quite. I’m Prince Khafre, the third. And I will be requiring your assistance.”

At this moment, Ben realized that the voice was not coming from the mummy itself, nor anywhere in the room for that matter. It was sounding off inside of Ben’s mind.

Great, I’m going insane.

“This is insane,” said Ben. “I must be going crazy. I must be -

“Oh, do stop dawdling,” Khafre interrupted. “We’re wasting time.”

“How are you speaking to me?”

“I have no earthly idea. Why, it took three days and all of my inner strength and then some more just to move my arms from my chest. This isn’t sustainable, Benjamin, and so I need your help, you see.”

“Oh, screw this.” Ben began heading for the exit.

“Excuse me,” said Khafre, “that’s quite rude.”

Ben suddenly felt a sharp pain inside of his head that quickly multiplied into the worst migraine imaginable. He fell to his knees, clutching his head and yowling in agony.

“Oh my god!” Ben cried. “Please, stop! Please!”

“Will you stop with the foolish rambling?” Khafre asked.

“Yes! Oh, god!”

Just like that, the migraine ceased. Ben climbed to his feet and clutched his forehead.

“Now, please do as I ask,” said Khafre, “or the next one will be far worse, I fear.”

“All right,” said Ben, “all right, fine. What do you want with me?”

“Benjamin, I have a confession,” said Khafre. “My own gods will not allow me into the afterlife. I am subjected to an eternity in the underworld, but I’m afraid it just won’t do. I need to get my soul to heaven, and you’re going to help me.”

“Me? I’m a security guard.”

“Which is exactly why you’re the perfect little helper. What I need lies in the museum basement. I need the scroll of the Cult of Karnak.”

“Scroll? W-What scroll? How do I know which one?”

“Speak clearly, you blithering buffoon!”

“The scroll! How do I know what it looks like?”

“On the front of it, there is the image of the god, Karnak, a pagan deity with the head of a flamingo.”

“Head of a flamingo, head of a flamingo, head of a flamingo...” Ben repeated this with the fear that he would forget.

“Find it and bring it to me,” Khafre snarled.

Ben stood there like a fool for a moment or two. Khafre didn't seem to like this.

“Waiting for something?” the prince growled with impatience.

“This is a dream,” said Ben, perhaps foolishly. But it made sense in that moment. He had fallen asleep in that chair and he was simply dreaming.

“Think so?” replied Khafre.

And suddenly, Ben felt the volume of the Pacific Ocean concentrated into the tiny cavity of his skull. He couldn't even scream. He fell to the floor and quivered in sheer, brutal agony. After a few seconds the behemoth migraine was gone.

“GAH!”

“Did that feel like a dream, you imbecile?” asked Khafre.

“Oh my god,” Ben exclaimed. “All right. Holy Christ, I'll do whatever you say.”

“That's a good lad. Better get going. I'd hate for Jenny to feel that, too.”

Ben's heart stopped. Jenny was Ben's wife. Sweet as could be, frail as a bird, never wronged anyone. Khafre must have wormed his way deep into Ben's mind because he clearly knew who Ben's wife was, a scary thought indeed.

“I swear to god, if you -

“Oh, Benjamin, do shut up. I'm already dead, you know. Now, get to it before I make your eyes pop out.”

“All right, all right.” Ben turned around and exited the exhibit with haste.

The elevator hummed as it traveled down into the depths of the museum. The mummy's voice was gone from Ben's mind, now, but Ben was certain the voice would pop back in when he least expected it. He knew it would scare the daylights out of him, too.

Ding!

The elevator doors opened and Ben's eyes adjusted to the darkness. The museum basement looked like a hoarder's garage, a maze of clutter and boxes and dusty items. Ben stepped out of the elevator and began his trek through the labyrinth of clutter. He felt himself traveling through time as he passed by numerous eras; the ancient Romans, the Aztecs, the Easter Islanders, the Mongols. His eyes scanned the place as he desperately tried to pinpoint Ancient Egypt. When he did, he exhaled with relief.

Ben clambered over to the pile of Egyptian artifacts. Golden statues and figurines and Pharaoh masks and amulets and jars with animal heads. He rummaged through everything, knocking things over and making a jumbled mess as he searched for the scroll.

"Head of a flamingo, head of a flamingo, head of a flamingo..." he repeated to himself over and over again until he was saying it so fast that the words no longer sounded like anything other than a toddler's gibberish.

His hand found its way to something in the middle of a jumbled pile, and when he clutched at it he felt that it was a scroll, and he pulled it out and saw the depiction of a man with the head of a flamingo.

"Thank god!" he cried.

Ben popped the seal and opened the scroll. A white museum label was taped to it and it read *Cult of Karnak*. Depicted on the scroll was apocalyptic imagery. The flamingo god Karnak stood at the top of a pyramid with his arms outstretched as people ascended the pyramid steps in hopes of escaping the hellfire that burned below. Another image depicted Karnak sending down plagues of fire and locusts upon followers of the god Osiris. And as he gazed at these images, he felt a feeling of dread slowly envelop him.

“That’s the one.”

Ben jumped and yelped, startled. As he had feared, Khafre’s voice popped back in at the most unexpected time.

“Holy shit,” said Ben as he caught his breath.

“Bring it to me,” said Khafre with impatience. “Let’s hurry along, here.”

“Okay.”

Ben walked hurriedly back to the elevator and furiously tapped the buttons until the doors closed. When he exited the elevator, he dropped the scroll more than a few times as he desperately scrambled toward Khafre’s exhibit. But as he rounded one last corner, he was filled with shock as he came face-to-face with Henry, the museum director.

“Holy shit!” said Ben, startled out of his whits. “Henry?”

Ben glanced down at his watch. It was already 6 AM. Henry was giving him that cockeyed stare once again as his eyes traveled downward to the scroll in Ben’s hands.

“What is that?” Henry asked.

“This?”

“That thing. What is that? Is that a...scroll?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Where’d you find it?”

“I, uh...the floor.”

“The floor?”

“Yeah. In the bathroom.”

“Huh...”

Henry stared at it for a while. *Please just walk away*, thought Ben. *Just walk away and cease to give a damn. Please!* But Ben felt despair as he watched Henry extend his arm and wiggle his fingers in a *gimme* motion.

“Hmm?” Ben mumbled stupidly.

“Let me have it,” said Henry.

Ben reluctantly handed Henry the scroll. Henry began walking off.

“Where are you taking it?” Ben asked as Henry walked away.

“To my office,” Henry replied. “I wanna find out what it is.”

“Dammit...”

“What’d you say?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Henry disappeared around a corner. Ben entered the mummy’s exhibit with haste and approached Khafre’s sarcophagus. He looked down at the silently-screaming mummy.

“Look, I’m sorry,” said Ben. “I’ll...I’ll find a way to get it back, I swear. I-I-I’ll figure out a way to...” Ben’s voice trailed off as he waited for a response. But this time, Khafre’s voice

did not sound off inside of his head. He waited many minutes, but the mummy's voice was dormant and did not speak.

“Hello?” Ben whispered down at the mummy. “I’ll get it back, please don’t do anything to me. Please.” But the mummy’s voice remained idle.

Ben looked up. Looking right at him with raised eyebrows were two little kids with their mother. She was holding them close, likely ready to defend them against this crazy security guard she was looking at. Ben smiled weakly at them before shuffling out of the exhibit.

Ben went home and drank a glass of milk and climbed into bed. His anxiety was at peak level as he dreaded hearing Khafre’s voice again. Heat flashes flowed over his skin and throughout his entire body as he shook with fear under the covers. No way he was getting any sleep today, no way at all. He tried desperately for many hours.

It was around 10 AM when Jenny entered the room with a plate of food for Ben. She handed him the plate and kissed him on the forehead. Ben was too uneasy to eat but he shoved some food in his mouth anyway so that Jenny felt appreciated. And she kissed him again and left the room. Ben closed his eyes and once again attempted to sleep. An hour passed, then another, and soon a few hours became eight hours, and Ben still had not slept a wink. *At least*, he thought, *I didn't have to dream about the mummy's face, again.*

“Feeling well-rested?”

Ben threw off the covers as he uttered a loud whooping noise. The mummy’s voice was back. Ben had a quick and dreadful thought that maybe the voice would never leave. They would surely lock him in a madhouse with a padded cell, it was only be a matter of time.

“Listen,” said Ben, “I’m sorry, I didn’t know he was gonna show up. I’ll get you your -

“Better hurry,” said Khafre. And then the voice disappeared, and it was silent.

“Hello?” said Ben. “Hello? Did you hear me? I said I’ll get you your scroll.”

And suddenly, Ben felt his head beginning to hurt. It was only a slight pain, but with each passing second the pain grew just a little bit more, and after about thirty seconds, the pain was twice what it was at the start. Ben knew what this meant. He was on his way to another gut wrenching episode of pain.

Ben leaped out of bed and flew out the door. He didn’t even throw on a pair of shoes. He jumped in the car and backed out of the driveway so fast that the car swung into the road like a rolling baseball bat. He was lucky no one’s kid was standing in the road. Ben stepped on the gas pedal with full force and made a beeline for the museum. It was a ten-minute drive, but Ben’s desperate and lunatic driving made it six. He arrived at the museum after running at least three red lights, though he hadn’t kept count.

Ben swerved his car into the parking lot and parked in two spaces. He shot out of the car like a missile. His head hurt badly, now. It was twice what it was at the start. With no plan whatsoever, Ben hauled up the stairs and got to the museum doors. He reached into his pocket for the keys. His heart sank when his fingers wiggled around inside of an empty pocket.

“Oh, no! The keys! I don’t have the keys!” Ben was pleading with Khafre, but the mummy evidently was not listening at all. Ben began slamming his palms on the glass doors like a lunatic.

“Hey! Hey! Open the door! Hello!”

Ben slammed his hands into the door over and over until his palms were black and blue. The museum was closed, now, but the other night shift guy, Jimmy, was there and he soon came scurrying over to the doors looking like a startled deer. He recognized Ben and, appearing concerned, unlocked the door.

“Ben, what is it?” The second the doors were unlocked, Ben burst inside and barreled right through Jimmy, knocking him to the floor.

“Hey! Ben, what’s going on?”

Ben sprinted down the hallway toward Henry’s office. He had the determination of a track and field Olympian as he bolted past exhibit after exhibit. He got to Henry’s office. Henry was gone for the night. Acting quickly, Ben picked up a nearby flower pot and swung it once, twice, and let go on the third, sending it crashing through the window. Ben crawled through the shattered window, cutting his hands on broken glass, which went unnoticed to him due to the excruciating pain inside of his skull. He scrambled all over the office like a cornered squirrel, knocking things over and breaking ornaments and causing a preposterous mess. He finally spotted the scroll sitting atop the shelf, which made it apparent that the mess he had just made was completely unnecessary. Ben would surely be fired and he didn’t care a bit. He snatched the scroll and the second his fingers made contact with it, the pain in his head ceased.

“Well done,” said Khafre, returning to Ben’s mind. “You sure move quickly with a bit of motivation.”

“Oh, god,” said Ben. “Ah, jeez. Okay, I got it.”

“Get to my exhibit. Now.”

“Sure thing.” Ben sounded almost grateful. As he exited Henry’s office, he could hear Jimmy shouting his name in concerned fashion. Ben couldn’t have cared less. He made his way to the second floor and entered the mummy’s exhibit for what he hoped was the last time. He approached Khafre’s sarcophagus and looked down at the mummy for, again, what he hoped would be the very last time.

“All right,” said Ben, “what do I need to do?”

“I need you to open the damned thing, first,” Khafre snarled. “Once you do, all I require of you is to look upon the words written. I’ll take it from there.”

As Ben opened the scroll and once again laid eyes on the frightening imagery depicted inside, he felt that sense of dread once again come over him. He lowered the scroll down to his side, perhaps unwisely.

“Say, Prince,” said Ben.

“Have you lost your mind?”

“Why aren’t you able to get to the afterlife, anyway?”

“Because I’m a murderous fiend. Now, lay your eyes on that scroll or I’ll throttle you so badly that I’ll have to use the other guard.”

“Okay, okay,” said Ben, not wanting to poke the beast any longer.

Ben gazed upon the scroll and trained his eyes on the hieroglyphics. Khafre began to read. Khafre recited the words in Ancient Egyptian tongue, and as he did, Ben began to feel a strange sensation inside of his head. It was not a pain, but rather a dizziness. *Come on, don’t pass out, don’t pass out.* And then, darkness.

When Ben woke he found himself staring up at bright lights, and as his blurred vision came into focus, he realized that he was looking up at the ceiling in the mummy's exhibit.

Holy shit, Ben thought, *the whole thing was a dream*. It all made sense, now. He had fallen asleep in Khafre's exhibit and simply must have had just another mummy nightmare, a vivid one at that.

But this notion completely washed away when Ben realized he could not move. He thought maybe it was sleep paralysis, something he had only gotten once in his entire life. And then he saw his *own* smiling face looking down at him, and that was when he put the pieces together. Felt the sides of the sarcophagus against his elbows. Felt his own decayed flesh. Felt the gauze wrapped around his own body. Felt his arms crossed over his chest.

"Thanks for the new vessel," said Khafre, now residing in Ben. "Now, if you'll excuse me...I must get home to Jenny." And with that, Khafre smiled and winked and walked off.

Ben, now dwelling in that stinking corpse he had hated for so long, could do absolutely nothing in protest. The only movement he could muster at all was to inch his jaw open and shut, open and shut, open and shut, as the smallest and faintest grunt exited his rotted lips.

Prelude - *Five-O*

It seems that every place, big or small, harbors some sort of scary story. To see my point, one need only take a look at the US map and realize that each and every state has a monster, whether it be Bigfoot in Northern California, the Jersey Devil in New Jersey, or “Champ” in Vermont. Not only this, but each and every state also has one or more paranormal stories, and some cities, such as Charleston, South Carolina, have an entire hatful of ghost stories.

If we narrow it down even further, most neighborhoods tend to have in them a house that is avoided and whispered about. No one usually remembers how the house or the people in it really got their bad reputation, but that doesn’t stop the stories from passing along. Sometimes the stories are true, sometimes false. Sometimes they are believable, and sometimes they border on ridiculous. But no matter the case, children are always wary when walking past that certain house, and teenagers are always daring one another to ring its doorbell and run.

Growing up, my street had a house like that. It was at the end of the street, sitting at the far side of the cul-de-sac. We called it “that white house”, because it was a large white home, bigger than the other houses on the street. At night, especially, as the white siding reflected pale, blue moonlight, and the trees cast ghastly shadows on it, it looked like a haunted manor out of *Scooby Doo, Where are You?*, somewhere that some masked caper was hatching their next dastardly plan.

I do not remember how or why this house became the stuff of campfire stories and wild rumors. I remember some old couple lived in that house, but people in the neighborhood barely

ever saw them. In fact, I'm not sure I remember anyone that even knew their names. What we did know, however, was that the lady was missing a couple of fingers. And when I say "we knew", what I mean is that it was what us kids gossiped about. I think one of my friends was selling boy scout popcorn at "that white house", and when the old woman came to the door, one of her hands only had three fingers. That's what he said, at least. We used to say that she was a witch, and that she had been the one to cut her fingers off as an offering to the devil, or some such nonsense. At a certain point, kids even spread a rumor that the old couple kept mummified bodies in their cellar.

As far as the old man that lived in that house, I only remember seeing him once, when I was in either 3rd or 4th grade. It was a Friday or Saturday evening sometime in late autumn, at that time when it gets dark at 6 PM. A few of us kids were out late, riding our bikes around and trying to outdo one another's BMX-style stunts on my bike ramp. We had been at this awhile, and the conversation was starting to become *what do you guys wanna do now?*, and gradually transitioned into *let's get into some trouble*. This was our go-to, pretty much; play basketball or backyard football until it got dark, and then start doing stupid shit when we had the cover of darkness.

One of our friends suggest that we go around and ding-dong-ditch houses. So, we promptly cut through yards and went to other streets, ringing the doorbells of people that couldn't snitch to our parents. Each of us rang a doorbell, one by one. Sometimes we'd get chased, sometimes just yelled at, and sometimes no one would answer. Some of the less boisterous kids in the group would try and weasel out of it by picking a house that had all of the lights off, the people obviously not being home.

Anyway, after a while, one of us had the bright idea of upping the stakes by ringing the doorbell of the scary house at the end of our street. Nobody wanted to do it, but *everyone* wanted to see someone else do it. Then, I recalled that rumor, the real nasty one, the one about the mummies in the basement. I suggested that we take a peak through one of the windows and see if those dead bodies were really there. Though a couple of the guys in the group questioned it, the majority ruled, and we soon found ourselves walking toward that scary house.

When we got there, we were relieved to see that the lights in the house were off. We sneaked around the side of the house. A few of the guys in our group were too scared, and hung back while the rest of us paced the side of the house, looking to find a window that would allow us a peak inside the basement. We had no luck for a few minutes. With the rascal in me wanting to at least see something scary, I peaked through one of the windows on the side of the house. This offered me a look into the living room, which was real dark, save for flickering light from the television. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness inside, I realized that the old man who lived there was sitting on the couch, watching TV. With his long and scraggly beard, balding head, and abnormally wide eyes, he looked like the type of guy who walked the streets and told everyone that the end of the world was nigh.

Suddenly, I heard the faint sound of a doorbell ringing, coming from inside the house. The old man's head jerked to the side to look at the front door. My friends and I immediately bolted off. As we ran toward the street, we saw the couple of guys that had decided to hang back. They were running away, giggling, having just rang the old couple's doorbell. As we continued running, I looked over my shoulder to see if they had answered the door. But the house was still and motionless. The door remained closed. We ran off up the street and quickly headed into one of our backyards.

Deciding that was enough fun for the evening, my buddies and I called it a night and went home. I went inside, climbed into bed, and began reading, as I always did before bed as a kid. At some point, I guess I had to get a glass of water, or something. I walked downstairs and poured myself a glass. As I sipped my water, I thought of how we had rang those people's doorbell. For some reason, I decided to take a look out one of the front windows of my house, and what I saw next terrified me: outside, slowly zombie-walking up the road, was the old man from the scary house. He was just pacing, his head on a swivel as he looked all around. He was looking for us. I ran back to bed, but curiosity got the best of me, and about a half-hour later, I went back downstairs to have another look. And to my surprise, there he still was, pacing up and down our street, looking for us damned kids.

FIVE-O

by

Jake Wiklacz

Maine, 1981

Sharon Cleaver pedaled her bicycle through patches of orange street light, keeping one eye on the road and the other peeled for sketchy folks. A nighttime trip to the park in this shady town was sort of like playing with fire, but Sharon needed it, tonight. Anything was better than sitting inside and rotting away, waiting for her husband, Gary, to come home with liquor on his breath and drunk sex on his mind. Gary owned a gas station on the sketchiest street corner in town, and Sharon was the lucky girl who had married into it, mainly on account of advice from her small-minded folks. Sharon knew it wasn't for her, too. But something kept her here, in Maine, cooped up in her comfort zone, which was becoming decidedly uncomfortable.

Sharon was growing tired of everything, which was the only reason she could think of as to why she was craving cigarettes at nine o'clock at night. She was tired of her rude husband. She was tired of the small minds that influenced and zombified her every single day. She was tired of working at that rundown gas station and fearing that, at any moment, someone would hold up the place. But most of all, she was tired of this crappy town where everyone knew everyone, and everyone knew each other's business and who was dating who and who's kid had just turned one years old.

Sharon had thought about leaving on more than one occasion, but something always held her back. *You'll never make it in the big city*, her parents would say. *We're not moving*, her

complacent husband would say. *Better to stay in your element*, her old-timer neighbors would say. But this town was anything but her element. She had never even been out of the country, and she had only been out of state as many times as the number of fingers on one's hand. Sometimes Sharon would lie in bed, awake for hours, genuinely wondering what the hell was stopping her from getting up, packing her things, and walking out that door, never to return. It wasn't any sort of love for Gary. No, she actually couldn't quite stand to look at him. Marrying him had been pushed upon her by her parents some three years ago, and she had deeply resented them for it after the wedding. The fact that she didn't have a college degree may have been keeping her stagnant, but then again, working as a waitress in a seaside burger bar would have been *miles* better than that gas station. Her parents had discouraged her about going to college a few years earlier. The reason for not leaving this small town was something that Sharon just couldn't quite put her finger on.

Sharon arrived at the park and set her bicycle down in the shadows where it couldn't be seen. If she didn't, there was a strong likelihood it would have gotten stolen, of that she was certain. Her mind was craving menthols, but she wanted to sit down, first. *I can at least wait until I sit*, she thought, seeking to convince herself that she wasn't addicted. She found her favorite spot, a bench on the side of the asphalt path, right across from a stone bridge. If she did leave, this peaceful little park was about the only thing she would likely miss.

Sharon lit up the first menthol and took a deep inhale of the relaxing smoke. She found it sad that this was what she looked forward to, but quickly ditched this thought upon a second puff of her cigarette. She leaned back and stared up at the stars, yearning to be able to whip out a jet pack and skyrocket toward those little, twinkling lights in the sky. She always used to love

imagining what sort of worlds orbited those stars. In fact, she used to write stories about it when she was little, until one day her parents made fun of her for it. She threw her stories out and cried herself to sleep, never writing a single word of fiction ever again.

Continuing to stare up at the stars and the full moon in the sky, Sharon burnt through about three cigarettes. And then, she heard the scream. It was a male scream, but it sounded terrified, and it was coming from beyond the stone bridge, over near the creek. Sharon stood up and listened. It was deathly silent for a moment. But then, the scream happened again, this time a bit louder. There were words within this scream, now. "Please, don't!" the man yelled. Her curiosity getting the best of her, Sharon walked across the bridge to see what was going on.

Staying behind the tree line and keeping a low stance, Sharon crept over to the creek, following the sounds of the yells. She could see movement across the creek, on the asphalt path. Allowing her eyes to adjust, Sharon watched as a terrified black man slowly backed away from somebody. His hands were raised, and he was crying. Walking toward him, aiming a gun, was a police officer. Sharon couldn't believe her eyes. This was not just any police officer. No, this was Jimmy Duvall, the beloved town sheriff. Sure, everyone in town knew each other, but no one was as loved and admired as Jimmy Duvall. Sharon had spoken to him plenty of times, as he frequented her husband's gas station, always greeting her by name and with a warm smile. He was a sheriff's sheriff, one of those all-American boy types. A few years earlier, he had become a local hero after stopping a mass shooting before it could happen. And now, here he was, aiming his pistol at a terrified man who was begging for his life.

"Please!" said the man. "Please, don't kill me!"

"You done?" Jimmy replied in a cold and unsympathetic tone.

“Please, do not shoot me! I’ll do anything!”

There was silence for a moment. Jimmy stared at the man as the man continued to whimper like a frightened animal.

“Anything?” Jimmy asked. “Why would you degrade yourself like that? What would your wife think? Do you think she’d find that attractive? No, she wouldn’t. Because it’s disgusting.”

“Please!” the man shouted.

And with that, Jimmy pulled the trigger. It was about the sickest thing Sharon had seen in her entire life. Blood and brain matter sprayed right out the back of the man’s head. He fell backward and limply hit the ground with a sickening thud. Jimmy just stood still, staring down at his handiwork. A thin line of smoke trailed out of the barrel of the pistol. Sharon cupped her hands over her mouth before she could gasp. She couldn’t move. She was haunted by the way Jimmy just stared and stared at the man’s dead body.

After staring at the dead body for several moments longer, Jimmy reached behind his back and pulled a second pistol off of his waistband. He bent down and began shifting the position of the dead man’s arms, before placing the second pistol right near the dead man’s fingertips.

Sharon began thinking of an exit strategy, but she couldn’t move, even though she wanted to. The second she inched her feet in any direction, the leaves under them would shift and crackle. By now, she was really wishing she had just hopped onto her bike and pedaled home. But she was stuck, now. She figured she could wait it out, wait for Jimmy to leave the scene, but

it was becoming apparent that he wasn't going to leave anytime soon. He was turning this crime scene into a false narrative, and was likely going to call it in, soon.

As Sharon began to try and inch her feet back, Jimmy's head began to turn toward her direction. Perhaps it was her breathing, or the crackling of leaves, or maybe just a sixth sense in Jimmy's head, but something had tipped him off to Sharon being there. Jimmy stared in Sharon's direction. Sharon held deathly still, not a muscle on her moving. But the thicket just wasn't thick enough, the branches still stripped bare by cold weather. Jimmy had pinpointed Sharon among the trees, and had his eyes locked onto her like that of a hawk's. He slowly began inching forward.

Overwhelmed by fear, Sharon quickly stood up, turned, and ran. Adrenaline coursed through her veins as her legs carried her across the park, toward her bike. She looked over her shoulder to see Jimmy, who was now standing on the bridge, watching her run away. He stood as still as he had after shooting that unarmed man. This was not the Jimmy she had seen come into the gas station time and time again. This was a cold, unfeeling fiend. Sharon quickly turned and faced directly in front of her, not wanting Jimmy to see her face, which he would have undoubtedly recognized. Her mind raced as she wondered if he had already seen her face. Jimmy knew where she lived. Sharon was pretty sure that he had come over one night to drink and gamble with Gary and some other guys. She remembered how he brought over an apple pie as a thank you for inviting him into her home.

Sharon dashed up the stone steps which lead to the archway park entrance. She picked her bike up off of the ground, hopped on it, and began pedaling away. As she did, she noticed a police car parked on the side of the road, ominously sitting beyond a patch of street light. The

thing practically lurked back there, and even though it had no driver, it was not unlike a shark creeping through murky waters, probing around for an unlucky swimmer.

HONK HONK!

Before Sharon knew it, a station wagon plowed into the back tire of her bicycle. She flew up into the air, her knee knocking against the hood of the car. Having had been so focused on pedaling to safety, she hadn't looked before crossing. The fact that the station wagon didn't have its headlights on only made it less visible.

Sharon found herself lying on the hard asphalt, trying to take in even just a little bit of air into her deflated lungs. A woman got out of the station wagon, an accusatory look on her face. Everyone around here was like that. Nothing was ever their fault, it was always yours, see. Even when they hit you with their car, it was always chalked up to "is there a dent?"

"Are you okay?", the woman asked as she knelt down to check Sharon. Sharon couldn't speak, however. In fact, she was still trying to figure out how to breathe again. After a few more tries, she was able to inhale a bit of oxygen, and her voice came out as a weak whisper.

"I... I think so," Sharon stammered.

The woman looked up and squinted at something on the side of the road. Sharon looked to see what she was looking at. It was the police car.

"There's a cop around," the woman said. Sharon began to panic as she thought of Jimmy.

"No, really," said Sharon. "I'm fine."

"What happened, here?" said a nearby male voice.

Sharon and the woman turned their heads to see Jimmy, who was emerging from the archway. He looked concerned for Sharon, and his concern looked as real as his kindness had at the gas station so many times before.

“She pedaled out in front of my car,” said the woman. “I don’t think she’s injured.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” said Jimmy as he walked up to Sharon and the woman. Sharon stared up at him with a frightened and wary look about her. Jimmy smiled down at her and extended his hand. “Here, take my hand,” he said.

Sharon hesitated, staring at Jimmy’s hand. After a moment, Sharon noticed a small drop of dried blood on Jimmy’s knuckle. It made her grimace.

“I’m fine,” Sharon said. “I can get up.”

Sharon slowly pulled herself up to her feet. Jimmy brought his hand back to his side, his sweet smile gradually fading. The woman, meanwhile, looked hopeful, but not really out of sympathy for Sharon. More out of concern that she would have to pay some medical bills.

“You sure you’re okay?” Jimmy asked.

“Yes, I’m fine,” said Sharon. “Just knocked the wind out of me, but I’m okay. I didn’t bump my head, or anything.”

“You should wear a helmet.”

“Yes, that’s good advice.”

There was a pause that felt like forever. Time seemed to stand still as Sharon felt Jimmy’s eyes staring right into her. Options flipped through her head like a deck of cards. She thought about warning the woman, but then feared they’d both end up dead. Jimmy had murdered that man without a sign of remorse afterward, and Sharon was sure that he’d do it to them.

“It’s Sharon, right?” asked Jimmy as he stared into Sharon’s face.

Sharon hesitated, but what could she do? Jimmy knew.

“Y-yeah,” said Sharon.

“That’s right. You work at Waughtown Market. I see you almost every day.”

Sharon nodded, her eyeballs sheepishly lowering toward the ground. Her eyes slowly panned over to the woman, and she began to open her mouth to warn her. As she did, however, Jimmy must have noticed, because he casually placed his hand on the handle of his gun, warily eyeballing her.

“Yeah, I remember I came over one night,” Jimmy continued. “Your husband and I played cards with a few other guys. Gary’s got the best damn poker face I ever saw, let me tell you. Wouldn’t be surprised if I see him at the World Series, one day. For poker, I mean.”

Sharon uttered a weak chuckle as she nodded her head once. Jimmy just kept on smiling that all-American smile. The guy really did think he was Superman, or something, but now it was becoming increasingly apparent that it was all a cover-up. The whole hero thing was just a brightly-colored veil that hid an unsightly monster beneath it.

“Well, I...” Sharon uttered, her voice quickly cracking and then trailing off. Jimmy stared at her, expectantly but patiently waiting for her to finish.

“I’d better get going,” said Sharon. “Goodnight.”

“You’re sure you’re okay?” asked Jimmy, this time with a slight tinge of menace. The nearby woman even seemed to pick up on it, as she began to slowly back up toward her car.

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“All right, it’s just, you know...wondering what the big hurry is.”

Sharon's blood froze when Jimmy said this. He looked at her as if he was waiting for an answer. It wasn't just an offhanded remark. Jimmy was genuinely looking for a response.

"I just..." Sharon stammered. "I just need to, uh, to get back home. Husband's waiting on me."

"Good old Gary," Jimmy said with a smirk. "Tell him I said hello."

Sharon hopped back onto her bike, but another remark from Jimmy sent chills down her spine.

"And Sharon," said Jimmy. "Remember to look both ways, yeah?"

"Right," Sharon said as she hurriedly pedaled away. She looked over her shoulder several more times, and each time she did, she saw Jimmy standing there, watching her pedal off. She prayed that she didn't fall off of the bike again. *Gotta get to the telephone*, she thought. *Gotta get to the telephone*. But then, Sharon began to wonder who she could call. What if others down at the police station were like Jimmy was? What if that whole place was crooked and corrupt? On one hand, it didn't seem logical. This town was not a hub for organized crime, which was where crooked cops were usually plentiful. But on the other hand, the town hero actually being some brutal killer was anything but logical.

Sharon's eyes were especially peeled as she biked through this small and quiet neighborhood. It was about a ten-minute bike ride from the park back to her house. At any moment, Sharon felt that Jimmy's police car could just come out of nowhere and blast into her. Each and every time she looked back to see that his car was not there, she was surprised that it wasn't.

Sharon pedaled up to her house. Gary's car was parked in the driveway. She rolled her bike onto the lawn before hopping off and leaving it there. She began hurriedly walking up to the front door, but stopped dead in her tracks when she noticed something a ways up the road. Parked on the side of the road, several houses down, was a police car. It was parked in the shadows, but Sharon could see it clear as day. There didn't look to be anyone inside. Sharon quickly backed away from the front door and went back around the corner, in front of the garage. She pressed her back up against the garage door, but quickly realized that this wasn't the safest place, either. Thinking fast, Sharon rounded the corner of the house and sneaked over to the side yard. Pressing her back up against the wall, she shimmied over toward one of the windows on the side of the house. She was afraid to move and afraid to breathe. Each breath came out as a shaky sputter.

She held her breath as she inched closer and closer to the side window. Jimmy wasn't in the police car, so where else could he be? Sharon's eyes immediately began to dart around, scanning the yards of the neighbors. She expected to see Jimmy hiding behind a bush, or something, ready to pop out and tie up loose ends. Make no mistake, that was what Sharon was, a loose end.

Sharon was now just a few feet away from the side window, the one that looked into the living room. The more she inched toward it, the smaller her steps became. She was stalling, still trying to work up the guts to peer inside. She began to imagine taking one peak through the glass, only to have a bullet rip into her face. She began to wonder what getting shot would feel like. If she would feel the bullet actually enter and feel the actual pain, or if she would just

suddenly see darkness. Or would she *see* darkness at all? Was that just a way to describe death? After all, death obviously could not be described by those who have felt it.

Taking a deep breath, Sharon took a final step forward and slowly inched the top half of her face in front of the window, peaking through it like a frightened rabbit might peak out of its burrow. The lights were all off inside, which was strange considering Gary's car was there. Her eyes started adjusting to the darkness inside. Once they fully adjusted, she noticed two legs, lying on the floor, poking out from behind the sofa. They were Gary's legs. She could tell by the brown boots on the feet. Those legs were limp, still as stone. Sharon tried to gasp for air, but her lungs felt shrunken once again.

Suddenly, Sharon heard the sound of the back door opening and closing. She didn't even pause to think. She just turned and ran. Jimmy came barreling out from behind the house, robotically sprinting after Sharon. Sharon began to scream as loud as she could. This, in turn, caused Jimmy to quicken his pace, becoming more and more desperate to catch Sharon and shut her up.

"Somebody help!" Sharon screamed at the top of her lungs. "Help me, please!"

Sharon dashed across her front yard. Her first instinct was to run to the neighbor's house and bang on the door. Jimmy would have no recourse if she got neighbors involved. Sharon ran to the neighbor's door as fast as she could. But Jimmy was not gonna stop. In fact, he was looking like he was gonna tackle her before she could even touch that door. Sharon started to time it in her head. Jimmy was about twenty feet behind her. There was no way she could stop and bang on the door without Jimmy flooring her. She had to get out of dodge, first.

"Help!" Sharon shouted this right at the neighbor's house, hoping they'd hear it.

Jimmy was gaining on her. She had to make some sort of evasive maneuver, and fast. Sharon hung a right and dashed through the side yard of the neighbor's house. There were some woods back here, but an open field in between the forest and Sharon. It was her only option, though, as far as she could see. She had to find cover. Jimmy was fast, and trained to catch fleeing criminals. The irony was that Sharon was no criminal. No, the real criminal was Jimmy, the town's police hero.

Sharon sprinted toward the woods. She was about one hundred feet away from the tree line, and she had put a bit of distance between herself and Jimmy after hanging the turn. She was beginning to pant heavily, but her legs would not let up. They moved independently of the rest of her body, just carrying her toward cover.

"Stop now!" Jimmy shouted. "I'll shoot!"

Sharon's heart stopped for a moment upon hearing those words. Soon after Jimmy shouted at her, Sharon could hear the sound of a gun cocking. She instinctually began running in a zigzag formation, and just in time, too, as Jimmy began firing off shots. Sharon yelped with fear, but did not let up one bit. Bullets struck the ground in front of her. There was only about thirty feet now between her and the forest. On a normal night, the deep and dark void of the forest would have looked frightening, but tonight, the real danger was outside of the forest. Hopefully, it did not follow her in. Wishful thinking, indeed.

Sharon burst through the tree line and into the dark depths of the woods. After about five seconds, she could hear Jimmy crashing through the undergrowth, as well. Sharon began to weave around trees, heading for the thickest part of the forest that she could see. It was so dark in these woods, but Sharon kept on going, nearly tripping every ten or so steps that she took.

Sharon must have been running for longer than she realized, because she soon found herself deep in that forest, not knowing where she was or where she had come from. She could no longer hear Jimmy's footsteps behind her, so that was good. But it only presented new challenges. Jimmy had the cover of darkness, now. He probably had a flashlight, too.

Sharon hunkered down behind a large tree, figuring she could wait Jimmy out. Her breathing slowed down, but it remained shaky as ever. *Deep breaths*, she told herself. Her hands, like her breathing, shook like a shivering dog that had just been taken out of the bathtub. As she camped out by that tree trunk, she began to think of Gary. Sharon didn't quite know how to process his death. She had never loved him all that much, but it was still a shock. She felt more for the rest of his family than she did for herself. She was still thinking of the fact that she was not yet out of this situation. A gleam of Jimmy's flashlight further reminded her of this.

A glimmer of blue light hit the corner of Sharon's left eye, which was enough to tell her that Jimmy was somewhere to her left. She quickly shimmied around the tree trunk, watching as the streak of light from Jimmy's torch swayed left and right across the forest floor. The streak of light was thin right now, but with each passing moment it grew slightly wider, which meant that Jimmy was getting closer.

As the ray of light grew wider by the second, Sharon carefully inched further around the tree trunk. The crackle of a stick, however, brought her to a screeching halt. That ray of light came to a halt, as well. Sharon held her breath for about ten seconds. The flashlight beam began swaying again, accompanied by the sounds of Jimmy's crunching footsteps, which were now getting uncomfortably close.

"I see you."

Sharon clenched her teeth when she heard these words uttered about twenty feet behind her. She tightly shut her eyes and prepared for the end. She thought of her parents, and wondered if they would have ever gotten over her death, if they'd ever be able to move on and live normally again, or if the loss of her life would ruin theirs, too. Sharon wondered if her own body would ever even be found. Would she just be labeled as a forever-unsolved disappearance? Perhaps she would have become another creepy episode of *Unsolved Mysteries*.

But the end didn't come. About thirty seconds had passed, but there were no gunshots or anything of the sort. Sharon carefully opened her eyelids, expecting to be looking straight at the pearly gates of the afterworld. She still found herself looking into that same endless forest. Jimmy's statement had been a bluff, a means of trying to get Sharon to take off running.

Sharon looked to the side. The beam of light was shining on the trunk of a nearby tree. Jimmy was now very close, likely standing directly behind Sharon's safe haven. She began to hear the crunching of Jimmy's footsteps again. This time, they sounded like they were coming from Sharon's left. Sharon held her breath and began to inch around the tree trunk a bit more. A moment later, and she would have been discovered, as Jimmy began to walk past that very same tree.

Sharon peeked to the side to see Jimmy walking through the forest. He was frantically shining his flashlight in all directions. The irony of it was that *he* looked as frightened and paranoid as Sharon was. His fear, however, was mixed with a sprinkle of desperation. After all, he had quite a reputation on the line.

Jimmy soon came to a halt, about thirty feet beyond Sharon's hiding place. His back was turned to her, but this didn't ease her anxiety in the least. She so desperately prayed for him to

keep walking, but he was stuck on pause, seemingly thinking things through. Jimmy proceeded to bend down and pick a rock up off of the forest floor. He reared back and hurled it at some nearby bushes. The rock made a loud *knock* as it connected with a tree trunk. He paused and tuned his ears. The wind was now whistling. Sharon was considering bolting off while the wind howled, as it would have momentarily covered up any noise she might have made. But just before she decided to do it, the wind's blowing came to a stop, and the woods were deathly silent once again.

Jimmy again bent down and picked up another rock. To Sharon's horror, he turned slightly toward her direction, tossing the rock. The rock landed about five feet in front of Sharon, but she kept her cool and held still as stone. Jimmy held still, too, tuning his ears like a wolf on the hunt. After a few moments, Jimmy bent down and picked up another rock, hurling it in the same direction. For some reason, he had become hung up on this spot. Perhaps Sharon had unknowingly made a noise, after all. This rock landed just a few inches in front of Sharon's feet. Again, she sat still, but her heart began fluttering like a crazed bird's wings. A new form of panic, stronger than the form she had been feeling thus far, began to sweep over Sharon. She could not handle it anymore. Jimmy had successfully wormed his way into her mind.

Like a frightened jackrabbit, Sharon sprang out from her hiding spot and dashed through the woods. About five gunshots followed. None of the rounds hit Sharon, but she could hear the bullets tearing through nearby brush.

"Help me!" Sharon screamed. It was no use. Nobody was out here, and if anything, it was only giving her position away.

Sharon hopped back onto the main path of the forest and ran. She could hear Jimmy running behind her. He had just emerged onto the path. He was likely aiming right down the path at her, and so Sharon veered back into the woods. She was now at the edge of the forest. Just outside of the woods, here, was an abandoned shack that had been sitting there for quite some time. Sharon began running toward it, figuring she could hide there. She wasn't sure how much longer she could run for, and besides, Jimmy was gaining on her.

Taking a chance, Sharon dashed toward the shack. She rounded the corner so that she was on the side of the place, out of sight. The windows of the old, rotted place were all without glass, so Sharon quietly climbed inside. She could hear Jimmy's footsteps crunching on leaves. From the sound of the footsteps, he had slowed back down to a walking pace.

Sharon tiptoed to the back of the shack. She could hear the sounds of mice crawling around in between the wooden panels. The place was musty and smelled like old hardboiled eggs. Sharon hunkered down in the back corner of the shack. An old baby doll lied on the ground at the opposite end of the shack, and seemed to stare into Sharon's eyes. It made her think that if she didn't get out of this, she would never know what it was like to have a baby. Sharon then began to not only look back on her life, but also on the life that she hadn't fully lived. She had never left the country. She had never had a child. Even at age twenty-four, she had never truly been in love.

Sharon thought of how she had always wanted to see the Greek Islands. She remembered how she had once seen photos of that emerald-like water and those breathtaking landscapes. She wondered what it might be like to slap on a pair of goggles and dive into that water, swimming amongst the fish and experiencing another world. Sharon soon realized that if she didn't imagine

these things right now, not only would she never experience them, but she would never be able to picture them again.

And so, that is exactly what Sharon did. She imagined being out on a boat by the Greek Islands, looking out at that greenish blue water in all of its crystal clear glory. She imagined putting on goggles and a snorkel and diving headfirst into the blue, and as she did, hoards of fish scattered, only to regroup a few seconds later.

Sharon then began to picture falling in love. The man she fell in love with was a mystery man, no one in particular. He looked a bit like Brad Pitt. She imagined what her wedding day looked like. Sharon had been to too many weddings that were held at small churches in Maine, so she decided that if she had had a wedding, that it would have been on a hilltop, in front of a beautiful blue sky. When the priest announced them husband and wife, and they kissed, it was the happiest moment of her life. And they honeymooned, as you probably already guessed, at the Greek Islands.

And then, Sharon imagined joyfully telling her husband that a baby was on the way. They would have waited to find out if it were a boy or a girl. If it were a boy, she would have named him Derek, and if it were a girl, she would have named her Daisy. And then Sharon imagined giving birth and, even though it hurt, feeling a sense of joy that she was bringing new life into the world. And she imagined hearing both *it's a boy* and *it's a girl*, and naming her newborns respectively. Then, she and her husband brought the baby home and placed it in its crib. And, yes, of course her baby kept them awake for many sleepless nights, and yes, she did have to change diapers, and yes, she did have postpartum depression...but it was a life well-lived, and as

Sharon heard Jimmy's footsteps outside grow closer and closer, she wished so badly that she had been able to live it.

BAM! Jimmy kicked down the door of the shack. Sharon yelped with fear. Like before, Jimmy stood there for a moment, staring down his prey. Sharon just laid there in the corner, wide-eyed and frightened, yet somehow still accepting her fate. After a few moments, Jimmy marched forward and grabbed Sharon's wrist, yanking her up off of the ground.

"First, we gotta make this look right," said Jimmy.

Jimmy yanked Sharon out of the shack and tossed her to the ground. As she scrambled to her feet, she took a deep breath of the crisp evening air, knowing it would be her last. She turned to face Jimmy, who raised his gun. He was mumbling to himself in demented fashion.

"I'll tell 'em I chased her out here," he muttered. "Yeah, yeah, that's what I'll tell 'em. And she pulled the gun on me...yeah, that's it."

Jimmy then pulled the safety off. Sharon took a deep breath. This was it. A gunshot filled the air, and just like that...darkness.

Rudimentary thoughts began to enter and exit Sharon's mind. As they did, she began to wonder how she was still having thoughts. She could have sworn she had just been shot, but her consciousness still lingered. She could not see, or hear, or smell anything, but conscious thoughts still bounced around inside her mind. The thoughts were primitive, like the simple impulses that a reptile might feel, but they were most certainly there.

After several more moments, the reptilian thoughts gave way to more human thoughts. Her five senses were still caput for the time being, but her consciousness began to grow in sophistication.

Sharon's eyelids then began to slowly open. She was staring up at the night sky. Her nostrils began to take in air once again, but very slowly and in shallow breaths. It was like she was coming out of sleep paralysis. She couldn't move, and she wouldn't have been able to speak, even if she wanted to. She could feel where the bullet had entered her abdomen, but more in the sense that she could simply feel that it was *there*, not so much the pain. Her body had numbed most of it, by now.

That changed, however, after a few moments. She was able to curl her toes and her fingers. As her fingers jolted, she came to realize that her right arm was outstretched. Not only that, but Sharon could also feel something metallic at her fingertips. Once her neck regained its ability to move, Sharon turned her head and saw that Jimmy had planted a pistol by her hand, just as he had with the man he shot before.

Sharon then heard footsteps in front of her. She looked past her feet to see Jimmy, who was pacing around about ten feet away. He was not looking at Sharon. He was simply pacing around, talking to someone on his walkie.

Sharon had to act fast. Gathering all the strength and willpower she had, she began to reach for the pistol. It was like a dream in which one moves at a turtle's pace, as if some force is holding them back. Sharon could barely move her muscles. She clenched her teeth as she tried harder. She eventually was able to grab the handle of the gun. Now she needed to get her finger in the trigger well. Easier said than done.

Sharon's index finger kept on slipping out of the trigger well. She tried to keep her movements concise so that Jimmy wouldn't notice her. So far, so good. Her finger slipped out a few more times, but then it finally lodged itself in the trigger well. Sharon took a deep breath. She picked up the pistol and held it with both hands. Jimmy noticed her, now. He dropped his walkie and quickly reached for his gun.

Sharon pressed down on the trigger, but nothing happened. She then realized that she had to pull the safety off. Again, easier said than done, and now, Jimmy was raising his pistol. Sharon moved both of her thumbs up to the safety of her pistol, using all of her strength to pull the hammer down. Just as Sharon heard Jimmy pull the safety off of his own pistol, she began firing at him, completely emptying the clip. With bullet holes in every corner of his body, Jimmy stumbled backward and fell limply to the ground. And with the threat of Jimmy no longer looming overhead, Sharon's bullet wound began burning with pain.

The rest of the evening was a blur. Sharon sort of remembered being lifted up and carried away, all the while wondering if she was being carted off to the afterlife. About forty-eight hours later, Sharon awoke in the hospital. On the news, everyone all over town was devastated over the truth about Jimmy. Many people were in denial about it. Reporters visited the hospital to try and get Sharon's thoughts, but Sharon sent them away each and every time. Everyone wanted to know what Sharon had to say, but the truth was, she had nothing to say. All that was left to do for her was to pack up and leave town. For Sharon had a life to live.

THE EIGHTH SEA

by

Jake Wiklacz

I gazed at the sea from my balcony, and in that moment, I saw it in a completely different way than I ever had. I became a marine biologist because of the beauty I saw in the ocean. On a bright and sunny day, its waves were like a hand that benevolently motioned to you and said *come with me*. But tonight, as I stared out at this dark and endless body of water, the waves said something to the tune of *I'll snatch you if you come too close*. It was a hell mouth of sorts, a monstrosity that wouldn't hesitate to swallow me up and turn me into a memory. They could find me if I'd drowned in a lake or a river, but the ocean would turn my mere existence into dust. To call an ocean-bound body a needle in a haystack was to make an understatement that bordered on sin.

Until now, I had never seen the ocean in this sort of light. It had always been the place where life's difficulties were forgotten. Staring out at the ocean exposed the pettiness of everyday life. Overdue bills, relationship troubles, university classes...everything became nonsense when staring out at a frontier more mysterious to us than the surface of the moon.

Even when I was an elementary-schooler, worried about what I had gotten on my spelling test the previous Friday, the ocean was where I realized it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Here existed a place that was here on Earth, and yet was an entirely different world in and of itself.

My wife, Amy, had said to me a few months earlier *what's wrong, Travis?* She had never heard me say a negative thing about the sea, not in our entire ten years of marriage. And so, I told her about the instance that changed one of the core parts of my being.

It was one of those perfect days to be on the water. That cutting breeze that smelled of salt and wet sand was passing through our little Hawaiian town, and I couldn't pass up this opportunity to take my class of bright-eyed marine biology students out to sea.

Not to toot my horn, but I was one of those professors whose class filled up within five minutes of the course signups opening. I liked to think it was because of my well thought-out lectures and effervescent charm, but it was most likely down to the fact that I would often take my students out on a boat. I figured the best way to know about the sea was to be on the sea. As far as I was concerned, time spent inside of those four classroom walls was time that could be spent in the ocean. Oftentimes, I'd even do a full-blown lecture while on the boat. My students' favorite days were when we'd cast a deep-sea net into the water and see what abyssal critters it would collect.

On this so-called perfect day to be at sea, my students and I set a course for open water. We were going a half-hour out for a deep-sea trawling session. That boat ride was always the best. Feeling the ocean wind on my face was the closest I'd ever been to heaven.

When we got out there and prepared to cast the net to the water, a few students noticed a small boat a good distance away, bobbing up and down on the water. No one thought much of it. Once in a while, we'd catch another boat out this far. Usually deep-sea fishermen.

Ten minutes passed, and that boat bobbed closer to us. Most folks would have kicked their boat into gear by now and put some distance between themselves and a nearby vessel. But this boat just kept on bobbing up and down on the waves, and that's when we realized we couldn't see one person on it.

The boat was about fifty feet away now. That's when we noticed that the entire floor of the boat was red. Gallons of blood trickled off the edge of the boat in a sickening red waterfall, clouding the water around it. There was so much blood that the air smelled like nickel.

I had a student radio in for help. The boat soon floated over to our boat and propped itself up against ours. As I leaned over to have a look, I noticed something lying there in this lake of blood. A little girl, I reckoned around six, lying there on her back as the gore soaked into her bathing suit and hair. She was blinking. Still alive, but in shock.

I peered around the corner of the boat's cabin and saw a middle-aged man lying facedown in the sea of blood, and I could see that *he* was the source of all of the blood. Both his legs were missing, the left one more gone than the right. Torn completely off. Blood endlessly gushing out of the stumps. A couple of students puked upon seeing this, adding to the repulsive soup of bodily fluids surrounding the boat.

After we'd left, the coast guard came and retrieved the boat and its passengers. The man died from blood loss. The little girl survived, remained in shock for several days. I, along with a couple of coast guard members, visited the girl in the hospital to try and piece together what happened. All she could tell us was that she'd seen a demon come up out of the ocean and rip her dad's legs off.

Many an evening was spent with my colleagues trying to figure out what happened. Some suggested it was a great white, but only a couple of them had been seen near Hawaii in the last half century. And the markings left on the dead man's legs were all wrong. They didn't match the jaws of a great white. No, it was like a giant needle had been poked through the man's

leg and then tugged on until it ripped the whole thing off. I couldn't imagine the pain he'd felt. There wasn't a single creature we could attribute this to, no boat injury that could do this.

Soon after the incident, whether coincidentally or not, things changed drastically around Honolulu, specifically at the beaches. Fishermen ceased to bring in a catch. People who went swimming or surfing began to get very sick. Upon a dive, myself and a few other researchers realized the sea was a dead zone. The seabed was littered with fish skeletons, and a fish that was actually alive and swimming became very hard to come by.

The once populated beaches in the area became barren and deserted. Nobody wanted to fish where there was nothing to catch, and no one wanted to swim in water that made you sick. The atmosphere at the university grew glum. Students in my morning class no longer wanted to go out on the water. They said it was because there were no living creatures to study, but I suspect they'd been traumatized by the man who lost his legs.

A couple months later, something happened on the water that made me glad I hadn't taken my students out again. The coast guard received an emergency call from some college student out on a boat. This guy had been deep-sea fishing with three of his friends off the coast of Pahoehoe. That area hadn't become a dead zone yet. He said one of his friends had lost her mind and went into a frenzy and fell into the water and drowned. He went on to say that his other two friends had been eaten by a creature that came out of the water.

A few of my fellow biologists and I rushed to meet with the guy, and we asked him what kind of creature he thought he saw. I asked him if it was a shark. His reply sent chills to my core.

Ain't no shark ever looked like that.

I was intrigued by the guy's account of his friend losing her mind. He told me she'd taken a dip in the water for a good ten minutes. Shortly after, she took a nap and when she woke up, she had fire in her eyes and acted demented.

We went and tested the waters in the area and found it to be poisoned with radiation. That nuclear disaster at Fukushima had finally caught up with us Hawaiians. The radiation from the plant had begun to seep its way through the water and over to our little islands. And not only had it spread over to us, but it began to sink miles and miles into the deep. The sea around Hawaii became a dead zone. Well, except for the alleged monster swimming around and chomping people up.

So, here I was, standing on my, looking out at this monstrosity that is the ocean. The following day, I was to hop into a submarine and venture down into the deep in order to figure out what the radiation was affecting down there. Truth was, I was terrified. But there was something inside of me that I knew would win out and force me to undertake this. Something told me that I was a man of the sea and I had something to prove. God only knows why I listened to it, and my wife wasn't too happy about it either. I refrained from telling my two kids of the expedition, and I forbade my wife from telling them. Far as they knew, I was just going to work that day and I'd be home for dinner by sundown.

It was sunny the next morning and yet the ocean looked ominous as ever. The way the waves bobbed and swayed felt like the sea was ready to jump up and eat me and drag me into the murk. I filled with dread the moment I saw the submarine floating there beside the dock. My

colleague, Cameron, looked equally nervous as he stood on the dock. He was certainly hoping I'd call off the expedition.

“Someone looks like he doesn't wanna go,” I jokingly stammered at Cameron.

“Ah, you know,” replied Cameron, “just another day at sea, right?” So we wished.

Getting in that submarine was a claustrophobe's nightmare. It was a small crawlspace with a fisheye-type window at the back where one could look out and another large window at the front, in the cockpit. Cameron piloted. I was to copilot and control the robot arms of the sub, which could collect small creatures. I had my doubts about catching anything alive.

Our sub soon began its descent. The water had this bright emerald color but I knew it wasn't long for lasting. Every minute that passed, we were just a little deeper, and the water became gloomier.

“Look!”

Cameron's shout snapped me out of my trance. I looked to see where he was pointing. About a hundred feet forth, lingering near the continental slope, was a barracuda. It looked so alone as it floated through space, and at one point I questioned whether it was alive. Once the sub's lights shined on it, it quickly swam into the gloom. I hadn't seen a barracuda here in a while. Usually they'd be a scary sight, but now, seeing one was actually welcome. What scared me these days was the deathlike inertia of the water around the islands.

We continued down into the murk. We were now in the twilight zone, the place where your eyes played tricks on you, the light comparable to dusk. As we'd expected, we hadn't seen any creatures down here, save for that barracuda.

The further we descended, the blacker the water grew. As it got darker, our lights began reflecting off of millions and millions of tiny particles in the water. The little specks just floated around endlessly, and if you stared deep enough into the depths, it appeared like you were looking into a starry nighttime sky. I always thought of *Horton Hears a Who* when I looked at those little specks. Maybe each speck was its own world, housing millions of tiny inhabitants.

A strange noise jolted me out of my peculiar thoughts. Neither Cameron nor I could make heads or tails of it, but it basically sounded like someone dragging their fingernail across velcro, or along the metal teeth of a zipper. But within the essence of this strange sound, there was the slight ghost of a voice. Like the sound I'd imagine a goblin making after a meal of flesh.

The sound entered the receiving end of the disc-shaped sonar device attached to our sub. It would occasionally pick up sounds from humpback whales when they swam around Hawaii between January and March. But this was five-thousand feet down. Thousands of feet further than a humpback whale dared to dive. Besides, I'd never heard a whale make a noise like this.

We sat there with our bodies and faces completely frozen and our eyeballs occasionally darting to the side as we aimed our eardrums at the speaker. The strange noise stopped a minute and then started back up and then stopped again. The most frightening part was that the deeper we sunk, the louder and clearer the noise became.

As the strange noise continued, it was met with the same noise, but a higher pitched version. The two noises occurred one after the other like some sort of horrific duet. No matter how long Cameron and I listened, we couldn't deduce what they were.

After a while, the noises died down. They didn't suddenly cease but rather underwent a slow and steady fade. I was tempted to ask Cameron if he wanted to bail and ascend to the

surface, and I suspect that he, too, wanted to take off. But we held onto our pride, in spite of our childlike faces that emanated the terror of a scared bird.

As we descended to the midnight zone, I noticed something in the lower right corner of the window. At first, I figured it was my eyes adjusting to darkness, throwing blotches of light into my confused pupils. But after several seconds, I realized what I was seeing was real.

“Over there,” I said as I tapped Cameron’s shoulder. He squinted through the glass, and for a moment, I didn’t think he saw it. But he continued to scrutinize, and I knew he saw it, too.

“How close is that?” Cameron asked. I shrugged.

A faint light glowed in the water like some sort of lightbulb. Bioluminescence was plentiful down here, but you wouldn’t have been able to see it from so far away. The animals that glowed were always pretty small. I thought it to be an optical illusion, a light that was close but appeared to be far. But it wasn’t. It was about the size of a basketball and we could see it from at least a hundred feet off.

“How about this,” Cameron started. “Let’s go take a look. Then we can at least say we saw something, something for us to talk about back at the lab.”

I slowly nodded as I continued to stare at the light. Soon, I felt a slight shift of weight as the submarine turned and began a course for the strange light. The way we drifted through the dark water, past all of the tiny little white particles, it reminded me of the opener of *Star Trek*, where the camera drifts in a straight line through space.

“Pump the brakes,” I snapped, as Cameron came up fast toward the bulbous light. He slowed down. A second more and the orb would have smacked against the window. Cameron flipped the headlights off, giving us a more accurate vision of the orb.

We scrutinized the orb for a moment. It was so bright, filling the entire cabin of our submarine with white light. It bobbed around a three-foot radius like the bobber of a fishing line.

And then, like pulling the string on a lamp, the light went *out*. There we sat for a moment, in complete pitch darkness. You wouldn't have been able to see something if it were an inch in front of your face.

And then, that godawful sound struck up again. But this time, it wasn't merely coming through the speakers. This time, we could hear it through the glass of the submarine, like it was right next to our ears. It was loud as all hell, but the most horrifying part was when Cameron flipped the headlights of the submarine back on.

Staring through the window into our souls was the eye of the devil. All we could see was the eyeball and nothing of the creature that it belonged to, but I tell you the eye was enough to scare the hell out of us. It was soulless and milky and every couple of seconds, it twitched to one side or another. Every second I stared into that eye, I tried to find some trace of a soul or a consciousness, but I could not.

After what seemed like ages, that horrible shrieking sound struck up again, this time louder than ever. At the same time, the creature—which, at this point, I assumed was massive—darted past the window and slammed hard against our submarine. We yelped with terror as our sub went into a tailspin. As the submarine twirled through the water like a baseball that'd been knocked out of the park, all of the equipment inside—monitors and fancy lights and machines that beeped, buzzed, and whirred—began blinking and malfunctioning. This, more than anything else, caused my heart to sink further than the submarine itself had.

After a long while of hurling through the water, the submarine slowly stopped spinning, though I could still feel it drifting downward. Cameron spent about a minute puking his guts out to his side, thankfully away from me.

“Well,” I said, “let’s get the hell outta here.”

Cameron leaned forward and immediately began pushing buttons and flipping switches and grabbing levers. Nothing happened. The only thing on the sub that was on were the headlights. Everything else was kaput. Cameron stared down lifelessly at the control panel, likely seeing his life flash before his eyes.

“Oh, god...” I said as words caught in my throat. A moment of silence passed as we grew paler by the second.

“C-Can we call someone?” I stuttered.

Cameron slowly shook his head in response.

“Well, try!” I said.

Cameron reached forward and tried to turn on the communications device. It didn’t turn on. I already knew it, too. I was hopeful, but deep down I knew it was toast like the rest of this godforsaken sub. We now resided in a lifeless and useless object, which sank downward like a dead leaf in the fall. I could feel gravity’s pull as the sub sank faster than it was meant to. It felt like the first drop of a rollercoaster. I knew that once the sub hit bottom it would be totaled. But bottom wasn’t for miles.

As we sank deeper and deeper through the dark depths, five words replayed in my head over and over again...*see you for dinner, tonight*. That was what I said to Amy before I left that morning. I said it in a reassuring manner. As if it were an obvious fact that I would be back that

evening, sitting at the table and asking everyone about their day. But that reality was now so far away.

“I can’t believe it,” said Cameron.

“What?” I asked.

“I can’t believe how...how petty everything seems, looking back on all of it. It makes you think...”

I began having these same thoughts. The thoughts were like a mirror image, the evil twins of the positive thoughts I used to feel while looking out at the ocean. Looking back on my life...most things just don’t matter. Makes you wish you’d focused on the things that did.

It was impossible to tell just how long we’d been staring through that glass into the dark and endless abyss. Checking the time on my now-worthless cellphone just seemed comical, to say the least.

More of those orb lights began to grow visible. There were now about six of them, but they weren’t stagnant like the first one. They floated elegantly through the water. Cameron and I peered at them and we began to notice other strange lights. Near the orbs were rows upon rows of smaller lights that came in shades of red and blue and purple, lit up and lining the sides and underbellies of these massive creatures like night-flying airplanes.

“My god,” said Cameron, “what are those things?”

We further examined the strange creatures through the window. As the submarine slowly rotated by way of the water currents, the lights shined toward the huge creatures. There were

about six or seven of them that were visible at once, a few of them periodically passing in and out of the gloom.

The creatures were each about the size of a humpback whale. Fifty feet long. Fish, snakelike—or eel-like—in shape. Their dorsal fins had sharp spines on the top, the last spine protruding very far out, an orb at the end of it. But the most terrifying aspect of these creatures was their faces. Each one had milky eyes and razor-sharp fangs that protruded so far out that they didn't even fit in their own mouths.

These creatures fit the profile of an already-existing animal in every aspect but size. They were viperfish, I was sure of it. But viperfish were ordinarily twelve inches in length. How these came to be, I did not know.

And then, I noticed something else about these leviathans. The cracks and crevices in between their scales glowed a neon-orange color. The glow pulsed at the pace of a heart's beat, steadily growing brighter and then less bright. And through the creatures' cavernous gills there was the same sort of glow. Radiation. The government sent us down here to unearth the effects of the radiation, but we would likely never have the chance to tell them.

As we sank deeper, more and more of the mammoth viperfish became visible. None of them had expressed much interest in our submarine as of yet. The huge viperfish drifted soullessly in and out of the murk. The ocean depths now felt hellish.

I peered out the window in a direction that I assumed was downward. After all the senseless rotation, it was hard to tell. I looked down and I saw what could only be described as a separate body of water.

This was an underwater lake, a well-documented area in the ocean depths. The shore, so to speak, was made of an endless field of clams and mussels. Some underwater lakes only span a few inches. Others might stretch for miles. This was the latter. As our lights shined upon this lagoon, it was apparent that it stretched on for a great distance. The surface of the moon was more thoroughly mapped than the deep ocean, so this lake could have been tens of miles wide for all we knew.

Regardless, we were sinking right toward the mouth of the lake. There was a thick veil of mist within it, and through the mist, I could see more of those orbs.

We sank down into the lake, falling through clouds of mist. I stared deep into the eyes of one of the viperfish. This one was big, but it was scrawnier than the others. In other words, hungrier. It set its sights on us and began to follow our descent. And as that scrawny viperfish neared our submarine with its jaw slowly unhinging, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I wasn't making it home for dinner tonight.

Sleep Paralysis

Jake Wiklacz

I lie down my head, ready to sleep
Awake forty-eight hours, too tired to eat
Ten hours should do it, help me catch up
The way my mind wanders, it gives me the creeps

Twenty minutes go by, why haven't I passed?
My eyelids are heavy, I surely won't last
But awake I stay, and to the good Lord I ask...
God, please let me sleep, and let morning come fast

As I continue to endure my own private Hell
My body becomes my own private cell
Though my mind is awake, it can only brood
And I realize with horror that I cannot move

As I continue to pray for sleep to approach
I see something crawling toward me...a roach

My eyes dart around, my mind has gone south
All while the cockroach crawls toward my mouth

A moment goes by, I take control of myself
I spring off the bed and utter a yelp
As I stand there and stare, shaking my head
I realize the “roach” was a just crease in my bed

I'M CERTAIN THE SUN WILL SHINE

by

Jake Wiklacz

I looked down at the old woman with her Einstein-like hair resting on the top half of the pillow, her wrinkled eyelids loosely closed in a deep and peaceful sleep, her frail body a cage that served only to trap her soul inside. A tube ran along her nostrils and snaked down the side of the bed to an oxygen tank on the floor. The only sound in the otherwise deathlike silence of the room was the steady *beep...beep...beep* of the EKG machine.

“And here she is,” said David Maynard, the 88-year-old woman’s son who seemed to have moved past all the turmoil, by now. His mother, Macy Maynard, had recently gone into a drug-induced coma. That was the most detail he had given me. She had been comatose for three months now, locked in the dungeon of her own anatomy.

“I hope she gets to see the sunshine, again,” David said. “I’m certain she will.”

The family moved her out of the hospital and back home to their estate, where they waited for her to reawaken. I was hired as her caretaker. My mother worked for David’s company, a big oil business.

I was in need of a summer job, and this was it. I was a nursing major, and so it was a fitting task. I supposed it beat bagging groceries or taking orders at a drive-thru. I would just have to get used to the smell of this room, which was an uncomfortably strong blend of lavender, soap, and a tinge of mothballs.

In addition to all the basic care—brushing her teeth, checking her vitals—David asked that I read to Macy and play music for her. He told me that the doctors said she could hear these things at the subconscious level.

What was bizarre, however, was David's insistence that I play the record for her every single shift, without missing a night.

"I cannot stress it enough," he said multiple times. "I need you to play the music at least once a night. I don't want her to be upset."

Macy's favorite book was *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling. A copy of it sat upon the night stand by her bed. Her favorite record was a Jack Teagarden album from the 1920's, her preferred song being the track titled *Jeepers Creepers*. And good god, did I hate that song, from the very moment I first played it for Macy on the first night I took care of her.

I wasn't sure if it was the singing voices or just the fact that it was an oldies tune. Oldies songs had always given me the creeps. I didn't know how or why Macy had picked this to be her favorite song, but because of it, here I was, stuck playing it for her all summer long. I'd never be able to listen to it again after the summer, which was fine by me, I never would have listened to it of my own volition.

And I read to her the tales of Rudyard Kipling, something that, by contrast with the music, I did not mind partaking in. I read her the stories of Mowgli and the white seal and Ricki-Tikki-Tavi.

During my shifts, David was very rarely home. I was alone with the old woman, who was more dead than alive, a notion that unsettled me because when I read to her, I felt like a madwoman speaking to a dead person. Though I hated the music, I began to hate the reading part

almost as much. It began to feel as though I was reading to her with the objective of eliciting a response. Every time I uttered the words *the end* and closed the book, I half-expected to hear her reply, something like “Beautifully read, Tammy. Will you read me another?”

It was a Saturday night. Most of my friends were out drinking, and here I was, once again talking to a dead person. I brushed what little teeth she had left. Wiped down her old leathery skin. Played that creepy old song for her. The lyrics—which I had now unfortunately learned by heart—ate away at my sanity, stuck in my head by day, ringing in my ears by night.

Jeepers Creepers...where'd ya get those peepers?

Jeepers Creepers...where'd ya get those eyes?

Gosh all, git up...how'd they get so lit up?

Gosh all, git up...how'd they get that size?

Golly gee...when ya turn those heaters on.

Whoa is me...got to get my heaters on.

Jeepers Creepers, Jeepers Creepers, Jeepers C -

I had heard this song enough to know that it didn't repeat the title that many times, and that was when I knew the record was skipping. I stood up and lifted the needle, causing that loud wiping sound. I did not begin playing that record, again. I couldn't do it, not tonight. I couldn't listen to that damned song anymore, the lyrics of which seemed to be taunting me by this point.

My stomach grumbled, and I realized that it was already ten o'clock and I had forgotten to eat. David wasn't here, tonight, but he had once told me to help myself to anything in the

refrigerator. I'd take him up on it, tonight. I went to the kitchen and opened the fridge, grabbing ingredients for a sub sandwich.

The house was a maze, more of a castle than a house. What sort of unsettled me was that you never quite knew if you were alone in the place. There were groundskeepers, there were butlers, and there were maids, people who came and went as their workday permitted. There had been nights that I could have sworn I was there alone, only to have some butler scare the bejeezus out of me after he rounded a corner.

With this in mind, I didn't think much of it when I heard faint voices from somewhere in the manor as I made my sandwich. But after a moment, I began to listen more closely, and came to realize that the voices were singing voices.

I don't care what the weatherman says, when the weatherman says it's raining.

You'll never hear me complainin'. I'm certain the sun will shine...

No, it couldn't be, it couldn't possibly be...but it was. It was *Jeepers Creepers*, echoing from down the corridor which lead to Macy's room. I dropped the kitchen knife I was holding, and thankfully it didn't go into my foot.

I crept over to the front of the hallway, placing my hand on the corner and squeezing the wall tight as fear bolted through me. I aimed my ear down the hallway, and I confirmed what I already knew. It was the song, and it was emanating from Macy's room.

Oh, those weepers, how they hypnotize!

Where'd ya get those eyes...ah la-dada, la-dada, la-da-da-da!

Them there eyes...

And as the trumpet solo part of the song ensued, I slowly backed away from the corridor, back into the kitchen. I clutched at the fabric of my shirt, clawing away at it as my mind zigzagged in every possible direction. I had to get out of this house.

It soon dawned on me just how ridiculous this story would sound. *Yes, Mr. Maynard, I quit because I heard music playing.* There had to have been an explanation for this. Maybe I had forgotten to move the needle to the side. *That must be it,* I thought. The needle must have simply fallen, dragged back down into the record by gravity.

Unnerved as I was, I began to creep down the hall to remove that record for good. It was one of the most difficult walks I'd ever had to endure. Every fiber of my being was telling me to turn away and get someplace that I could no longer hear that godforsaken song. But I bravely pressed on.

As I rounded a corner, however, I was chilled to the bone as I heard the sound of the needle sliding off of the record, that loud scratching noise clear as day. I stopped dead in my tracks as I peered down the hall at Macy's room, which lied just ten feet in front of me. The door was wide open, as I had left it. I scrutinized the record player from afar, and saw that the needle was resting *beside* the record, which meant that it was impossible for the needle to have fallen onto the record.

Needless to say, I got the hell out of that house, dipping one foot into Macy's room only to reach my bag. I snatched it and left the manor with haste.

Nevertheless, I was back the next evening. I had thought about the incident all day, and had considered telling David that I wanted to quit. But I realized the whole thing was irrational. I had spent so much time in that manor, in that one room, listening to that one song that I hated. Of

course I thought I'd heard it. It made sense. Enough sense, anyway, to get me to go back that evening. The pay was too good.

I sat in a chair across from Macy's bed, her copy of *The Jungle Book* in my lap. The *Jeepers Creepers* record was tucked away in its sleeve, and it would stay there I was sure of that. I would not be taking it out, not tonight, not ever. As long as I lived, I vowed never to allow that song's melody to worm its way back into my ears.

Macy laid there, her abdomen steadily rising and falling with each slow breath that she drew. I tried never to gaze upon her for too long, because sometimes when I did, my mind would play tricks, and Macy's eyelids would appear to flutter, and her mouth would give the illusion of turning upward into a smile.

I opened the book and began to read from it. But after about five minutes passed, I found myself unwilling to continue. That feeling of talking to a dead person, I couldn't handle it. I could not find it within me. Every time I finished reading the book, I had that same expectation that Macy would respond in her sleep, and I didn't want that feeling again. I had a strong urge to leave the room, and so I did.

I entered one of the dozen living rooms in the manor, sitting down on the sofa and flipping on the television. This wasn't what I was getting paid for, but I needed to get out of that room, I cannot stress it enough. I *needed* to.

From the living room, I could still hear the steady *beep...beep...beep* of the machine beside Macy's bed. Even with the TV on, I could hear it. But what I heard next, I could hardly believe. Gone were the steady beeps, replaced by the sound of a flatline...*beeeeeeeeeeeep*.

I shot up off of the couch and bolted down the hall to Macy's room. I entered, the flatline beep drowning out any and all other noise that may have been in the house. I looked down on Macy, felt her pulse. Nothing.

I thought of unplugging the machine, but refrained, not wanting to tamper. Calling David would be my best option. Funny enough, I hadn't thought of this occurring, probably because she had always just seemed dead to begin with.

There was something else I had never thought would occur: the notion that Macy's eyes would ever open. But in this moment, as I looked down on the pulseless Macy, and as the flatline beep continued to echo through the house...Macy's eyelids *snapped* open.

I thought it to be just another trick of the mind, at first. But that idea washed wholly away as Macy made direct eye contact with me and sat up with a jolt. Her electrocuted hair waved wildly as she sprung up from her resting place, her wide and wild eyes piercing me. I screamed out in terror, and my cry seemed to run parallel with the continuous flatline beep.

Still sitting atop the bed, Macy raised one of her ghastly hands and pointed a single bony finger directly at me. "You bitch," she growled. "He told you to play the song!"

And just like that, all consciousness seemed to drain out of Macy's body. Every one of her muscles became kaput, and she fell limply back into her original resting place. I did what was indivisibly rational *and* irrational; I called the police.

The police soon arrived, and so did David. By then, I had calmed down a bit, and I did not share my story, at least not the part where an undead Macy Maynard rose up and shouted obscenities at me, something that would have garnered me the status of a lunatic.

As I spoke to one of the police officers, David emerged from Macy's room with a look of suspicion on his face, one that was eventually directed at me. He must have noticed the way she was laying there, the position her hands were in, the wild and mangled state of her hair, and the way the Jack Teagarden record was back in its sleeve. The look on his face suggested that maybe, just maybe, he knew what I knew.

With that death, I was out of a job, but it didn't bother me much. I had spent enough time with Macy Maynard, that much was clear. And as it had turned out, she evidently didn't care too much for me. But I tell you now, with the utmost dismay, I am frequently reminded of her. Because on certain nights, as I lie in bed and try to fall asleep, I can hear the faint sound of a familiar song just outside my window.

I SHOT BIGFOOT

by

Jake Wiklacz

I knew I was onto something when I saw those unmistakeable prints in the dirt. A black bear had been here, a large one. I strapped my hunting rifle over my shoulder and kneeled down in the dirt to get a closer look, running my fingertips across the prints and examining them like fine pieces of art. The bear had been through here not long before I'd arrived, I could tell by the freshness of the tracks.

I'd been to this same hunting spot the previous fall, I reckoned it had been nearly a year ago on the dot. My results had been pitiful. I had seen one bear, a big one, too. I fired off one shot, thought I could've made it at that distance. I was wrong. The thing got scared off and ran away, eluding me for the rest of my trip.

As I stared down at the tracks, I laughed as I wondered if this was the same bear as the previous year. It wasn't too much of stretch, this one was just as big. How poetic it would have been; the head of the bear that had eluded me, planted firmly on the wall above my fireplace.

I stood up and began to follow the tracks. Everything seemed just right. The tracks were clear and fresh, my prey was clearly quite the trophy, and the wind was kind to me as it blew in my direction. The bear wouldn't have been able to sniff me out if I'd been wearing the strongest cologne.

I navigated over several hills and across paths, eventually coming to a ledge that looked out across the woodlands. I perched atop the ledge and pulled out my binoculars, scanning the area for signs of my target. Something to look for when hunting bears is a tree swaying back and forth due to a bear scratching its back on the bark.

After just a few moments of inspecting the terrain, I spotted a faint shadow moving through the thicket, a couple hundred yards away. At first, I thought it was just wishful thinking, a trick of my own mind stemming from the hope that I would attain redemption. But as I looked closely, I realized that what I was seeing was really there. Something big and furry was moving through the brush below, and fairly quick. I only caught fleeting glimpses. I wasn't about to make the same mistake as I had last year, overconfidently pulling the trigger at Navy SEAL range.

I immediately stood up, walking with a crouch so the animal wouldn't spot me. I was certain this was a bear. I needed to get somewhere suitable for stalking. I walked parallel to the bear, which was still on the move far below.

I entered back into the thicket, navigating winding paths and streams, being quick about it so I wouldn't lose track of the bear. At the tree line was a ravine, the edge of which made a fairly good spot to perch. Below the ravine was a large stream and a sandbank, followed by patches of open woodland, perfect for a clear shot. Staying slightly behind the tree line, I crouched down and pulled out my binoculars, peering through them and waiting for the bear to emerge. If it was still on the move, it shouldn't have taken long for it to rear its head from the grove.

My heart was pounding out of my chest. Thoughts of apparent poeticism continued running through my head. The thought of conquering this thing was all too satisfying. *Do not mess this up.*

Sure enough, the bear soon emerged from the woods and into the open. But something was immediately apparent. It was walking on two legs, pretty commonplace for black bears if their front paws are injured. But its front legs didn't look injured at all. Matter of fact, they looked like they were working fine. Something was wrong, though. The front legs were down by its side as it walked, swinging the way a human's arms swing during a stride.

The pounding of my heart soon ceased. In fact, my heart stopped completely once I got a better look at the creature—the *thing*—that came out of those woods. This was no bear.

At a passing glance, the animal looked like a bear. It was stocky and fuzzy. But the front legs were long, even longer than a person's arms. And that's exactly what they were: arms, not front legs. And at the ends of these arms were not paws. No, those were hands, hands with opposable thumbs.

And then I tilted my line of sight upward. What I saw next sent more chills through me than when I had seen the hands. Because now, I was looking at the animal's head. Not a bear's. Best I could describe it would be as the head of an ape, like a gorilla. *It can't be*, I thought. *As I live and breathe, it simply cannot be.*

That is when I realized that I was looking at Bigfoot, right there, in the flesh. I'd always heard the stories, the eyewitness accounts, seen the documentaries on Discovery and National Geographic. But here he was, pacing along a riverbank here in the Pacific Northwest. I wondered if I was to become another one of those crazy-sounding interviewees on a NatGeo documentary.

Then, it hit me. I wouldn't have to be just another eyewitness. If I brought this thing home, I'd be famous. Hell, I'd be rich. How many museums would pay top dollar for a Bigfoot carcass?

I kicked it into high gear, grabbing my rifle and holding it at the ready. I cocked it and peered through the scope. But the hulking ape was traveling too quickly, moving at a brisk walking pace. If I shot, I'd likely miss, and the gunshot would scare it off. *No need to make the same mistake this year.*

I stood up and began creeping along the ravine, once again walking parallel with the ape. I resisted the urge to stare, knowing that I might trip over something and make a sound. But it was damn hard, I tell you. This thing was quite a sight. It was hard to tell at this distance, but it must have been seven feet tall.

As the minutes passed, tracking the animal became difficult. If you've ever been out in the Pacific Northwest, you'll know what I am talking about when I say that the forests there are like a box of cotton swabs, incomprehensibly dense and seemingly endless.

I couldn't stand the thought of this thing disappearing into the thicket. I was sure I'd never have this chance, again. No way this kind of thing happened to someone twice.

I came to a halt and peered into the forest. No sign of Bigfoot. I cursed under my breath, though I refused to curse above a whisper, hoping that the ape was still nearby, and maybe I'd find it again. I kept my feet planted firmly in the dirt, refusing to turn even an inch. I had walked deep into the forest, now, and it was all beginning to look the same. Not only would I lose track of Bigfoot, but I might get lost out here, too. Hell, D.B. Cooper made off with a half a million in cash in the Pacific Northwest, and no one ever found anything more than a necktie.

I started walking again, more slowly this time. I hoped Bigfoot had stopped at some point, and I'd be able to catch up. No way I'd catch up when it was moving at that pace. The sensible part of me said *turn back*, but I pressed on, determined to bring home the ape.

I perched atop a nearby boulder and looked out at the forest. I couldn't believe my luck. There, standing still by a tree about a hundred yards away, was Bigfoot. It was squatting down, and it looked like it was eating the ferns on the ground by the tree.

I held my rifle at the ready, aiming at this monstrous simian creature. My arms were shaky, trembling. There was too much at stake for a relaxed sensation. This wasn't just any hunt. There'd be more black bears next year and the one after that, but this was my only shot at a living, breathing Bigfoot. I gulped as I attempted to steady my rifle, but my arms just wouldn't calm down. *How the hell do brain surgeons do it?*

I took a deep breath, and then another, and then another. This seemed to help all the trembling, at least a little.

And then my heart sank as Bigfoot stood up. It was bound to start walking off again. I had to take the shot. I said a silent little prayer and pulled the trigger.

Time seemed to stop for a good while. Everything went silent after I pulled the trigger. I swear I didn't even hear the gunshot, but I knew it went off, because when I snapped out of my trance, all the birds nearby panicked and began flying away.

I looked on and saw Bigfoot lying by the tree. He was dead, all right. My bullet must have ripped right through his heart, because he didn't flail or do anything of the sort. Now, he was just a heap of fur on the forest floor.

My heart pounded like a turret as I hopped down from my perch and began jogging over to the dead ape. I couldn't believe it. For a split second, I felt accomplished and at peace. I was bound to be a millionaire. But those thoughts washed quickly away as I realized I had a new challenge: getting the beast home.

I slowly approached the dead ape and reached out with the barrel of my rifle, ready to poke at it. The last thing I wanted was for this thing to turn out to be still alive and to jump up and rip my head off.

I gave the dead Bigfoot a good poke with the rifle. It didn't move. I took a deep breath as I stared down at the body, which was lying there facedown. I wanted to get a good look at the face. See what this thing really looked like up close.

As I squatted down on the ground, however, I noticed something peculiar on the body. Something was running down its back, right down the spine, in a straight line. I didn't quite believe it at first, but as I squinted at it, the thing running down its back could only be described as, of all things, a zipper.

I began to panic as I rolled the thing over. The second I touched it, I noticed that the fur felt strange. The face looked fake and rubbery. I didn't want to believe it, but suddenly I knew the truth.

Everything added up in my head in the most horrific way possible once I unzipped the zipper and peeled away that rubber mask and revealed a man's face beneath it. His eyes were shut and his skin was pale and cold when I felt it. I pressed two fingers to his neck and felt no pulse.

The sound of crunching leaves alerted me. I looked up to see two horrified men standing a few feet away. One of them was holding a camera. To say I'd ruined their hoax would be an understatement. I shot Bigfoot, and as I sat there and stared back at the two witnesses, I wondered if they'd caught the killing shot on camera.

SOME ENCHANTED MORNING

by

Jake Wiklacz

With each Sunday morning always came a familiar scent. The smell emanated directly from the kitchen, and sometimes when you entered, the air was veiled with a thin layer of mist because we'd forgotten to open the windows while we cooked. Every Sunday morning was accompanied by a pancake breakfast, complimented by a serving of scrambled eggs, bacon, and orange juice. This, in turn, would be accompanied by jazz music, often Vince Guaraldi. My daughter called it pancake music.

By the time we finished cooking and had sat down at the table, my goodness the setting was picture perfect; myself, my wife, and our daughter, Lilly, sitting there with our plates. Though our daughter soon grew to be a teenager—preoccupied with friends, boys, and sports—she never missed a Sunday morning pancake breakfast. Not once did she omit.

But this truth eventually came to pass. Nowadays, Lilly was absent each and every Sunday morning, but not out of choice. We always told her not to text and drive. Almost once a week, we stressed it, both myself and my wife. Lilly swore she drove like a 'grandma', both hands on the wheel, looking both ways, all of that.

Many nights I lay awake, wondering if we just weren't clear enough. Perhaps we should have stressed it every day and not just every week. I would have stressed it every hour if it had

made Lilly listen. Because if she wasn't texting while behind the wheel on that one fateful Sunday afternoon, perhaps she'd still be here with us.

I remember the coroner—I think it was the coroner—asking if we wanted to see her. I told him no. I was certain that the image of her mangled figure would be the one that was burnt into my brain for the rest of my days. And I didn't want that. I preferred the image from a few hours previous: a glistening pair of eyes that looked down happily on a plate of pancakes.

Seven days later marked the first time we omitted our pancake breakfast. I was sure this trend would remain, and I was correct. We couldn't bring ourselves to it. Neither I nor my wife even suggested, even hinted at continuing our tradition. It was an unspoken sort of thing. We just knew, naturally, that it wouldn't be the same, and that if we even tried, at least one of us was liable to break into tears.

However, one Sunday morning many months later, something changed. It must have been before 6 AM that I floated into a state of half sleep, half lucidity. My eyelids were practically bolted shut, but conscious thoughts were slowly emanating from my brain, nonsensical at first. And then, a familiar fragrance seemingly drifted into my nostrils, a fragrance that I had not smelled for a long time. It was not just a pancake smell, though it was partially. It was what I could best describe as a fully-fledged 'Sunday morning smell'; pancakes, eggs, bacon, and coffee, all swirled together and packaged into one.

My eyelids suddenly snapped open, and just like that, the aroma had left. All I could smell, now, was the house's typical scent. I did not know how or why I had smelled that Sunday breakfast smell, I figured it had just been a thing of dreams. But this thought suddenly morphed

into a sort of *command*, directed at me. And I soon found myself walking down the stairs, entering the kitchen, and grabbing the pancake mix out of the cupboards.

I fired up the stove and began furiously mixing up all of the ingredients—for pancakes, for scrambled eggs, for bacon—as if I were possessed. My thoughts had no rhyme or reason to them, but I just kept at it, mixing up the batter, flipping the pancakes, cracking the eggs, frying the bacon.

Soon, I found myself with a full-on Sunday morning breakfast in front of me. It was more than usual, too. There was enough food here to feed five households. The box of pancake mix, the carton of eggs, the package of bacon...all were completely empty. Not only was there so much food, but the quality matched the quantity. Everything I had cooked appeared as if it had been cooked by some master chef. It didn't make sense, but there was my achievement, right before my eyes.

All of the food was spread out across the kitchen counter. I sat at the table across from it, marveling at my achievement. Whatever had possessed me to cook all of this food had apparently left me, as I now just stared at it as if it were the work of something outside of myself.

I was about to stand up and go fetch my wife, but something caught my eye. I wasn't quite sure what it was, at first, it was sort of like that little glob we all see in our eye, but can never look right at it. But as I blinked and darted my eyeballs this way and that, I was able to observe what had caught my attention. Standing there, in the doorway that gave way to the kitchen, was Lilly.

My heart nearly leapt to my throat. I rubbed my eyes more times than I care to recall. It was her. She walked into the kitchen and came to a halt in front of the counter, looking down on

the Sunday morning breakfast I had made. And then, she smiled, at peace. I stood up and approached her. I stood across from her, on the opposite side of the counter.

“Lilly?” I stammered. She smiled and nodded her head. She then looked back down at the breakfast I had made.

“Thank you,” she said.

I reached for the immense stack of pancakes, grabbing one off the top.

“Take one,” I said as I attempted to hand it to her. But as I let the pancake down onto the palm of her hand, it drifted right through and fell to the floor. I looked at her, expecting to see her upset. But she only smiled and shook her head.

“It’s not for me,” she said. “It’s for you.”

And with that, she disappeared. For a moment, I was saddened by her sudden departure. But I soon realized what she meant and I went upstairs to get my wife. My wife and I ate our traditional breakfast that Sunday morning and the one after and the one after that. It was what Lilly wanted.

Prelude - *Uncle Victor*

I once heard a professor of psychology say that “old memories become future personality”. Immediately after hearing this, I thought of a very, very old memory, one that has followed me my entire life. This memory does not stay with me like a shadow, or a devil on the shoulder, but rather pops up every now and then, sort of like a common cold. And, without fail, I have a dream about it exactly twice a year, once in the spring, and once in the fall.

I was not more than a year old when my parents first took me on a trip to Disney World. Now, I must confess, THIS part of the story is one I do not remember, but it is important. During our time at Disney World, my parents were approached by a camera crew. The camera crew was filming a music video for a Disney sing-along special, and they wanted to get footage of me. The music video in question was for the song “You Must’ve Been a Beautiful Baby”. My parents obliged, and so, I was well on my way to becoming a movie star.

All jokes aside, I first remember seeing this music video when I was two years old. My parents sat me down in front of the TV, and I began watching this Disney sing-along special, hosted by the animated ant, Flik, from “A Bug’s Life”. Soon, we arrived at the music video for “You Must’ve Been a Beautiful Baby”, the one that I was featured in for a few seconds. Immediately when the song began playing, I felt like something was wrong. This Disney remix of “You Must’ve Been a Beautiful Baby” was sung loudly by a chorus of children, but it sounded

strangely unsettling. The mishmash of Disney cartoon characters and little kids at Disney world only added to my unsettlement.

But the most unsettling part of all was when my parents began shouting “THERE YOU ARE! THERE YOU ARE!”, and I saw myself on screen, among the cartoon characters and the unnerving music. I soon after told my parents that I no longer wished to see the video.

“I don’t like the Disney video”, I would tell them.

Confused, my parents shelved the tape, keeping it only as memorabilia, nothing more. A few times throughout my childhood, I have returned to the video: once in kindergarten, once in 5th grade, and then again in college. Each and every time, I feel the same unsettling feeling that I did when I was two years old. I cannot attempt to explain why this video creeps me out so much. Even when I am watching the most frightening of horror movies, I cannot match that “off” feeling I get when watching the Disney video.

There are many other crazy aspects to this memory. I had to see a therapist in 5th grade upon viewing the tape again. As I said before, I have a dream about it twice a year. But perhaps the craziest part about this memory of viewing that unsettling tape at two years old, is that it is my very first memory...

UNCLE VICTOR

by

Jake Wiklacz & Edward Taveras

What you are about to read are leaked psychotherapy notes from the office of Georgia Roana, Ph.D., in Springfield Nebraska, as well as an additional set of notes from the office of Thomas Rodarald, Ph.D., in Springfield, Nebraska. Reader discretion is advised.

Georgia Roana, Ph.D.
2020 Oak Av
Springfield, Nebraska

Date of Exam: 12/15/1997

Time of Exam: 4:00 PM

Patient Name: Jill Ingram

Patient Number: 73849563848

Age: 17

Psychotherapy Note

Jill still has feelings of insecurity and paranoia. She reports constantly feeling like she is being watched and that something is going to go wrong. She does not trust her family or her friends. She also claims to have “the memory of a goldfish”, and sometimes attempts to recall memories both positive and negative. Jill also reports having repressed memories, which she speculates may be false memories, specifically of a man who calls himself “Uncle Victor”.

She reports having a vague, possibly false memory of sitting in her living room while being home alone, at about the age of 12. She reports that after watching TV for a while in her living room, a man named “Uncle Victor” entered from another room in the house and shouted “It’s me! It’s your Uncle Victor!”, all the while flailing his arms around in a cartoony, clownish manner.

She reports that this “Uncle Victor” was tall (around 6 feet 7 inches), around the age of 50 or so, thin, and balding. He would make quite large movements with his arms, as if trying to appear large. Jill claims that, at the time, she felt very comforted by the presence of Uncle Victor, and recognized him as a longtime family member. However, she states that she not only does not recall his departure from her home, but also that she does not have an uncle named “Victor”. Jill cannot seem to clearly communicate whether this was a dream, a repressed memory, or a completely false memory.

MENTAL STATUS: Jill presents a case of paranoia, as well as the false memory phenomena. Insecurity and possible pantophobia.

LEVEL OF CARE JUSTIFICATION: Jill continues to need outpatient treatment. She continues to exhibit paranoid behaviors that interfere with her day-to-day functioning and requires continued treatment.

CONTENT OF THERAPY: This session focused on the problem of coping with Jill's paranoia and repressed/false memories.

Georgia Roana, Ph.D.
2020 Oak Av
Springfield, Nebraska

Date of Exam: 12/22/1997

Time of Exam: 4:00 PM

Patient Name: Jill Ingram

Patient Number: 73849563848

Age: 17

Psychotherapy Note

Jill expressed an interest in Recovered Memory Therapy in order to get to the bottom of her memories of "Uncle Victor". She believes that these repressed or false memories are somehow connected to her current paranoia and insecurity. Jill agreed to take part in age regression therapy.

I first wanted to introduce Jill to the process of age regression. After having her mind perform certain exercises, I asked Jill to think back to an event that she had not thought of since the day it happened. When asked about the event she had thought of, Jill said that she could picture herself running and laughing. She stated that she could remember that it was night time, she was 8 years old, and she was playing tag with her friends. Jill further stated that she and her friends had been hiding in the neighbor's bushes. Their neighbors were very friendly, and didn't mind.

Jill said she was hiding from her friend during tag. Her friend was "it". I asked her what her friend's name was. She said that her friend's name was Chloe. Jill said that, during the game of tag, she had been wearing a dark green shirt, shorts, and athletic shoes. It was late October, and the ground was littered with dead leaves. Jill was able to recall the exact moment that her friend, Chloe, found her in the bushes and tagged her. She said that, as she was hiding, she was staring at a rooster weather vane on the top of her neighbors' pool house. As she stared at it, she felt Chloe's hand make sudden contact with her shoulder, as Chloe shouted "Gotcha!"

After this exercise, I told Jill that we would give her mind a rest for now. However, we would do the exercise again during our next session, after the holidays. She is hoping that next time we will be able to use the exercise to deal with her repressed memories.

MENTAL STATUS: Jill still exhibits paranoid behavior during her day-to-day life, and still feels the presence of a vague, unknown evil.

LEVEL OF CARE JUSTIFICATION: Jill continues to require outpatient treatment. She continues to exhibit paranoid behaviors that interfere with her day-to-day functioning and requires continued treatment.

CONTENT OF THERAPY: This session's focus was to prepare Jill's mind for age regression exercises on her more unnerving repressed memories.

Georgia Roana, Ph.D.
2020 Oak Av
Springfield, Nebraska

Date of Exam: 1/07/1998

Time of Exam: 2:00 PM

Patient Name: Reese Baxter

Patient Number: 73649663848

Age: 18

Psychotherapy Note

Reese feels extremely depressed. He reports that, almost every night, he lies in bed awake and thinks about how meaningless his life feels. He feels alone, even in the presence of his family or his friends. Reese feels frustrated by the fact that he always feels lonely, saying that it is because he thinks he is not supposed feel lonely. He is completely uninterested in eating. His mother will give him pills that make him hungry, but even then he does not want to eat. He is rapidly losing weight.

I asked Reese why he expresses such a disinterest in eating. Reese replied by saying that he was unsure, and that he just did not want to eat when he felt sad. Something about his answer did not satisfy me. I asked him if there was any possible way for him to know exactly why he never wanted to eat. Reese told me that he would rather not talk about it. I insisted for him to talk about it. After a long silence, Reese told me that it was because of a bad memory he had in his kitchen with his uncle. He stated that his uncle's name is Victor.

MENTAL STATUS: Reese exhibits clinically depressed behavior.

LEVEL OF CARE JUSTIFICATION: Reese still requires outpatient treatment, as he exhibits symptoms of clinical depression and suicidality.

CONTENT OF THERAPY: This session's focus was getting to know Reese, understanding his issues, and setting up possible solutions.

Georgia Roana, Ph.D.
2020 Oak Av
Springfield, Nebraska

Date of Exam: 1/10/1998

Time of Exam: 4:00 PM

Patient Name: Jill Ingram

Patient Number: 73849563848

Age: 17

Psychotherapy Note

Jill reports having a much more relaxed state of mind following the age regression exercise. She reports feeling less anxious and/or paranoid throughout the day, which has led to her being able to enjoy day-to-day activities. However, she expressed to me that she still did not yet feel ready to use the age regression exercise for unpleasant memories. We decided to use the exercise with a positive memory once more.

I began by asking Jill to travel back to the memory of her playing tag with her friends, which was the memory we used in the last session. She once again demonstrated an exceptional ability to vividly recall the memory. She could recall exactly what her friend, Chloe, was wearing and even how her hair looked.

This time during the exercise, we continued on past the point of Chloe tagging Jill. Jill then described, in detail, what she remembered about the rest of their game of tag. She stated that she leapt out from the bush and ran after Chloe, and then after one of her other friends that was playing, named Sarah. Jill further stated that she recalled chasing Sarah all the way through the neighbor's yard and over to the side of her own house.

At this point in the exercise, Jill paused. I asked her to continue. Jill continued, but somewhat hesitantly. She stated that she recalled chasing Sarah around the corner of her house. I asked Jill what happened after she rounded the corner. Jill replied by telling me that, once she rounded the corner, there was someone waiting there for her, arms outstretched. I asked Jill who it was. Jill paused, once again. She appeared to be trying to remember who the person was. After about 7 seconds, Jill's eyes opened and she leapt up from the couch. She appeared to be very stressed, and quickly left the room, crying.

MENTAL STATUS: At the beginning of the session, Jill seemed to be the most relaxed I have seen her. However, at the end of the session, Jill appeared to be extremely stressed and even traumatized.

LEVEL OF CARE JUSTIFICATION: Jill still has a lot of lingering trauma, and I hope she considers returning for another session.

CONTENT OF THERAPY: This session was conducted to keep Jill exercising her memory so that we may access the repressed areas.

Georgia Roana, Ph.D.
2020 Oak Av
Springfield, Nebraska

Date of Exam: 1/14/1998

Time of Exam: 2:00 PM

Patient Name: Reese Baxter

Patient Number: 73649663848

Age: 18

Psychotherapy Note

Reese is still feeling very depressed every day. Still does not eat, he is rapidly losing weight. I asked him about his bad memory involving his uncle, Victor, and why it has contributed so much to his disinterest in eating. Reese was reluctant to talk about it at first, but eventually worked up the courage.

Reese stated that when he was fifteen, his parents left him home alone for a weekend. They left him money for food. The first day, Friday, he went to get fast food. The next night, Saturday night, Reese states that when he was about to leave his house to get food, he noticed his "Uncle Victor" sitting in the kitchen. Reese said that, at the time, he recognized Victor, but was nevertheless unsettled by the fact that Victor had simply appeared out of nowhere in his kitchen and was just sitting in there with all the lights turned off.

Reese said that the man shouted "It's me, it's your Uncle Victor!", before saying "You don't have to go anywhere for food, Reese. I'll cook you something." Reese reports that he then sat down on the couch and watched as Uncle Victor cooked a meal by the stove while whistling some 1930's show tune, curiously keeping all of the lights off while he cooked. At this time, Reese had an unsettling feeling, but despite this, he had no intention of getting up and leaving. Something in him told him not to, almost like it was a bad idea to do so.

Reese stated that after about 20 minutes, the meal was ready. Victor brought a plate of eggs, toast, and bacon over to Reese, setting it down in front of him, on the coffee table. Reese further stated that in that moment, he felt sort of unsettled and thus felt inclined to reject the food Victor had made for him. Once he did, Reese stated that his Uncle Victor suddenly grew extremely angry and brought his fist down hard on the coffee table, shouting "Eat the goddamn food your uncle made for you!"

I asked Reese what happened next, but Reese reports that he has no recollection of what happened after Victor yelled at him. The rest of that night is a blur in his memory. He just remembers waking up the next morning and his uncle no longer being there. Reese also reports

that, upon telling his parents about what happened between him and his Uncle Victor that night, his parents replied by telling him that he does not have an uncle named Victor.

MENTAL STATUS: Reese exhibits clinically depressed behavior and seemingly repressed memories.

LEVEL OF CARE JUSTIFICATION: Reese still requires outpatient treatment, as he exhibits symptoms of clinical depression and suicidality.

CONTENT OF THERAPY: This session's focus was to find out more about what transpired between him and his uncle, Victor.

Georgia Roana, Ph.D.
2020 Oak Av
Springfield, Nebraska

Date of Exam: 11/10/1998

Time of Exam: 1:30 PM

Patient Name: Billy Wilson

Patient Number: 73642643948

Age: 16

Psychotherapy Note

Billy has constant feelings of paranoia and also has suicidal thoughts. He does not trust anybody, especially his family members. He reports constantly feeling alone. He is wary of meeting new people, and avoids it at all costs. He says he feels like people he already knows will turn their backs on him at any second. Spends most of his time in his room, alone, watching TV. He rarely leaves except to use the bathroom and eat.

Billy also reports that he was repeatedly abused/harassed as a child, but nobody in his family believes him. I asked him if there was any reason that his family does not believe that he was abused. Billy stated that his family thinks that the abusive occurrences were simply Billy's nightmares. I asked that Billy go into detail about his abuse.

Billy reports that, when he was eight years old, he woke up one night between the hours of 2:00 AM and 3:00 AM. He reports that upon rolling over under his sheets, he saw someone peering into his bedroom, with just their head poking in through the doorway. Billy says that it was an exceptionally tall, thin, middle-aged man, with curly, balding hair. He says that upon making eye contact with the man, the man whispered "Psst! You asleep?" Billy says that he sheepishly replied by saying "no".

Billy says that the man then entered his room and climbed into his bed next to him. The man then rolled over, pulled the covers over himself, and began sleeping. Billy says that he was not able to sleep that night, and didn't want to get out of bed for fear of waking the man up. Billy states that when he woke up the next morning, the man was gone. I asked Billy if he had recognized this man. Billy said that he did. We unfortunately ran out of time before we could touch upon this more, but before Billy left, I asked him if this was the only experience of this nature he had. Billy said that it was not.

MENTAL STATUS: Billy shows symptoms of clinical depression and pistanthophobia.

LEVEL OF CARE JUSTIFICATION: Billy still requires outpatient treatment, as his depression prohibits him from enjoying his day-to-day life.

CONTENT OF THERAPY: This session's focus was on getting to know Billy, as well as understanding the issues he struggles with.

Georgia Roana, Ph.D.
2020 Oak Av
Springfield, Nebraska

Date of Exam: 11/17/1998

Time of Exam: 1:30 PM

Patient Name: Billy Wilson

Patient Number: 73642643948

Age: 16

Psychotherapy Note

Billy and I wasted no time today as we delved deeper into his past experiences of abuse. He reports that he has not said anything to his parents about our last session, as they have heard the story many times and continue to not believe him. I asked Billy to go into detail about his other experiences of abuse. At first, Billy appeared to be very reluctant to talk about his further experiences. However, I reassured him that the information would remain absolutely confidential and that it would necessary for him to touch upon his experiences so that we could resolve his issues.

Billy reports that when he was nine years old, he awoke one night around 3:00 AM. Similarly to his first experience a year prior, he rolled over and, once again, saw the same man peering into his room from his doorway. Billy states that the man whispered something along the lines of "Psst! It's me, your uncle. You asleep?" He states that when he did not reply, the man said "Don't pretend you're asleep, I can see your eyes. They're open."

Billy says that the tall man then entered his room and, once again, climbed into bed next to him, rolling over and falling asleep. He says that he laid awake in bed for quite some time, not being able to fall asleep. Billy states that after about 45 minutes, he had to use the bathroom very badly. As he slowly climbed out of bed, the man must have heard him, because he murmured "Uh-uh, uh-uh. Get back in bed."

Billy says that he just stood there, contemplating running out of the room. After a few seconds, the man, his voice slightly raised, said "Get back in the fucking bed." Billy obeyed the man and climbed back into bed. The next morning, the man was gone.

By the end of his story, Billy appears to be very unnerved. Tears are falling from his eyes. I ask him to go into detail about another instance. Billy says that he'll think about it, possibly during our next session.

MENTAL STATUS: Billy still shows symptoms of clinical depression and pistanthrophobia.

LEVEL OF CARE JUSTIFICATION: Billy still requires outpatient treatment, as his memories of abuse are still bothering him. They are possibly repressed memories, or false memories, though he denies the possibility of the memories being false.

CONTENT OF THERAPY: This session's focus was to explore these bad memories Billy has.

Georgia Roana, Ph.D.
2020 Oak Av
Springfield, Nebraska

Date of Exam: 12/01/1998

Time of Exam: 1:30 PM

Patient Name: Billy Wilson

Patient Number: 73642643948

Age: 16

Psychotherapy Note

Cutting straight to the chase, I asked Billy to touch upon another one of his memories of abuse. Billy was initially reluctant, so I had to assure him that it was indeed necessary to resolving his issues. Billy seemed very emotionally distraught by the thoughts of these memories, but he eventually agreed to share another one of these memories.

Billy states that when he was 10 years old, his parents had gone out for the night, leaving him home by himself. He remembers again waking up in the middle of the night, this time around 12 AM. His parents were not yet back. He says that when he awoke, he saw the same tall, thin man from before. The man was sitting at the foot of his bed, looking over his shoulder at Billy. Billy reports that the man whispered "It's me. It's your Uncle Victor."

(At this point in the story, I dropped my pen and immediately became unnerved. I quickly regained my composure, however, as I did not want to further unsettle Billy. Plus, patient confidentiality came to mind when I thought of the other patients with similar stories).

Billy reports that Uncle Victor then climbed into bed and rolled over next to him, just like he had done before. Uncle Victor soon began snoring loudly. Billy says that after about 30 minutes, he felt overwhelmed by fear and absolutely had to get out of that bed. He says that he slowly climbed out of bed. He says that it must have taken him at least five minutes just to get the covers off and get his feet to the floor without making any kind of noise.

Billy says that he slowly began tiptoeing away from the bed while Uncle Victor was snoring. He crept away so slowly that it took him about five seconds just to cover an inch of distance. He says that he was absolutely terrified during this. His main objective was to get out of the room and get out of the house, possibly to a neighbor's house to call the police.

About halfway to his bedroom door, he suddenly heard Uncle Victor's snoring stop. This made him freeze in place. He held his breath for a while, careful to not make any noise. After about fifteen seconds, Uncle Victor said, under his breath, "Get in the fucking bed." Billy was too terrified to get back into the bed, and started walking toward his door again. The second he

started walking toward his door, Uncle Victor shot up out of bed and screamed “Get the fuck back here!”, and began chasing after Billy. Billy ran down the stairs while Victor chased after him. He ran all the way to his front door and ran out of the house.

Billy says that after running out of his house, he looked back over his shoulder to see if Uncle Victor was still following him. Victor was not there. All he saw over his shoulder was his wide-open front door. He says that the dark, empty void beyond the door was terrifying to him. He spent the rest of the night sleeping in a neighbor’s yard, where he was found the next morning.

I was in absolute shock after hearing Billy’s story. Unsure of what to do next, I asked him to describe Uncle Victor’s face to me. I figured a composite sketch was in order. This had to be reported to the authorities.

Attached to the following page is a scanned copy of the composite sketch, going off of Billy’s description of “Uncle Victor”.



Thomas Rodarald, Ph.D.
Clarity for Health Therapy, 45 Harper Way
Springfield, Nebraska

PATIENT NAME	Sally Roana
SOCIAL SECURITY	507-74-0276
DATE OF BIRTH	04/24/1990
VISIT DATE	11/03/1999

IDENTIFICATION This is a 9-year-old white female who lives with her mother in Springfield, Nebraska. She was referred to our offices by her mother, Georgia Roana, Ph.D.

CHIEF COMPLAINT Sally presents to our office for: Afraid of monsters in her bedroom.

HISTORY Sally was interviewed with her mother, Georgia, whose reliability is good.

Sally reports being afraid to go to bed at night. She is afraid of monsters in her closet or under her bed. She is afraid to go to sleep and will often put off sleep by reading a book. She will often leave all of the lights on in her bedroom, which affects her sleep. She is afraid to get out of bed to use the bathroom. Sally was asked when this had started. Sally reports this having started over the summer. She claims that this was not due to having seen something on TV or in a movie.

Sally was asked to recall back to the exact day during the summer that she began fearing monsters in her room. Sally reports that she and her family went camping at the end of July. She claims that during their camping trip, she was playing in the woods and got lost. Georgia confirms this story to be true. Sally reports that she was lost for a number of hours, leading into nighttime. She claims that she sat under a tree for quite some time, hoping that someone would come and find her the next morning.

Sally reports that after a little while of sitting under the tree, a tall, thin man appeared out of the darkness and lent her his hand. She claims that he told her he would help her find her way back on the condition that she sit by the campfire he had built in the woods and sing campfire songs with him. Sally claims that she followed the man through the woods, to his campfire. She reports vaguely recognizing the man as they sang campfire songs. After a while, the man is reported to have lead Sally back to her campsite.

Georgia reports not having seen the man, rather only seeing Sally come out of the woods. Georgia also says that this therapy session was the first she had heard about Sally vaguely recognizing the man.

I asked Sally where she recognized him from. Sally says that she could not put her finger on it, but that she thinks the man might be a family member. I asked her why she thought this. Sally says that it is because when the man returned her to her campsite and she thanked him, he replied by saying "You're welcome. You can call on your uncle Victor anytime you need to."

Once Sally said this, her mother seemed to grow extremely distressed during our session. Georgie may need a private session of her own. She seemed quite unstable after hearing her daughter's story.

If you recall an old man that is tall and is thin

He wears a black suit and has a wide grin

He popped into your room while you were asleep

Laid by your side and began to count sheep

You remember him appearing to you in the night

He patted your head and tucked you in, tight

If this sounds familiar, I tell you 'beware'

For it is likely your Uncle Victor was there

THE PUMPKIN PATCH

by

Jake Wiklacz

Liam was the believing type, but even more so than your average 3rd-grader. Most kids at his age believed in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, but Liam found those tales foolish and irrelevant, fictional characters conjured up to draw young hearts and minds into holidays. Liam surmised that his faith could only lie with a single idol. Like an agnostic questioning which deity out of Yahweh, Allah, and Buddha could be the one true god, Liam knew there could only be one authentic holiday totem. There couldn't exist both a Santa and a tooth fairy, there could be only one. And for Liam, the one in question was The Pumpkin King.

Down the road from Liam's house was a pumpkin patch that stretched on toward the horizon, below which the sun dipped each and every evening. This, Liam believed, was where his holiday deity arose to reward his disciples, young and old. The night on which this happened was All Hallow's Eve, of course.

Now, Liam knew in his heart that this Pumpkin King was the one true idol, just as any tiny tot with their eyes all aglow knew that Santa Clause would slide down their chimney with his bag of goodies on Christmas Eve. But the kids at school thought Liam to be asinine for his childlike beliefs. Just like the world's religions—where believers of a talking serpent poke fun of believers of a winged horse—the grade school believers of flying reindeer and Christmas elves jeered at Liam for his devotion to a pumpkin god.

“When are you gonna stop believing in that stupid pumpkin?”

“Hey, Liam! Watch me carve the pumpkin king’s face!”

“Santa’s real, my parents told me. But my parents said the pumpkin king isn’t real!”

On his two-mile walk home, the school’s fifth-grade bullies—Franky, Tyler, and Aspen—waited patiently for Liam to walk under the arched stone bridge. When Liam emerged from under it, he was greeted by a shower of cold and slimy pumpkin guts that rained down on his head, immediately followed by sounds of devilish snickering.

Word spread through the small South Carolina town that little Liam Henson believed in the occult and would be spending Halloween night in a pumpkin patch, awaiting his pagan deity. A notion that was met with judgmental stares and virtue-signaling gossip from those bible-belt dwellers. And soon, Liam’s parents stopped receiving invitations to local church functions. His older sister was shunned in school, believed to be some sort of witch who, like her brother, bowed to heathen idols.

The afternoon of Halloween soon arrived. The classroom was thoroughly decorated for the occasion; paper cutout jack-o-lanterns were strung together with yarn and tacked to a corked staff on the wall, a large black cat cutout was pasted to the classroom door, and a jack-o-lantern bowl filled with candy sat atop the teacher’s desk. None of the decorations in the school dared echo anything to do with witches or goblins or vampires or devils, something which would have drawn judgement from more than a few sets of parents.

Liam’s school held a trick-or-treating event within its walls. Costumed children lined up outside each classroom to receive their treats. Liam, of course, dressed as a pumpkin. He

received the usual jeers from his classmates; if they weren't making fun of his devotion to the Pumpkin King, they were laughing at the fact that pumpkin costumes were normally reserved for an infant's first Halloween. It was not until Liam was kindly asked to refrain from the school-wide trick-or-treating, however, that he became most distraught.

"Liam, I think it's best if you hang out in Principal Reviss' office for an hour." His teacher, Ms. Volskay... he hated her with a passion.

"Why?" Liam asked quite innocently.

"Because."

Liam hated her for that, the way she'd never give a real answer. She acted as if she was the all-powerful overlord upon which the righteousness of rules rested. But she was only a part of the problem. The bigger issue was that Liam was a believer among nonbelievers, at least when it came to his Pumpkin King. These bible-thumpers just wouldn't have it. The Easter Bunny and Santa Clause were fine to them; they were the mascots for Christian holidays, and were thus virtuous and pure. To them, the Pumpkin King was equal in nature to the god Pan, upon which their Satan character's appearance was based.

And so Liam sat and seethed and stewed in the principal's office. Principal Reviss offered him candy from the bowl on his desk. As Liam pathetically chewed on a piece of caramel, he thought of how much better the other kids had it in terms of quality and quantity of candy. It made his blood boil to think of it. Of how those commonplace zombies were rewarded for their lack of original thinking.

"Excuse me, I hope I'm not interrupting anything." Ms. B, the school counselor, entered the room with a firm knock on the already-opened door.

“Not at all,” Principal Reviss replied. “Have a seat.”

Oh, god. Liam knew what this meant. Ms. B was about to ‘counsel’ him. Even at his age, Liam thought it to be a useless position that could be handled by anyone and everyone. Ms. B sat down across from Liam, next to Principal Reviss. As Ms. B adjusted her hair, Liam caught Reviss’ eyes wandering down toward her tights-covered legs. *Such hypocrisy.*

“Now, Liam,” said Ms. B in her thick southern accent, talking to Liam in a most passively degrading manner, “we wanted to talk to you today about certain things you’ve been saying around school.”

“Okay,” said Liam, uninterested.

“Liam... do you know what the word ‘gossip’ means?”

Oh, boy. Here we go.

“Yes,” Liam replied.

There was a pause. Ms. B was waiting for an answer.

“Go on, then. Tell me.”

“It means to go around saying things that aren’t true.”

“That’s right. Well, that’s sort of what this is about, Liam.” Another pause as Ms. B stared Liam down with demeaning puppy dog eyes.

“Okay,” said Liam amidst the awkward air.

“I hear you’ve been going around school, talking about a thing called ‘The Pumpkin King’. Is that true?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s almost Halloween. And every Halloween, the Pumpkin King comes out of the pumpkin patch and gives presents to all his believers.”

“Now, that’s not really true, though, is it?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Liam, there’s no such thing as a ‘Pumpkin King’”.

“Are you a god-fearing woman?”

Ms. B was taken aback, and this was two folds; not only had young Liam turned the questioning onto her, but he was also asking an intelligent question, intelligent for his age. She couldn’t tell whether he was that mature in intellect, or if he was just repeating something he’d heard an adult say.

“I, uh,” Ms. B stammered, “yes, I believe in God. Go to church twice a week.” Liam grimaced at how she pronounced ‘twice’ as *twass*.

“And do you believe the story about the snake in the garden?”

“Of course. First story of the bible.”

“Is a talking snake in a garden less crazy than a talking pumpkin in a patch?”

“Well, Liam, it’s important that you understand the difference. The bible’s the word of god.”

This was going nowhere. Liam quit and spent the rest of the session staring at a wall as Ms. B rattled off baptist drivel and quotes about ‘dishing dirt’ that she picked up at a help site for counselors. *She is child*, Liam thought. *Unenlightened, uneducated.*

Evening soon came, and there was Liam's older sister, Tara, wearing her glittery witch costume. She scolded him for his stupid beliefs that had garnered her so much flak in school and around town.

"I swear to god," she said, "if I hear one more word from you about this stupid pumpkin thing, I'm gonna drop you off in the cemetery overnight."

But Liam would not be spending the night in a cemetery. He'd be spending it in the pumpkin patch near his house. Tonight was the night, and it made him grin. All of the torments, the virtue-signaling religious fanatics, the bullying, the harsh words, the neglect... it would all pay off on this chilly Halloween.

Liam left the house, but unlike the hoards of children walking the earth that evening, Liam was not in a costume. He wore jeans and had on a fur coat to keep warm once the sun fully set. His lack of a costume drew confused stares from the adults who were handing out candy. The other children were too busy gobbling down chocolate to notice. Liam cut through several yards as he made his way to the patch. If he hurried, he'd be able to catch that reddish orange sunset in its full glory.

As he walked among swirling hoards of dead autumn leaves, he saw something out of the corner of his eye that he hoped was just his imagination. But it wasn't. He saw them clear as day. Franky, Tyler, and Aspen, the three bullies, were standing on the side of someone's house. And they saw Liam, too, who was obviously walking off toward the pumpkin patch.

In this moment, Liam wished he hadn't ran off at the mouth so much about the Pumpkin King. The three bullies seemed to freeze in place as their hawklike eyes tracked Liam's every step.

“Going to see the pumpkin man?”

One of them shouted it. Liam wasn't sure which one. This was bad. They surely wouldn't pass up a chance to get Liam alone in a pumpkin patch. Liam began to picture his head covered in pumpkin guts again.

Liam kept on walking, avoiding eye contact with his three tormentors. He could still feel the weight of their eyeballs against his back. But he didn't dare look back, as it may have further provoked them.

Liam arrived in the pumpkin patch at the exact time he'd hoped. The sun was halfway below the horizon, and it gleamed a reddish glow that turned the sky around it pink. Liam perched atop a massive pumpkin and watched the sun set. Before he knew it, the sun was gone, giving way to a starry night sky that was complete with a bright orange harvest moon.

The air was chilly now and Liam's teeth slightly chattered as the wind glided over the back of his neck. The occasional sound of a solitary, windblown leaf bouncing off of a nearby pumpkin would fill Liam with a small sense of hope. Each time it happened, he yearned that the sound was produced by the Pumpkin King's arrival. Still, Liam did have some current satisfaction at the fact that the three bullies hadn't shown up to torment him, at least not yet. Nevertheless, Liam kept his eyes peeled for the fiends.

The moon soon ascended to its peak in the sky. It must have been about 8 o'clock by now, and the trick-or-treaters were likely heading inside, typical of a Halloween night that fell on a weekday. But Liam was still out under the night sky. He was a patient boy and he'd wait until his idol showed up.

I rustling in the foliage nearby alerted Liam. He sat up and listened. The rustling sound was not far off. Was this the Pumpkin King? Liam surely hoped.

“BOO!”

Liam nearly fell off the pumpkin he was sitting on. Just as he'd feared. Franky, Tyler, and Aspen had reared their fiendish faces in his pumpkin patch.

“Has the pumpkin king showed up, yet?” Franky jeered. He was the ringleader, and right now, he looked especially out for blood. Each of the three brutes held massive bags of candy, probably stolen off some younger kids.

“No comment?” Franky persisted.

“Bite me,” said Liam. And in this moment, it was as if a bomb had detonated. Liam wasn't entirely sure if what he'd thought had actually exited his mouth. It was clear from the astounded faces around him that he had indeed said it.

“What did you just say?” asked Aspen.

Liam took a deep breath. “I said...” (Liam still could not believe this was coming out of his mouth) “...bite me.”

Franky snorted out a menacing laugh. “Wow,” he said. “Even after all this time, you still don't get it.”

“What are we gonna do to him?” Tyler sneered.

“Hmm,” Franky pondered. Liam sat atop the pumpkin, trying to look as calm as possible. His fingers nervously twitched by his side, and he hoped they didn't see. Any sign of weakness from him was like blood in the water. He wasn't sure how he was getting out of this jam.

“I know!” Those words alone uttered from Franky’s mouth sent chills through Liam’s entire body. “He likes pumpkins so much! Let’s stuff him inside that one! Grab him.”

Before Liam could budge, Tyler and Aspen gripped his arms tight and yanked him off the pumpkin.

“This one’s perfect,” said Franky as he pointed at the large pumpkin. “Tyler, you got the knife?”

“Right here.” Tyler pulled a large, sheathed hunting knife and tossed it to Franky. Franky pulled the knife out of the sheath as if he were some middle-aged swordsman, grinning wildly.

“Perfect!” Franky exclaimed as he approached the large pumpkin. “Move.” Franky waved his hand wildly. Like houseflies, Tyler and Aspen parted from the large pumpkin, Liam in hand.

Franky knelt down in front of the massive pumpkin and viciously stuck the knife into its belly, ripping a gash right down the middle. The manner in which he stabbed it would cause one to imagine Franky as a future serial killer.

“Aw, yeah,” said Franky as he hacked away at the pumpkin’s flesh. Tyler and Aspen nodded and snickered as they watched Franky carve away.

Eventually, Franky had carved a large opening in the pumpkin, just big enough for a human body to be shoved into, but tight enough so that it couldn’t be taken out. Franky gawked at Liam with those crazed eyes, looking quite proud of his work.

“And now,” said Franky, “we insert our little pumpkin-lover. Good luck pulling yourself out!”

Tyler and Aspen yanked Liam toward the opening of the pumpkin. But they didn't have to use much force, which seemed to puzzle them. Liam was being curiously cooperative and the fear had all but faded from his face.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Tyler, getting right up in Liam's face. "At least scream a little. Cry for help. Something." Tyler and Aspen came to a screeching halt. They scrutinized Liam's unbelievably calm features, trying to make sense of it.

"Aren't you scared?" Aspen asked. "Go ahead and cry for mom. 'Cause she won't hear you when your ass is inside that pumpkin."

Liam's relaxed demeanor persisted. But the three bullies also persisted. Tyler jabbed Liam's shoulder with his fingertips. "Cry for help!" He jabbed again, repeating his command. Liam did nothing. Not even a flinch.

"The hell's going on?" Franky asked in complete bafflement. "Is he tripping?" Liam wasn't gonna give these little sadists the satisfaction.

"HOO-WAH!" All the air from Liam's lungs exited his mouth in a single burst as Aspen's fist smashed the sweet spot of Liam's gut.

"Cry for help!" Tyler repeated as he, too, punched Liam, this time in the ribs. But Liam stayed defiant. Franky, meanwhile, looked to be growing impatient.

"Move," said Franky as he approached Liam. Franky raised the knife, and Liam felt his eyes widening of their own accord. Franky grabbed the back of Liam's neck and knelt down in front of Liam so that the two were face-to-face. He brought the tip of the knife up to Liam's chin, holding it just a hairsbreadth away.

"Cry...for...help," Franky commanded.

Then, suddenly, a change in the wind. No one could quite put a finger on it, but the atmosphere shifted. A new presence made itself apparent in the pumpkin patch, but wasn't yet seen. And just about every kid who'd ever been bullied would have relished the way Franky's eyes slowly began to fill up with fear. They widened as he watched Liam's mouth slowly form into a sadistic grin.

"No," said Liam. "YOU cry for help."

Franky leapt to his feet and held the knife at the ready. He looked panicked, his head rapidly turning in all directions like that of a frightened songbird.

"Who's there?" Franky stammered, his voice cracking. "Wh-Who's there?! C-Come out or I'll gut you!"

A cold wind began to move across the pumpkin patch, blowing dead leaves all around. And there was a sudden rustling noise coming from nearby, and one could see the leaves and vines moving around from something crawling among them.

"Over there!" Franky shouted, pointing in the direction of the rustling. He began to approach, his stooges in toe. Liam stayed put, not quite sure if the three even remembered he was there.

The three bullies then came to a screeching halt, the blood in their veins running wintry. Franky dropped the knife as he watched a thick pumpkin vine slither along the ground like a boa constrictor. More vines followed, all of them crawling to one collective, centric area in the middle of the patch. As this happened, Liam's menacing smile grew wider and wider.

"What the hell's going on?" Aspen shouted.

"I don't know," said Franky, "but I'm outta here."

Franky began to run off, but he hadn't made it ten steps before one of the pumpkin vines lashed out and snagged his ankle. Franky fell to the ground, landing right on his face. He was screaming like a little girl. Before the other two had the time to react, they too were accosted by the vines, which yanked them to the ground.

"Help! Help us!" They all shouted the same thing. With a grin still plastered to his face, Liam turned and watched as the Pumpkin King rose out of the pumpkin patch in all his glory. This had been a part of Liam's plan all along. He knew his tormentors would show up. Just like last year's 5th-grade bullies showed, and the year before that, too. For each year, the Pumpkin King demanded a sacrifice, and Liam never failed to produce.

The Pumpkin King arose, a ten-foot figure, torso consisting of thick, intertwined vines that wrapped around one another to form a tree trunk of sorts. The head of the King was a large and ripe jack-o-lantern, fluid in its expression. Once again a witness to the great sight, Liam fell to one knee and placed his palms in the dirt, showing his respect.

"HELP!" The three tormentors continued to shout in a pathetic sort of way, in the way that had made *them* laugh when their previous victims produced the same panicked screaming.

"Pumpkin King," said Liam, "I have once again brought you nonbelievers."

"NO!" shouted Franky. "We believe! We believe! We really, really believe!"

The Pumpkin King smiled down at Liam. He approved. And with that, the vines that held onto the three screaming brats began to drag them toward the King. They screamed and hollered like they never had before, but no one was coming. Like the mouth of a python, the Pumpkin King's jaws unhinged and his mouth opened wide. Inside the mouth, floating around in the squashy guts and the seeds, were a few of the skulls and bones from past offerings.

The bullies all dug their fingertips into the dirt as they were dragged closer and closer to the Pumpkin King's maw. Their petrified faces... more delightful than Liam had anticipated.

"PLEASE!" Franky shouted in a last ditched effort to save his skin. "Liam! Make it stop!"

And with that, the three bullies were slurped right into the Pumpkin King's mouth, a loud squelching noise filling the air as their bodies became submerged in the piles of guts inside. Their screams, too, became submerged, muffled, and eventually... silenced.

The morning after Halloween. Candy wrappers littered the streets. Toilet paper was strung out along several front lawns. A handful of people tore down their Halloween decorations at the crack of dawn before the workday began.

Among the townspeople returning to their regular lives were three sets of worried parents, wondering where their boys had gone. Last Franky's mom had seen of him, he was departing the house with an empty pillowcase and that sycophantic smile as he waved goodbye to her. Aspen's mom watched as her son departed with Franky. And Tyler's mom had only heard a halfhearted 'bye' uttered by her son, followed by the sound of the backdoor slamming.

Search parties were sent out to look. No one nor nothing turned up. Liam said not a word of it, of course. The day following Halloween was always a somber one for him, because it meant he had to wait another year to see his god.

Eventually, the search parties went looking for the three missing boys in the pumpkin patch. They searched through the entire patch, looking for any sign of the missing boys; a watch, a glove, a bag of candy, anything.

And after the search parties rummaged through the pumpkin patch, Liam found himself watching the story on the news that evening. As he plucked the peas from his otherwise satisfactory pot pie, he smirked at the image on the television screen: his very own handiwork, the phrase 'INRI' carved into the side of a pumpkin.

THE LAIR BEHIND THE WALLS

by

Jake Wiklacz

The sound of my cellphone vibrating against hardwood jolted me awake. Though it's a no-brainer to tap that moon icon before going to bed, I was always overcome with this petty little fear that it would silence my seven o'clock alarm. Safe to say that, at 3 AM, I was regretting it.

With blurred and sleepy vision, I felt around my night stand, my fingertips eventually making contact with the quivering cellphone. I turned the screen toward me and squinted from the bright light. The caller ID read *unknown*. My inclination was simply to ignore it and hope I could fall back to sleep. But I was awake and might as well have answered it. Besides, who in their right mind was calling at the witching hour? I swiped the little phone icon to the side and pressed the cellphone to my ear.

"Hello?" I mumbled.

"Hello." The voice on the other end was male. Sounded like a guy in his twenties.

"Yes?" I replied.

"Is this Olivia Bennett?" the voice asked.

I delayed for a brief moment but realized if he got my number, he was likely sure I was Olivia Bennett.

"It is," I said.

"I'm sorry to bother you at this time of night," said the voice.

"It's..."

I was about to say *It's okay*, but I stopped when I realized it certainly wasn't. When morning came and I had to drag myself off to work, it would be nothing short of unbearable.

"Who's calling?" I asked.

"Again, I do apologize for calling at such a late hour," the voice said, "but I couldn't risk calling you at a time that someone else may be present."

I sat up, intrigued. This suddenly felt rascally and dangerous, and for a moment I forgot to even care who was calling.

"Oh?" I uttered, keeping the ball firmly in his court.

"As for who's calling," the voice promptly continued, "that, I cannot say."

"Why not?"

"Because."

"All right, then, Mr. Stranger. What can I do for you?"

Static filled the air for a moment. I wondered if he was still on the line.

"There's nothing you can do for me," the voice continued. "In fact, I'm calling because I've got some information for you."

"Which is?..." I asked, growing impatient.

"I knew your father, Roger Bennett."

The blood in my veins ran cold for a split second. My father, a wealthy stock broker, had died several months earlier. He and I hadn't been on speaking terms for a little while, mainly due to his refusal to spare a few of his millions. I had always asked him why he was so obstinate, so keen on not sharing the wealth, to which he would reply with a lecture on how a family fortune is gained and lost in two generations. No matter how many times I told him that I would refrain

from splurging an inheritance on frivolous purchases, the stubborn bastard just wouldn't hear it. He had strived for years before reaching the top of the ladder, and he would be damned if he watched one of his kids kick back on a beach and call it a life.

"Seriously?" I replied.

"Yes," said the voice. "My regards on his passing."

"Thanks."

"Be that as it may, I am going to tell you something that you may not want to hear. Your father was no straight arrow."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is he was a bit of a scammer. Now, this isn't to take anything away from his accomplishments as a broker, but I'd be lying if I told you he gained all his fortune by, uh... playing by the rules."

"What'd he do?"

"He scammed people out of their money. Ever heard of the *pump-and-dump*?"

"The pump-and-dump?"

"It's a kinda scam... anyway, doesn't matter. Listen up." The guy took a deep breath.

"There was a significant portion of his money he never laundered," he said. "Means cash. And he had it squirreled away where no one could find it." I was sure as hell paying attention, now.

"The money wasn't moved before he died," he continued. "Still in the same spot it always was."

"How do you know this?" I interrupted.

“Again,” he replied, “that’s really not something I can say. Whether you believe me or not, that’s your business. Just passing along what I know.”

“If you know where the cash is,” I said, “why haven’t you taken it?”

“Number one,” the voice said, “I don’t need it. Two, it’s dirty money, which is a risk that someone who doesn’t need money...doesn’t need to take.”

“I see. So, where is it?”

“At his old house, upstairs. There’s a hidden compartment in one of the bedrooms.”

“Which bedroom?”

“Don’t know.”

“How much money?”

“Enough to flip off your boss, that’s for sure.” I paused to think for a moment. This was lunacy.

“Like I said,” the guy continued, “if you don’t believe me, it’s your business. But, if I were you...let’s just say it can’t hurt to check and see if I’m right.”

And just like that, the guy hung up the phone. I laid there, baffled, even forgetting to take the phone away from my ear. One phrase kept repeating in my head, over and over: *dirty money, dirty money, dirty money*. It wasn’t easy to grasp the idea of my father being a criminal, but it also wasn’t completely implausible. Wall Street is notorious for foul play, and besides, my dad was a money-hungry shit. But more importantly, could I really take dirty money? For a split second, the thought of possessing illegally obtained money unnerved me. However, my fear was soon completely wiped away when I thought of work in the morning.

I worked a desk job, and it sucked. Must I go into more detail? My boss tried to tell us to be passionate about the company. *Passionate?* I did not even *like* it, not even a little. Every day I would sit at my desk and think that maybe if I were hotter I could marry some rich guy and hang out by the kidney-shaped pool for the rest of my days.

So, here at 3:05 AM, my options were thus: sleep in and then go on a scavenger hunt for a hidden fortune, or lie down and toss and turn, hopefully squeezing in a few hours of sleep so I could at least function at my shitty job in the morning. This, clearly, was not a difficult decision.

While I did end up getting around six hours of shuteye, I was, unsurprisingly, not able to sleep in past nine o'clock that morning. My brain, which was preoccupied with thoughts of cold, hard cash, snapped me awake and jolted waves of energy through my body.

Money really does make the world go 'round. Money makes feet move, is what it does. And my feet moved fast, carrying me out of bed, over to my dresser to grab some sweatpants and a t-shirt, and down the stairs where I could grab a hearty breakfast of OJ and a protein bar to go. My feet hadn't moved this fast at this time of day in some time. I didn't even bother calling work to tell them I was sick. I could only interpret this as a sign that, deep down, I truly believed this mystery-man's story about the hidden jackpot in my old house.

I bet I still have the key, I thought. Or rather, I *hoped*. It had been a while since I had even thought of needing the key to my dad's house. I looked around my apartment, hammering away at my mind as I tried to remember where I put that thing. I ended up finding it at the bottom of one of my dresser drawers, buried under some underwear.

I hopped in my car and floored it. Not five minutes passed before my cellphone began buzzing atop the passenger seat. I glanced at the screen. It was the workplace. I uttered out a little *screw-you* giggle as I flipped my cellphone facedown.

The phrase that the mystery-man had used on the phone kept repeating in my head: *enough money to flip off your boss*. I pictured walking into work, grabbing my stuff, and saying something cocky as I extended my middle finger. Or, better yet, maybe I just wouldn't show up ever again. After all, the stuff on my desk consisted of a couple framed pictures, a jar of pens and pencils, and a few things like a telephone and a computer that were owned by the company. *Yeah*, I thought, *that's what I'll do. I'll ghost 'em*. I thought maybe I'd keep count of how many times my place of work called, all while I was kicking back on a beach somewhere, silently thanking that mystery man. Now, this was all very overconfident thinking. After all, it could have turned out there was no money. But this mystery caller knew my name, he knew my father's name and his profession, not to mention his criminal activities. There *had* to be truth to this.

My father's house was about a two-hour drive from my place, over in a wealthy suburb in Atlanta, Georgia. My kid brother, Sammy, and I grew up there. It was a nice, sheltered sort of childhood. We played outside a lot, mostly riding bikes and building tree forts. All of our childhood friends either lived on our street or the one next to it. On the other side of our street, behind our house, was a forest, which had a pond and a few generators that powered all the lights. I'll never forget this awesome tree fort my brother and I built back there. We used a bunch of branches, leaning them up against a tree in a row around the trunk, leaving a space for the entrance. It was the last happy memory from my elementary years, because a few days after that,

I never saw Sammy again. We never found out what happened, but I always suspected it had something to do with those damned woods. He always used to mess with me about those woods.

“I’m gonna go to the woods at night, when it’s dark!” he would declare while bravely puffing out his chest. I would always giggle and tell him that he didn’t have the guts. I guess he did.

I was soon snapped out of my thoughts when I pulled up to our old neighborhood. I had not been here in years, but I still remembered the code for the gate. When you’re in high school and you go to class and live the same day over and over again, like Groundhog Day, motions like punching in a code became robotic.

Soon, I was driving down memory lane. I passed by houses, some of them housing people I knew, some of them not. Some of them *used* to house people I knew, but those people had since moved. As I drove through, I reminisced about Halloween as a kid, and how on that night each year, the streets were flooded with a river of costumed children. I remembered how with each passing Halloween, as the neighborhood’s current generation grew older, less and less costumed children would be out trick-or-treating.

I pulled up to my old house. Though I should have grown only more nostalgic as I gazed upon the place I grew up in, my sentimentality slowly oozed away as the thought of money popped back into my mind. Today was about the future, not the past. This was ghost money, it had no destination, and no one was looking for it. Granted, someone was missing it, but likely no longer looking.

I hopped out of my car and walked briskly up the driveway. Sentimentality struck again for a brief moment as I watched dead autumn leaves blow across the lawn, reminding me of how my brother and I used to rake them all up into a gargantuan pile and then nosedive into it. It then hit me that it was late-October. I pulled out my cellphone and checked the date: October 31st. I giggled to myself, imagining buying a lifetime supply of Halloween candy with all the money.

I walked up the doorsteps and peaked through the window. The place was empty and lifeless. It almost felt wrong looking into it, strange as it sounds. But then...more thoughts of money.

I unlocked the door and opened it. I stood in the doorway for a moment, taking it in. The second I stepped forward and entered, the familiar smell of the house entered my nostrils. During October, there was usually a candy corn fragrance in the house, emanating from these orange Halloween candles we would set on the table. But not this year. There was only the house smell. Unhesitating, I ascended the stairs.

At the top of the stairs, I peered down the lengthy hallway. At the end of it was the master bedroom, dad's old room. That, I figured, was the most likely place for the money to be.

I walked down the hallway, continually glancing over my shoulder, which I soon realized was a bit silly. After all, if a ghost lived here, it would be my dad's ghost. I wondered what I would say if his ghost showed up. More pressing, I wondered what he would say when he saw me holding the money. Would he be angry, or would he smile and wish me the best with my newfound fortune?

I entered my father's bedroom. The place smelled like mothballs. My aunt had come and stripped everything away after he died, so the room was barren. I looked around and tried to

think of the most well-reasoned place to look. This house was big, but at least the mystery man had narrowed it down to a bedroom.

I approached the closet and opened it. It was a large walk-in closet, and it made me think of how our dog used to curl up on a pillow in the corner. I looked around the barren closet, but all that was there were four walls and a roof, plus an empty dresser. I thought to move the dresser aside, placing my hands on it and inching it away from the wall. That's when I saw the gleam of a metal surface. I pushed the dresser more, ignoring the possibility of it falling over from my impetuous shoving.

And there it was. Behind the dresser was a vault door, built into the wall itself. It was about the height and width of a mini-refrigerator. I excitedly crouched down, but quickly realized that it needed to be opened with a code. The numbered buttons stared at me, almost taunting me for thinking I was about to get my hands on any money. I tried to jog my memory, thinking back to significant dates.

I tried my dad's birthday. It didn't work. I thought some more, racking my brain. Then it hit me. *Eleven-twenty-one*...my parents' anniversary. My dad used it as the passcode for almost everything. I punched in the code. To my greatest elation, I heard the locks click, and I ripped the door open.

I peered into the dark void beyond the vault door. I couldn't see a thing, so I pulled out my cellphone and turned on the flashlight. All that laid beyond the vault door was a five-foot compartment, completely empty, save for some dirt and dust. *Goddammit*, I thought. At that moment, I was certain someone else had taken the money. Perhaps my aunt knew about it. There

had to have been money at some point. This mystery caller told me about it, and then here was a secret compartment.

After sulking in defeated fashion for a moment, something caught my eye. At the back of the compartment, about five feet beyond the entrance, was another door. This one was a wooden door, sort of like the small door on the back of a house that leads to a crawlspace. I'll admit, this seemed strange, at first. But then I realized it made sense. Embezzling money on Wall Street was a surefire way to have the FBI busting down your door, so it was only natural for this money to be hidden behind layers of security. Although, I must admit, a simple wooden door was a bit on the nose.

Using my flashlight, I crawled into the compartment and toward the wooden door. I crept through at a quick pace, feeling claustrophobic in the tight area. The wooden door was closed with a simple hook through a metal loop. I unhooked it and pulled the door open.

I peeped my head through the small doorway. I wasn't sure if what I was seeing was real. I was looking at another home inside our home. Beyond the doorway was a long, dark hallway. Faint beams of light seeped through a crack in the ceiling, but beyond that, the hallway had no windows or lights at all. The floor was smooth concrete, covered in a layer of dust. The walls were made of wood, the kind that gave you a splinter just by looking at it. The hallway stretched on for about thirty feet. And, as you may have already guessed, there was a door at the end of this one. But this door was a regular door.

I was frightened, at first. How bizarre that I couldn't even think of how this hallway could fit within the architecture of the house. My dad's room was upstairs, so this wasn't

underground. If this hallway stretched on for thirty feet or so, why was there not a thirty-foot protrusion on the side of the house?

Enough money to flip off your boss. That phrase popped back into my head. I was no longer sure that it was welcome, but it popped in. It was stuck there on loop, and it wasn't going away. The temptation was strong. That money was close.

After a moment of gazing down the corridor, I worked up the courage to crawl forth. I wormed through the tight space and got to my feet and took a deep breath. The hallway was unbelievably musty. I pinched my nose and shined my flashlight and walked forward. Halfway down the hall, a sudden noise startled me and caused me to stop. The noise was a little scurrying sound. The pitter-patter of tiny rat feet, I reckoned. I pressed on.

At the end of the hall, I placed my hand on the doorknob. I wondered what was beyond *this* door. My mind juggled a mix of fear and tenacity.

I turned the doorknob and yanked the door open. At first, all I saw was darkness, but my eyes quickly adjusted. What I was looking at was actually a pitch-black wall. But as I further scrutinized, I realized there was something off about it. This wall was not made of wood or brick or concrete. This wall was oily and...slimy. It looked almost like latex, or dare I say, flesh. I peered in through the doorway. I looked left, I looked right. On either side, there was an entire tunnel lined with this slimy stuff. As I continued to examine the walls, it seemed as if the material was lightly pulsating. Or more like breathing.

As my heart fluttered and I began thinking of getting the hell out, I noticed something on the ground about ten feet to my left. I knew what it was before I had even gotten a good look at it. A wad of money, wrapped in a currency strap. Like a moth to a flame, I immediately walked

through the doorway and tiptoed to it, stepping onto the slimy, pulsating surface. The ground squelched with every step I took. I bent down and picked up the wad of cash. The currency strap was a mustard orange and was marked '\$10,000'. I stared at the cash like Gollum at the ring, running my fingers through it like a flip book. It felt sublime just to hold it.

Ten-thousand was enough for a year's rent, but allow me to quit my job, it would not. The rest had to be here. Most people may have been frightened off by the sheer peculiarity of these tunnels. I was frightened of working a nine-to-five the rest of my life.

As I walked through the tunnels, I continued to run my fingers across the edges of the dollar bills. Each time I flipped through the stack, the air would fan my face, and it made me think of how I could soon pay somebody to fan me on a hot summer's day.

I arrived at the end of the tunnel. Here was a chamber, lined with the same gelatinous materials. The chamber was about the size of a standard bedroom. I shined my flashlight into the room and saw a duffel bag at the back. *This must be it.* This was the money I had been dreaming about since 3 AM, my mouth watering each and every time I imagined getting my hands on it. I walked forth, bent down, and unzipped the bag. There was a mountain of cash inside. I let out an excited yelp as I stared at it. There were countless wads of cash wrapped neatly in those colorful currency straps of yellow and pink and blue. Smiling wildly, I shoved my hands into the bag and immediately began rummaging around, scooping up wads of cash and letting them fall back into the bag as if I were scooping water from some fresh spring in the ground.

I tossed the cash I had found on the floor into the bag and zipped it up and threw the strap over my shoulder and got to my feet. The second I did this, I began to notice a strange and constant squelching sound coming from the very room I was in. More specifically, it was coming

from the wall straight ahead. I shined my light on the wall, and what I saw next frightened me to my core.

Something was emerging from the wall, a mass that was the size of a human being. It was rising like pizza dough, but remained shapeless. Before I had time to turn and run, the mass began to take a humanoid shape. And then, to my greater horror, a sapient arm burst out of the wall. The skin on the arm was pitch-black, just like the tunnels. At the end of this arm was a clawed hand, black talons protruding from the fingers. The claw reached sideways and sliced away at the outer “skin” of the wall.

My eyes widened as the most grotesque of humanoid creatures emerged. It was a demonic being with a pitch-black body and a sickly, skeletal face. But what caught my attention the most were those eyes. The eyes were as a snake’s, yellow and devilish, the kind that could catch you in a horrified trance if you looked into them for too long. The teeth, like a shark’s, rows upon rows of jagged rippers. It had decrepit harpy wings on its back that didn’t look capable of flight.

The demon fully emerged from the wall and just stood there, staring me down with a look of ire. The thing was leering at me as if I had done something punishable by death. I was frozen. Not a muscle on me so much as twitched as I stared back at the demon. The thing stood still as stone. It didn’t even respire. A few moments passed, and the demon’s mouth began to upturn into a grin. Its grin soon became a full-blown, toothy smile.

I felt the adrenaline kick in and I turned around and bolted through the tunnel. The duffel bag was still strapped around my shoulders. If it hadn’t been secured then I likely would have dropped it. For the first time since 3 AM, I wasn’t thinking about the money. I kept sprinting

through the tunnel. Then, to my horror, I dropped my cellphone, which was also my light. The place was pitch dark, and I surely would not have found the door without a flashlight. As I bent down to pick it up, I noticed something that was as peculiar as it was frightening.

Down the tunnel, back in the chamber where I had found the duffel bag, was the demon. It was just standing there, continuing to stare me down. It had never even attempted to chase me, as I had expected it would. This entire time, I assumed it was right behind me, ready to pounce and do its worst. But no, that abomination simply stood and leered. I picked up my cellphone, and as I did, the demon exited the chamber and hanged a left down one of the other corridors, disappearing. And that was when I realized that this place was a labyrinth and I didn't know where I was. I panicked as frightened whimpers escaped my dried mouth.

I frantically twisted and turned, trying to piece together where I had and hadn't been, but it was no use and I knew it. As I pivoted my head this way and that, I heard the echoes of the demon's horrible growl bouncing off of the slimy walls of the endless labyrinth. It was a deep bellow, like a silverback. That thing was hunting me and it wanted me to give it chase. Its echoing growls soon slowly faded into a deep and menacing voice. I still couldn't see the demon, but I could hear its voice echoing through this maze, jumping from wall to wall and making its way to my ears.

“That doesn't belong to you,” it said. “You knew it wasn't yours”.

My blood ran cold and my heart stopped. It had lead me here. I no longer felt an urge to beg or anything of the sort. It was my doing, not the demon's, that I was here. I had brought this upon myself. It wasn't even a spur of the moment decision. I drove hours to get here, to get my hands on money that did not belong to me nor belonged to my father.

But I didn't take the time to unstrap the duffel bag, even though the heavy thing slowed me down a bit. It was the icy hands of my own greed that still had a hold of me. I ran frantically through those tunnels that twisted and turned like the body of a massive python, and the growls and the taunts of the demon continued to echo throughout. Panic continued to sweep over me, and every few moments, I thought about stopping and just succumbing to the demon, allowing it to put me out of my misery just so I didn't have to feel this terror any longer.

I stumbled around that labyrinth for hours, though how many hours it was, I cannot say. I wondered why the demon hadn't taken me already. It surely knew its way through the place. That beast must have fed off of my terror. I tried to call someone numerous times, but my cellphone had no service. And all the while, the bag of money stayed strapped to me. Part of me would like to say it was because that, in my terrified state, I forgot it was there. But there was still a part of me that could not let it go. Hours more passed. I prayed and prayed, wept and wept.

“Olivia!”

After hours in those hellish tunnels, a voice echoed. But it was not the demon's, at least not his deep voice. It was a voice I recognized but hadn't heard for a very long time.

“Olivia!”

There it was again. I knew that voice anywhere. That voice called out to me several more times. I followed the sound. As I did, I glanced down at my cellphone. Five percent battery life. Just a few more minutes and I would be in the dark forever.

I continued to follow the sound of that sweet and innocent voice that I hadn't heard for many years. Of course I wondered if this was a trick, but I had nothing to lose. I ran through the tunnel as the voice grew louder. It was not far, now. And then the voice entered my left ear. I

turned, and to my left was a small jail cell, like a dungeon. Tentacle-like bars covered the doorway. I shined my light through and my heart broke instantly.

Inside the jail cell, looking just as he did when he was nine years old, was my little brother Sammy. He was curled in a fetal position in the corner of the cell and his face was grimy and bruised and gloomy. When he saw me, however, his face lit up with a childlike sense of desperation, like a preschooler who's mom had just arrived to pick them up from school.

Sammy crawled to the doorway of the cell and placed his hands on the bars and looked at me. I couldn't believe my eyes. I approached the bars of the cell and squatted down and stared into Sammy's baby blue eyes. He was still wearing the dinosaur pajamas that he was wearing the night he went missing. I had forgotten about those dinosaur pajamas. Sammy used to love to count the different types of dinosaurs that were pictured on them. I believe he had counted six.

"S-Sammy," I uttered, the sound just barely escaping my mouth.

"Olivia," said Sammy, as he stared back at me.

My lip quivered as I tried to find the words to say. I felt as though I had a million different questions to ask him and a million more things to tell him.

"Sammy, what happened?" I asked.

"Charlie told me I could have that wallet," said Sammy. "The one that Miss Sally lost, and I gave it back to her, even though I wanted the money. Charlie said I could have it."

"Who's Charlie?"

Sammy's glance down the tunnel was all I needed to know. It was a strange name for a demon but it didn't make him less unnerving. I remembered what Sammy was talking about, too. With the wallet. Our neighbor Sally had lost her wallet after coming to our house for dinner.

What was worse, it had \$50 inside of it. When Sammy found it between one of our couch cushions, he wanted to pocket the money. But my good little brother Sammy, sweet as he was, returned it that very same day without so much as a dollar missing.

“Charlie told me I could have the fifty bucks,” Sammy repeated, tears welling up in his eyes as he began to choke up. “I know I did something bad. It wasn’t mine.”

Sammy’s face winced as he started to cry. I cried, too. But I wiped the tears from my eyes and began thinking of how to get him out.

“I’m gonna get you out, okay?” I said.

Sammy somberly shook his head. I looked at him, confused.

“Sammy, it’s okay,” I said.

“I can’t,” said Sammy.

“Yes, you can. We’re gonna leave, okay?”

“It’s too late.”

I contemplated this with despair. I reached forward through the bars of the cell, attempting to touch Sammy’s face. My hand just passed right through. This was his spirit, no hope of walking back into the world.

“Oh god, Sammy.”

Sammy glanced at the duffel bag. He looked into my eyes and then at the duffel bag and then back at me again. I felt ashamed.

“You can free me,” said Sammy. “You have to escape Charlie.” Sammy pointed at the duffel bag.

“But you have to let it go,” he continued. “You have to let it go, Olivia. And you have to let me go, too.”

I reluctantly removed the strap from my shoulders and slowly pushed the duffel bag aside. I looked back into Sammy’s eyes and I knew that this would be the last time I could. Sammy smiled as he seemed to recall something of a cheerful nature.

“Remember that fort we built in the woods?” Sammy asked.

“Of course,” I replied.

“Do you think it’s still there?”

Sammy’s eyes were filled with childlike wonder. I do not think he realized how long he had been here. I didn’t know what to say, but as I watched the unworldly glee fade slowly from his eyes, I quickly concocted an answer.

“Yes it is,” I said firmly. “I looked. It’s still there, Sammy. It’s still there.”

At that moment, Sammy beamed a satisfied smile and looked to be at peace. Those sweet baby blue eyes looked as content as they did when we built that fort all those years ago. And then the echoing roar of Charlie snapped us both out of our sentimental bliss. Sammy’s eyes turned wide and frantic.

“Quick, you have to go!” Sammy said in a hushed tone. “If you escape, it’ll break the cycle. You’ll free my soul! Go!”

“How do I get out?” I replied, just as frantic as he was.

“Keep going down this tunnel, take a left, the doorway will be on your right after you take about twenty steps.”

I nodded my head, looking into Sammy’s eyes one last time. “I love you,” I said.

“Go!” he replied.

A horrible reality suddenly dawned on me as I looked down at my cellphone. The battery was on two percent. *Time to go.* I stood up and gave Sammy a last glance and bolted off.

Charlie’s ravenous snarling was growing louder by the second.

Doing exactly as my brother had said, I ran down the tunnel and kept my eyes peeled for the left hand turn. All I had to do was find the left hand turn and then the doorway. *Twenty steps.* That’s what Sammy had said. Only twenty steps and I’d get to the doorway, which was on the... right side? At least, I thought he had said *right*.

As Charlie’s roaring grew uncomfortably close, I came across the left hand turn. But just as I hung the left, my cellphone died and the flashlight went out. I began to panic, but I quickly remembered what Sammy told me. *Twenty steps.* I counted fast in my head.

One, two, three...

Charlie’s growling grew louder. I was sure he was coming upon the same left hand turn that I’d just taken.

Four, five, six, seven...

That demon’s bellowing sounded almost like the growling of a hungry stomach, amplified as it shot through the airwaves of these musty tunnels.

Eight, nine, ten...

Halfway there.

Eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen...

Now, I was sure Charlie had taken the left hand turn. Not only was its growling unbearably close, but I could feel its hot breath gusting against the back of my neck and it sent a snakelike shiver down my backbone.

Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen...

So close I could taste it. I could sense Charlie's presence just ten or fifteen feet behind me. The demon was now excitedly whooping like a circus animal. Whether or not I escaped, one thing was for certain...the hunt was almost over.

Eighteen, nineteen... twenty!

I threw myself to the right and made contact with the slimy wall. I frantically began feeling around for the door, shimmying down the wall as Charlie began to close the gap between us. I could see his yellow eyes, which glowed in the pitch darkness. They were all I could see. And those devil eyes were now almost in front of my own. I screamed out in terror as Charlie's eyes and jagged teeth made their way toward my face. Just as they did, my hand found the doorknob. I turned the knob and pushed. Light flooded the tunnel as I fell backward through the doorway, back into the musty hallway that at least wasn't made of flesh.

But Charlie wasn't done. I got to my feet and began running down the hallway. Charlie entered the hallway and continued his pursuit. He began to run along the wall like a lizard chasing a bug. My eyes locked onto the opened wooden dog door at the end of the hall.

I dove for the door and knocked the wind out of myself in the process. My head now poked through the small doorway, but as I crawled through, I felt Charlie's claw grab my ankle and begin to pull.

“Get back here, you whore!” Charlie bellowed, his voice carrying a hint of desperation. “Don’t you want the money?!”

“NO!” I shouted back, wrenching my ankle from his grasp. As I frantically crawled through the doorway and back into the crawlspace, I heard Charlie utter a scream of pure agony. It was over. Using my foot, I slammed the wooden door shut and thus Charlie’s agonized scream was blotted from existence.

I quickly crawled toward the doorway of the crawlspace. The light that poured in from my father’s walk-in closet was ecstatic and so was the breath of fresh air I took once I crawled out of the vault. I got to my feet and slammed the vault shut. I was panting like a dog. The room was spinning and it felt like what had just happened didn’t actually happen. As it turned out, enough money to flip off your boss wasn’t worth it.

I got out of that house as fast as I could. I stepped out onto our old back porch. The sun was setting now, and that crisp autumn air had gotten a bit colder. I savored it though, and as I took in a deep breath that smelled of fallen leaves and pine, I stared into the depths of that forest behind our house. And as I did I thought of the tree fort and how Sammy thought that it was still there.

But I knew the truth. We had built that fort out of branches and logs that weren’t long for lasting. Truth was, I didn’t need to check. That fort had long since rotted away, eaten up by the woodlice and the carpenter ants and bees. But I smiled anyway, knowing that Sammy found peace in the thought that it still might be there.

As I walked around to the front of the house, I grew somber as the concern of the unknown shrouded me. Sammy had told me that escaping would break the cycle, but I had no way to be certain that Sammy's soul was free.

When I walked out in front of the house, I almost couldn't believe my eyes. An absolute ocean of costumed, trick-or-treating children filled the streets. A new generation of kids occupied the neighborhood that Sammy and I once claimed as our own.

As I stood there in awe, I saw an apparition that brought me peace. Walking among the trick-or-treating children was Sammy, wearing his old Superman cape and carrying a pillowcase that was already half-full. I watched as he and a 10-year-old me galloped across a neighbor's front lawn, ready for the next offering of Halloween candy.

UNCLE VICTOR: PART 2

by

Jake Wiklacz & Edward Taveras

What you are about to read is a transcription of a leaked audio tape from Matlock State Hospital, a Nebraska state facility housing the criminally insane and those whose sanity is being evaluated for the criminal justice system. Audience discretion is advised.

TAPE STARTS

Dr. Ward: Hi, Thomas. Come on in, have a seat.

Tommy: Call me 'Tommy'.

Dr. Ward: Sure, of course. Well, Tommy, I'm Doctor Rachel Ward, I'm your assigned psychiatrist, today.

Tommy: I know that. [Pause] Like... I'm well aware.

Dr. Ward: All right, well then we can get started. So, they told me you're awaiting trial, is that right?

Tommy: It's not right. But it is correct.

Dr. Ward: Okay, well they think it might be helpful if we have a discussion about that, today. Is that all right with you?

Tommy: What's it matter if that's all right with me? I'm not here of my own volition. So, why do you bother asking?

Dr. Ward: What you're saying isn't correct. You're forced within these walls, but no one's requiring that we have a productive discussion. So, I ask the question again: is it all right with you?

Tommy: Sure, I guess.

Dr. Ward: Very good. Would it be all right, then, for you to tell me about what's been going on, Tommy?

Tommy: What's been going on?

Dr. Ward: That's right.

Tommy: In the world? Or...

Dr. Ward: With you, with your situation.

Tommy: Ah, I see. Okay, let's see. [Pause] Well, you're gonna think it sounds stupid, but then again, I don't really... care. [Pause] You know, it...it seems so silly that I'm sitting here talking to you.

Dr. Ward: Why is that?

Tommy: Because, you're like a child. No, more like a toddler. And I'm like an old man.

Dr. Ward: [Laughs] So, you're saying that you're smarter than me?

Tommy: Smarter... hmm. No, I wouldn't quite use that term. I'd say 'knowledgable'.

Dr. Ward: Well, I do have a Ph.D.

Tommy: [Laughs] Oh, right. Right, sorry, when I said 'toddler', I meant 'kindergartener'. My bad.

Dr. Ward: Tommy, if you don't mind, I think we're straying from the matter at hand.

Tommy: [Irritated] What is you want to know?

Dr. Ward: I want to know what you're going through, what your situation is so we can work through it.

Tommy: Ooo, lady, I'm afraid there ain't no diagnosis for the shit I've seen.

Dr. Ward: We'll see. Let's hear it.

Tommy: [Takes deep breath] 'Kay. [Pause] Just out of curiosity—this is relevant, by the way—have you ever had any patients come in, talking about their Uncle Victor?

Dr. Ward: Pardon? Uncle Victor? [Pause] No, can't say I have.

Tommy: Hmm, I suppose I'll be your first, then.

Dr. Ward: So your problems are with your uncle? Your Uncle Victor?

Tommy: That's exactly right.

Dr. Ward: Tell me about Victor.

Tommy: He's tall, he's thin. Really thin. You can see his bones. Um, balding. Uh... old, maybe sixty.

Dr. Ward: Maybe sixty?

Tommy: That's right.

Dr. Ward: Now, you say that as if he's a stranger. You say 'maybe sixty'. You don't know his age?

Tommy: He never told me.

Dr. Ward: Uh-huh. [Pause] Continue.

Tommy: Let's see... where was I?

Dr. Ward: Describing.

Tommy: That's right. Well, Victor, he smiles a lot. Yeah, a *lot*. But his smiles were never wholly warm. They were always, like...[Pause] They always carried this hint of—oh, what's the right word—of mischievousness. Kinda menacing, in a way. It varied in intensity, but it was always at least somewhat there. Like, kinda like this...

Dr. Ward: I see. There was something untrustworthy about it.

Tommy: Well, that's just it, you see. I trusted him fully, from the very beginning. In fact, I knew him very well. Of course, everyone else told me the opposite.

Dr. Ward: What do you mean by 'they told you the opposite'?

Tommy: Well, for starters, after commonly spending quality time with Victor for years during my childhood, my parents just one day told me that I didn't have an uncle named 'Victor'.

[Long silence]

Dr. Ward: Tell me more.

Tommy: I was fifteen, and I -

Dr. Ward: Sorry, how old are you now?

Tommy: I'm twenty. But, um, anyway, I was fifteen. And I had just gotten done fishing with Victor. And I got back, and I told my parents all about how I had caught so many fish, and how quickly I caught them, this and that...and then I said that Uncle Victor hadn't caught any. And they were like 'who?' And I said 'Uncle Victor'. And they just stared at me with confused

expressions, with the utmost concern. [Laughs] Side note, my dad even went down to the police station, they thought I was being stalked by a child molester. I mean, at fifteen? [Laughs] But, be that as it may, I just remember being highly...confused and frustrated. I was all like, 'are you guys crazy? Uncle Victor. You know Uncle Victor!' You know?

Dr. Ward: So, let me get this right. You swear you have an uncle named 'Victor', but no one else in the family knows him?

Tommy: What you just stated is true for my fifteen-year-old self.

Dr. Ward: Gotcha. But now you know the truth?

Tommy: Sweetie, I know *everything*.

Dr. Ward: No, I mean that now you know that you don't have an Uncle Victor?

[Pause]

Tommy: Well, your question is flawed in its very nature. I mean, you ask if I now know that I don't have an uncle named 'Victor'. But that's a loaded question. [Pause] You know?

Dr. Ward: [Irritated] I-I'm just trying to gauge what's changed between now and when you were fifteen.

Tommy: Well, okay. [Pause] So, if by 'uncle' you mean somebody who is, say, the brother of my dad, or something of this nature, then you are correct, I do not have an Uncle Victor. But saying something as arbitrary as 'you don't have an Uncle Victor' stems from being ignorant of the matter at hand.

[Pause]

Dr. Ward: You know, something just occurred to me.

Tommy: What's that?

Dr. Ward: Well, just a minute ago, you asked if I had any other patients come in and talk about their Uncle Victor.

Tommy: That's right.

Dr. Ward: How is that possible? That multiple others would have the same exact issue with this same 'Victor' person that you do?

[Pause]

Tommy: I think it's time I go into more detail about Victor. I now see that, yes, that question would be nonsensical to you, given that you know nothing about Victor. [Pause] When I was about thirteen, I used to go fishing at this pond near my house. Usually by myself, too, I wasn't a real sociable kid. I liked to keep to myself and all of that. So, anyway, one day after school, I'm doing my usual little fishing trip down at the pond. I sit down, I bait my hook, I cast the line, and I'm fishing for about thirty minutes.

Then, all of a sudden—and I mean all of a sudden, like, out of nowhere—comes this tall, skinny old man. He just walked up to me from the tree line. And immediately upon looking at him, before he even opened his mouth and said one damned thing, I knew exactly who he was. It was my Uncle Victor, who I'd known all my life. And, sure enough, he looks at me, and he's beaming that old 'Uncle Victor smile', and he says: 'Tommy! It's me! It's your Uncle Victor!'

And he's prancing around, waving his arms around excitedly, doing this sort of...circus clown-type dance. And then, he sits down next to me. And he pulls a fishing pole out of thin air, and he starts fishing with me. He's asking me about school, giving me profound life advice, not to mention fishing advice [Laughs].

Dr. Ward: I see. And so, you say that you recognized Victor the second you saw him, before he even said anything?

Tommy: That is correct.

Dr. Ward: But you also imply that this was your first time seeing Victor. There's a contradiction, there.

Tommy: Precisely.

[Long silence]

Dr. Ward: Um, so -

Tommy: Do you think I had any more of an idea on that day than you do, now? I was just as confused as you are.

Dr. Ward: Are you still confused?

Tommy: No, not in the slightest. Everything makes sense, now. In time, though, Doc. In time. Let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Dr. Ward: Very well.

Tommy: Now, where was I? [Pause] So, this sort of thing continued for the next couple of years. Some days, Victor wouldn't show. But other days, he would just walk up from the tree line, just like before, and come and fish with me. I would say...about half of the days out of the week, Victor wouldn't be there. But then, the other half, he would show up.

Dr. Ward: What kind of stuff would the two of you talk about?

Tommy: You know, like I said, he'd give life advice, ask me about school, all that good stuff. Just like a regular family member.

Dr. Ward: Was any of the advice he gave ever questionable?

[Pause]

Tommy: Not at *that* time, no.

Dr. Ward: When did it start to get questionable?

Tommy: Well, we'll get to that. So, then of course, like I said before, when I was fifteen, my parents told me that I didn't have an uncle named 'Victor'. Or an uncle in general.

Dr. Ward: How come that took two years?

Tommy: That's a good question. I have no idea. I mean, there was this idea planted in my head that my parents knew Victor, and also that they knew he came fishing with me from time-to-time.

Dr. Ward: 'Planted'? Sort of like your recognition of Victor?

Tommy: Precisely. So, anyway, as I mentioned earlier, my father had the idea that this 'Uncle Victor' guy was some sex offender, and so he forbade me from going fishing, anymore. And then he went to the police about it, got the neighborhood watch in on a manhunt. [Pause] We didn't even have one guy...ONE GUY in our neighborhood with the name 'Victor'.

And then, when my dad found that out, he found that there was only one guy in the neighborhood across from ours who had the name 'Victor'. He was some 30-year-old, didn't fit my description. My dad figured Victor was using another name so he wouldn't get caught.

Dr. Ward: So, your parents were really determined to find this guy, huh?

Tommy: Mhmm.

Dr. Ward: Did they ever find him?

[Long silence]

Dr. Ward: What?

Tommy: You think Victor was some child molester, too, huh?

Dr. Ward: It sounds like that's the case, Tommy.

Tommy: Hmm...well, think what you want, but there's more to this than a surface-level explanation such as that.

Dr. Ward: All right, then. Continue.

[Pause]

Dr. Ward: What are you looking at?

Tommy: That photo. On your desk. Is that your husband?

Dr. Ward: Um, yeah it is.

Tommy: Hmm. [Pause] Let me ask you something.

Dr. Ward: Sure.

Tommy: Do you believe in an afterlife?

Dr. Ward: We're Catholic. Mhmm.

Tommy: [Laughs] Oh, boy. That is rich.

Dr. Ward: You don't believe in an afterlife?

Tommy: I didn't say that. I also didn't say anything about *belief*. As a matter -

[Inaudible for seven seconds. This distortion is in the audio tape as obtained from Matlock State Hospital]

Tommy: ...on that, later. In fact, the only one in this room that is exercising belief—or the lack thereof—is you. I am telling you what I *know*. In turn, you choose whether or not to believe it.

Dr. Ward: [Laughs] Well, okay. Tommy, I'd like to hear more about your situation. What happened after? What was the aftermath of your parents, uh, finding out about Victor?

Tommy: So, I believe I mentioned they forbade me from fishing down at that dock, any longer.

Dr. Ward: Correct.

Tommy: Right. Well, a few weeks—or maybe it was a month—went by. And, you know, I had no friends. Like I said, I was a loner. So, without the fishing activity every day after school, I was bored out of my mind. Sure, I had video games and all of that, but after a while, it was maddening.

Dr. Ward: Right, right.

Tommy: So, one day, about a month later, I came home from school. I played video games until dinner, and then played more video games after. It's about... 10 o'clock now. My parents were both asleep. I'm sitting at home, and I suddenly think, 'good god, I cannot sit here and play video games any longer. I simply cannot'. So, I got up, I grabbed my fucking fishing pole, got my tackle box, and I snuck out, headed for the pond. And that... [Laughs], *that* is when the real shit started happening.

Dr. Ward: Yeah?

Tommy: Yeah. So, I get to the dock. And to my surprise, standing at the end of the dock, his back to me, looking out at the pond, is Uncle Victor. He had his hands clasped behind his back like an army general, or something. It was weird, not once had he been there, waiting for me. He always showed up *after* I arrived at the pond. So, right off the bat, I knew something was up.

Dr. Ward: He had never once gotten there before you?

Tommy: Not one damn time. Not one. But he did, this time. And even just upon seeing that, I knew something wasn't right. I knew it. So, I just kinda stood there for a few seconds. You know, real sheepish, not really knowing what to do.

I was about to speak, and he must've known I was about to say something, 'cause Uncle Victor sure as hell was gonna have the first word. Still looking out at the pond, he says 'Isn't it beautiful? The moonlight on the water?'

And I said, 'Yeah'. And then there was another long silence, Victor standing there with his back to me, still as a statue. And then he says, 'Where have you been?' And I'm standing there, not knowing what to say, I was just silent. And Victor says, a little louder this time: 'I asked you a question, Tommy'.

So, I started stammering, you know? I didn't wanna bring up my parents thinking he was a sex offender, and shit. So I ended up stammering out something like, 'Oh, I got grounded for playing video games past my bedtime.'

So then Victor says, 'So what? You didn't come and tell me so that I wouldn't show up and be by myself? It's hard fishing alone. Maddening, even.' And so, then I started to say

something, but before I could even start my sentence, Uncle Victor spins around and looks right at me. And when he looked at me...[Shudders]

I had never seen someone make a face like that. It was so angry. I mean, you wanna talk about seeing red? He had hellfire in his eyes. He looked like a viper that was ready to plunge its fangs into something. I swear to god, every one of his facial muscles was contracted to the max. I don't know how I didn't shit myself.

Dr. Ward: What happened next?

Tommy: He charged at me like a rhinoceros, or something. Before I could even flinch, Victor picked me up off of the ground and held me up. And he started shaking me, screaming at me at the top of his lungs. He said 'What kind of disrespect is that?! You insolent little shit!'

The rest is a blur. The rest of what he said, I mean. I just remember crying and crying and crying. He had *never* spoken to me that way, ever. After a while of Victor yelling at me, I just kinda shut my eyes and waited for it to be over. And then...silence.

I opened my eyes, and he was gone. I was just sitting there, ass in the dirt, looking out at the pond. Victor was right, too. That pond did look beautiful. So, after that, I went home, couldn't fall asleep that night, of course. And the next morning, when I woke up, I felt myself sinking into a deep depression.

Dr. Ward: Why were you depressed?

Tommy: Not a clue. No idea. But it lasted for the next five years, all the way through to the present day. I still feel it. I tried suicide a couple times, but I got stopped both times. Guess I suck at killing myself [Laughs].

Dr. Ward: And did you see Victor again during this time?

Tommy: Only once, since that night he screamed at me. I went years without seeing him.

Dr. Ward: And how did you feel about not seeing him?

Tommy: Indifferent. Didn't matter either way. I didn't miss him, nor was I necessarily glad that he was gone. And that, in turn, drove me even more crazy.

Dr. Ward: What did?

Tommy: My own indifference. I felt like a...robot. It was very strange.

Dr. Ward: So, Uncle Victor leaving had nothing to do with your depression, as far as you can tell?

Tommy: Well, I didn't know, you know? I couldn't consciously say, 'yes, this is why I feel depressed'. I was more, just, depressed in general. I didn't eat, I didn't have fun, I didn't smile. Existence became an empty vacuum. It was like...

[Long pause]

Tommy: Existence felt like a long and seemingly endless hallway, in which there would be a door. And I would open that door, only to find that on the other side of that door was just another door. And I would open that one, and that door, too, lead to another door. And so on, and so forth.

Dr. Ward: So, you felt like life didn't yield anything positive?

Tommy: Positive *or* negative. I felt like life didn't yield *anything*. Positive or negative. My indifference to everything...incredibly soul-crushing.

Dr. Ward: I see. That's hard.

Tommy: Mhmm.

Dr. Ward: Would you say it's better, now? Your depression?

Tommy: [Laughs] Are you kidding? Worse. Far worse. But...different. The whole 'hallway of doors' thing...no longer applicable. In fact, it seems silly, now.

Dr. Ward: Why is that?

Tommy: To understand my reasoning for that, you'll need to know about Uncle Victor's most recent visit.

Dr. Ward: Let's hear.

Tommy: I have to warn you, though. Once you hear it, it can't be unheard.

Dr. Ward: Of course. [Laughs] I think I can handle it.

Tommy: Hmm. Your laughter indicates that you don't quite realize the...magnitude of what I am about to tell you.

Dr. Ward: My apologies.

Tommy: But, I do suppose you can make the choice of not believing what I say. As a matter of fact...it might be your best course of action.

Dr. Ward: Is that right?

Tommy: It is correct.

Dr. Ward: Noted. Now, tell me about your Uncle Victor's last visit, if you would.

Tommy: Very well. [Takes deep breath] This was about a month ago. Recently, I'd been going to community college. Hated it. My depression was at an all-time high. I was planning suicide, again. One night, I just couldn't take it. My insomnia was killing me, and nothing was worth a damn anymore. So, I got up and headed down to the pond with a cinderblock in my hands, chained to my ankle. I made sure that chain was TIGHT, too. Real tight. I had to make sure it worked, this time.

So, I get to the pond, and I'm standing at the edge of the dock, right? Doing my Hail-Mary's and my God-forgive-me's. And just as I'm about to toss that cinderblock into the pond, the very SECOND before it slips from my fingers, I hear a familiar voice behind me. 'Tommy!'

And I look over my shoulder. As I live and breathe, it's Uncle Victor. He's standing at the opposite end of the dock, just standing there, staring at me with that wild grin.

Dr. Ward: How did that make you feel? Seeing him again?

Tommy: Uh...for some reason, everything felt fine. I immediately set the cinderblock down on the dock with the utmost care. I no longer felt the urge to kill myself, and I no longer felt sad. But, again, it didn't feel directly connected to Victory, you know? It was more indirect, I guess. As if he had pushed some sort of button that flushed the depression out.

Dr. Ward: I see.

Tommy: And so then Victor says 'Let's get you out of those chains, my boy!' And he walks over, and he touches his fingertips to the chains, and they just...snapped off.

Dr. Ward: Snapped off?

Tommy: Yeah, as if they'd been clipped by chain cutters. But he didn't have a pair on him. He just snapped 'em right off.

Dr. Ward: Uh-huh.

Tommy: I can tell by your expression that you don't believe me. That's...that's okay, that's fine. I don't give a shit.

Dr. Ward: No one's saying that, Tommy. I'm just trying to make sense of it, that's all.

Tommy: The problem is, your version of ‘sense’, of what is ‘real’, is fundamentally flawed. You can’t make sense of what I’m saying until I have reprogrammed your notion of ‘sense’. There’s much you do not know.

Dr. Ward: Enlighten me, please.

Tommy: Okay.

[Long Silence]

Tommy: One second.

Dr. Ward: Take your time.

[Long Silence]

Tommy: So, you know, then I was all like ‘Uncle Victor! Where have you been all this time?’ And he says ‘I’ve always been with you, Tommy!’ And I said, ‘No, no you haven’t!’ And he’s like, ‘Yes I have! Just because you can’t see me doesn’t mean I’m not here. I’m always here, Tommy.’ And he gives me a hug, and...yeah, it was a heartfelt family reunion, gotta say.

Then, he looks into my eyes, and he says...[Laughs], ‘I sense that you’re upset with me, Tommy.’ And I was like, ‘Well, you were deadbeat for five years, you know?’ And Victor looks down at the ground, looking like he’s thinking things over. And after a minute, he looks at me with the most BEAMING smile ever. And this one—and this was the only time I can say for sure—this smile was the only time he smiled and didn’t have that hint of deviousness in his smile. It was completely and utterly warm and inviting.

And so, he’s beaming at me, and he says ‘Tommy, I know just what we’ll do!’ And I said, ‘What?’ And Victor says, ‘I’ll take you home with me! It’ll be lots of fun! I’ll spoil you, too!’ And I said ‘You mean it?’ And he says to me, ‘Of course!’

[Pause]

Dr. Ward: And did you go with him?

Tommy: Mhmm. I sure did.

Dr. Ward: Where was his house?

Tommy: Oh, man. That’s a whole other conversation in and of itself. We’ll get to that, though, I assure you.

[Pause]

Tommy: Um, question.

Dr. Ward: Uh-huh?

Tommy: You ever been to Springfield? The town, Springfield? It's about 45 minutes down the road?

Dr. Ward: I have, yeah. Couple times.

[Pause]

Dr. Ward: Why?

Tommy: Ever do any work over there? Clinical psychology?

Dr. Ward: No, I've only visited.

Tommy: Well, if you do enough digging, you can find some files from a therapist named Georgia Roana. They're dated back to... '99, I think. Some of them, earlier than that. I think the originals were burned, and I think SHE burned them. But if you hop on the deep web...they're there.

Dr. Ward: What's significant about them? About the files?

Tommy: Well, you remember how earlier I asked you if you'd ever had other patients talk about 'Uncle Victor'?

Dr. Ward: Uh-huh.

Tommy: Well, if you look into the Roana files, you'll find that SHE has. She's had patients talk about 'Uncle Victor', several of them. She ended up burning the hard copies, but only after they'd been leaked. And eventually, she ended up seeking psychiatric treatment for herself.

Dr. Ward: How do you know this?

Tommy: I know everything. I'm the merchant of truth, you could say.

Dr. Ward: Hmm. I've never heard of the Roana files.

Tommy: Look into it. Yeah, look into it. [Pause] Anyway, the reason I ask is because there's a fundamental difference between MY experiences with Uncle Victor, and the experiences of her patients.

[Pause]

Dr. Ward: Which is?

Tommy: See, they had caught onto Uncle Victor's malevolence earlier than I. And once that happens, you can bet that one will deny an invitation to Victor's house. But, as I previously stated, I had yet to catch onto it by the time Victor invited me to his domain. None of Roana's patients—not a single one—reported going home with Uncle Victor. Not one.

Dr. Ward: You say 'Uncle Victor's malevolence'. What do you mean?

Tommy: We'll get there, yeah. We'll get there. [Pause] So...with that being said, let's get back to my story.

Dr. Ward: Right.

Tommy: So, I started following Uncle Victor. He lead me off of the dock and back into the forest. Usually, to get back to my house, I'd hang a right onto this path. But this time, we go left. We got out of the forest and walked out onto this road. I recognized the road, nothing unusual so far. I figured, *hey, he must live in a nearby neighborhood.*

So, then, we keep walking down this road, all the way past this 'Dead End' sign. And so, I'm thinking *where the hell's he taking me?* We walk off, past the end of the street, through a field and into some woods. I keep asking 'Where's your house? Where's your house?' And he just tells me, 'We're almost there.'

After a while, though, Victor was the one who started growing impatient. He starts rushing me, saying 'Hurry up, walk faster, pick up the pace.' That smile on his face...it's fading. So, then, we get to the edge of the forest, and there's this beautiful meadow. It's all moonlit, and everything, really beautiful at night.

Dr. Ward: And you'd never been there before?

Tommy: No, not at all. I had no idea where we were. And in the middle of this meadow was this nice little cottage. It was like something out of a Disney movie, I swear to god. There was even a chimney. [Laughs] It was like...Snow White, or some shit. And I'm about to comment on how beautiful it is, but Uncle Victor says, with a scowl, 'Come on, let's go. What are you standing there for?' So, I start following him across the field. I have no idea what he's so uptight about, right now. But, you know, here I am, still not feeling depressed, so I just kept following him.

We get to the cottage, and he beckons me inside. I walked in, and it was the strangest thing, ever; from the outside, the cottage looked small, you know? Like, you know, like a little cottage. But when we got inside, the place looked like a mansion. It made no sense. But because of this, I was just awestruck, you know? I mean, it must've been twenty-thousand square feet. On the outside, the place looked like some little Snow White cottage, but on the inside, it looked like the castle from Beauty and the Beast, or something.

So, Victor closes the door behind us. And I said, 'Wow, this is something.' And he looks at me, and...there's that grin, again. He smiles at me, but this time, that smile was about one-hundred percent devious. I could almost see the wheels turning inside his head. And he looks at me like this, and he says: 'Follow me'.

So, I follow him down this long and seemingly endless corridor. It's so long that, after a while, I look back from where I came, but I can only see a dark void. This hallway must have been a mile long. And...[Pause] I'm sorry, I don't like the way you're looking at me.

Dr. Ward: I'm sorry, how...how do you mean?

Tommy: Like you're passing judgement. If I'm going to tell you about my experience, I'm not going to be looked upon like some madman on a street corner.

Dr. Ward: My apologies, I have no intention of offending you.

Tommy: Okay.

[Long Silence]

Tommy: Anyway, so I'm following Victor down this hallway. And I keep asking him, you know, 'Where are we going? Where are we going?' And he looks back at me with that grin, says 'I can't spoil the surprise!' He says, 'Don't you like surprises? You never snuck downstairs on Christmas morning, Tommy. Not once! So, I know you like surprises!'

For what must have been thirty minutes, we continued down this hallway. At the end of this insanely long hallway was a massive double-door. Big, brass doors. And Uncle Victor looks back at me, and he's smiling and he raises his eyebrows up and down wildly, and he says 'Are ya ready, kid?' And I said 'Yes'. And he pulls this set of keys out of his pocket. Must have been, like, fifty keys on that keyring. And he unlocks the doors, and he opens them.

[Long Silence]

Dr. Ward: What...what was there?

Tommy: Well, there was this massive chamber. There were candles all over the walls, marble pillars, tile, all of that. Lot of really nice furniture, there was this huge collection of marionette puppets along one of the walls. And then, Victor leads me across the chamber, to this other door. This door's a little smaller, like a regular door.

And Victor looks back at me, and he does the thing with his eyebrows, again. And he says, 'You're really ready?' And I'm like, 'I guess'. He takes out the keyring, again. He unlocks the door, opens it up.

What I saw next...[Shudders]

Dr. Ward: What did you see?

Tommy: Hopelessness. The truth, which is this: nothing yields anything. Anything we ultimately do, any decision we ultimately make...is for naught.

[Pause]

Dr. Ward: Can you explain?

Tommy: Beyond that doorway, I saw an endless maze of corridors. A labyrinth, if you will. The ground was made up of dust, and the walls were covered in dust, and the whole place smelled of dust, musty as could be. And wandering this labyrinth were the dead. Old souls, young souls...all souls. They walked through the darkness, but like moths to a flame, they all stopped and looked up when Victor opened that door and let in some light.

They all just stopped and looked, you know? Like, they were frozen like statues. And they just stared with this look of shock and despair, like deer in headlights. Then, Uncle Victor peeped his head in through the doorway, and he said 'Count me among thy saints'.

And they all just stared back at him with these sheepish expressions, not saying ANYTHING. No one said a damn thing. And among them were every single kind of person imaginable; young, old, black, white, brown, you name it.

Dr. Ward: How many people were there?

Tommy: That labyrinth looked to be miles long. Because what we were looking at was just one single level of the labyrinth. It stretched far and wide, more levels went up toward the sky, and for miles down into the depths of the earth. To answer your question: there WERE billions of people when I was there. But as for the people that have been, are, and WILL be there...infinite.

[Long Silence]

Dr. Ward: I...I don't understand.

Tommy: This place, this labyrinth...it is the netherworld that awaits every living person. No matter who one is or what one does in this life, sooner or later, he will be taken to Victor's labyrinth to wander through darkness. [Pause] Uncle Victor's playhouse [Laughs].

After that, Uncle Victor brought me back to the dock, but before I went home, he winked at me and he said 'See ya soon, kiddo.'

Dr. Ward: [Takes deep breath] Um...er...

[Pause]

Tommy: You wanted to know. Now you know.

Dr. Ward: Well, Tommy...it's clear you're, uh...

[Pause]

Dr. Ward: [Clears throat] 'Scuse me. Um. [Pause] Tommy, it's clear you're going through a lot, mentally, right now. Uh, we're gonna have to wrap this session, um...anything else you wanna say?

Tommy: [Laughs] I can see I've struck a chord.

Dr. Ward: Okay, so, I think this session is -

Tommy: I thought I said that not believing me would be your best course of action. But it seems to me, from your sudden nervousness, that you do believe me, at least partially.

Dr. Ward: [To guard outside] Guard!

Tommy: What's wrong, doc? Don't like when other people do a psychological evaluation of you?

Dr. Ward: You're not well, okay? [To guard outside] Hey!

Tommy: Who are you yelling to?

Dr. Ward: The guard out there...[To guard outside] Hello?

Tommy: He can't hear you. You know why? Because I've deemed it so.

Dr. Ward: Oh my god...your...

[Long Silence]

Tommy: Hmm?

Dr. Ward: Your eyes. What's happening to your eyes?

[Pause]

Dr. Ward: Holy fu - [Pause] They're glowing...they're orange.

Tommy: It's hellfire. The hellfire that I've seen. You're seeing what I've seen.

Dr. Ward: Holy shit. Somebody help! Somebody!

Tommy: Rachel, didn't you listen to what I told you? There's no 'HELP'! Nobody to help. No cavalry coming over the hill to save you, or I, or ANYBODY. There's just me, you...and Uncle Victor, too.

Dr. Ward: [Panicked] Hello? Anyone?

Tommy: Now, if you'll excuse me. My uncle is waiting for me.

Dr. Ward: Oh my g - [Pause] Oh my god!

[Dr. Ward screaming]

[Burning sound]

Dr. Ward: Someone! He's on fire! HELP!

[Dr. Ward screaming]

TAPE ENDS

Good night.