

Short Horror Tales

Book Bundle 3

By
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Introduction

Welcome to my third omnibus of *Short Horror Tales*. In this collection of tales we have:

An expert assassin sent on a lethal job which may turn out to be his last... Since his supernatural target will prove very hard to kill...

A legendary ghostly horseman. Believed to be mere superstition by some, this creature will slay anyone who enters its territory at night...

And we can join a man who rushes to help his friend, only to discover a terrible secret – and the truth behind the folk tales of trolls.

Ian Thompson
December 2016

Kill Him, Slowly

“Kill him, Slowly.”

Everyone who hires me to do a job says those words. They can't resist it. Not many of my employers appreciate having to call me 'Mr Slowly' – but they all enjoy the punch line.

Funnily enough, I never do kill slowly. I don't believe in causing undue suffering. I'll end a life because someone pays, and I'll do it however they'd like it done. Killing slowly or torturing a target goes against my personal code, so does killing a minor or a pregnant woman. Don't think I'm squeamish, I'm not – I'm just a professional.

I've been Mr Slowly since I turned twenty-two, some eleven years ago. During that time, I've completed a hundred and seventy-two contracts. Including bodyguards belonging to targets, I've deleted three hundred and four people. I've shot, stabbed, garrotted, fought hand-to-hand... done virtually everything, including devising creative accidents. If I was a chess player instead of an assassin, I'd be considered a Grand Master. As it stands, I'm a Grand Master of Death.

Who is Mr Slowly, though? Really? I am, all the time. Any other name I use is part of a disguise. My birth name was 'Marty Forely' – but Marty is long dead and forgotten to me now. Marty was a kid who got his sandwiches stolen in school, who hated violence, sucked at sports and loved video games. I discarded the identity of Marty like a snake shedding a skin. Mr Slowly is who I am and who I was always meant to be.

* * *

My new target was a millionaire.

My employer spoke to me anonymously over the dark net, that sublevel of the internet used by shadowy members of society. She was a woman who had a grievance. I stopped her before she went into detail – firstly, because such information might reveal her identity; secondly, because I didn't care. Your mailman doesn't care why you want a box delivered – he does it to get paid... I don't care why you want someone dead – I just want to get paid.

She gave me the address, which was three miles outside the city. A secluded mansion amid forty acres of gardens. There might be tight security to contend with. The target, Joshua J. Woods, was alleged to enjoy the company of high-class hookers. When I went in, my employer wanted everyone dead: Woods, his guards and any hookers who might be there. Then I was to start a fire before I left.

I asked for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. She haggled... upwards... and argued the job was worth four hundred thousand to her. It wouldn't have been chivalrous to argue, so I accepted. The money was transferred in a few minutes and I made a promise to have her target dead within seven days.

She ended the conversation overjoyed: a promise from Mr Slowly is a death sentence. I never fail.

The last thing she said was predictable:

“Oh, and one last thing. Kill him, Slowly.”

* * *

Two days should have given me ample time to do my background research.

In my business, you had to know your target first and the chosen location second. Nothing is more dangerous than a target you don't know or a place that holds secrets.

Joshua J. Woods had done for investment banking what magicians often do for their beautiful sidekicks. He'd put hundreds of millions of pensions and invested savings into a secure place... and it had all miraculously vanished. Four years of his whizz-kid lawyers working their own kind of magic, and Woods had emerged free of any criminal charges. And, unlike many of his investors, he hadn't been destitute. The mansion was just one of eleven luxury homes he had across the globe.

It was targets like Woods who brought a sense of real job satisfaction to being a murderer. If I kill you, I'll take responsibility for your murder if I'm caught. Woods had destroyed tens of thousands of lives by being a slimy, underhanded bastard. I relished the thought of ending him.

Weirdly, beyond his history as a crooked businessman, I could find nothing on Woods. No history before his first investment company appeared on the scene in 2001. No family, place of birth, education, previous jobs, or medical records... Zero. In 2001, Woods and his company had apparently been dropped onto the earth from space. This impressed me. I can get records which few people even dream of looking for – Woods was my first target for whom there were no records to

find.

The only information I unearthed made the situation stranger still. Woods had never entered his company offices: everything had been done by the internet or by phone; perhaps, rarely, senior employees had visited him at one of his homes, but I had no such reports. No one even knew what Woods looked like. The millionaire was a recluse who refused to attend events of any kind. He'd never had a photo taken in his life. When I attempted to hunt down an old lover, I found he had apparently had none. Nor did any of the high class escort agencies know of him. The man was a ghost. An enigma.

I usually have a thick file prepared on a target before I go in to kill him or her. In Woods' case, I wouldn't have known who he was if he passed me on the street. Heck, I didn't even know how old he was.

Researching the mansion, I grew mildly annoyed by another mystery. Every record and blueprint for the building had been 'lost'. No one knew the architect or who had been commissioned for the build. Neither did anyone know which company had fitted out the interior. All I had was an address.

A mystery man living in a mystery house.

Soon to be a corpse in a smouldering ruin.

* * *

For three days and nights, I scrutinised the Woods property.

In essence, there were three parts. At the heart was Woods' home. Around this were the inner gardens, bordered by a six-foot high red brick wall that formed a square a thousand yards wide. Beyond the wall were the huge outer gardens.

Again, more mystery.

The fence and gates surrounding the property were similar to any you would find around a farmer's fields. This wouldn't hinder paparazzi, thieves or people like myself from looking into or entering the outer gardens. More importantly, no one from the house ever went for a walk in those fantastic gardens, with their beds of gorgeous flowers, ornate fountains and sinuous gravel pathways... So why expend money on a designer and the floral and stone ornamentation in the first place? Plus, the ongoing maintenance work by visiting contractors each day must have been costly.

Clashing against the luxury of the gardens was the starkness of the brick wall square. There were numerous doors and gateways through the wall, the widest being at the front: a pair of wrought iron gates set over the tarmac road running between the highway outside and the mansion itself.

From a hill a mile away, I was able to spy beyond the wall and into the inner gardens. There were no flowers there: just a sweep of dull lawns. *Why have a house that looked onto boring lawns... then amazing gardens hidden behind a six-foot wall?*

Woods' mansion itself was in a T-shape and was constructed from more red brick, topped off with terracotta tiles on the angled rooftops. I'd seen more attractive-looking warehouses.

The bottom part of the T was a one-storey section, about thirty feet wide and eighty feet long. There was a pair of double-doors at the front of this and several windows along the sides. Cars were parked either side; two black limos and a variety of vehicles belonging to security staff. Regular glimpses of guards through the windows of this section of the house indicated it was solely for the security team.

The crosspiece of the T-shape was much larger: three storeys high, and measuring around two hundred yards wide by fifty across. Although there were windows on every floor, these ones proved fake upon examination by binoculars: instead of glass, the 'windows' held dull plate steel. Evidently, Mr Woods wasn't a fan of light – or fresh air for that matter. No second doorway into the house existed, so the only way to reach the main, rear part of the building was through the front doors.

Security consisted of several layers. Five Dobermans were left to run through the outer gardens at night – no one (man or animal) checked those gardens during daylight. CCTV cameras were situated along the walls of the inner garden, recording activity in both sets of gardens. Day and night, seven security guards patrolled the inner gardens. These guards worked in three teams of two men, each pair walking a Doberman; and a seventh man – a real big son-of-a-bitch – who roamed alone. I guessed there were at least two of those big guys, since there was always one on patrol, any time of the day.

By observation, I found the guards were on eight hour shifts. At each shift-change, twelve men left and twelve more arrived. Only the big guys never left: evidently, they lived on the estate. Shifts of a dozen men equated to the six I saw patrolling outside and six inside, monitoring the CCTV feeds

and waiting on standby. Plus, the giants.

The night before I was going in, a limo left the property and returned with four prostitutes. Even from a distance, I could tell the girls were street hookers – not the upper class kind I had expected and tried to track down. The girls went through the double doors of the mansion and remained inside that night and throughout the following day.

As evening began to draw in, I hoped the four girls would be sent home. They were just bystanders in what was going to befall Woods, his guards and his mansion. If the girls got out in time, I wouldn't need to kill them.

Eight o'clock arrived and the girls were still inside. Which meant they had to die. I didn't feel any true sorrow – it was merely an unnecessary feature of the job.

The sorrow would come the next night, when I lay in bed reliving what I had done. I knew I would see each and every face in perfect detail. Looks of surprise, disbelief and pleading. All the blood. All the death. It would be a night of hell, when my normally-suppressed emotions raged at me. For days after, I'd convince myself I was finished and would never accept another job. Then I'd come to my senses, and Mr Slowly would log onto the internet and post himself as available for contracts... After all, what else was I going to do? Bakers bake. Singers sing. Killers kill.

End Of Sample

The Burning Rider

“If the Burning Rider is just a dumb fairy tale,” stated Jane tersely, “...why has no one lived in Lydchurch for over three hundred years?”

Five of us were crowded around the table in the roadside cafe. Two were heavily-biased against the idea of a legendary, ghostly figure of vengeance; one was a stalwart believer in all things supernatural; one didn't care and just wanted to make money. And then there was me. I've been called a debunker of the supernatural, because on numerous occasions I've revealed hoaxes or discovered non-supernatural causes. Really, I'm just an open-minded guy who seeks out the truth of a situation – I'd be happy if the truth was a ghost rather than a charlatan or some natural event.

The two sceptics were Nadia Palin and Tim Jordan.

Nadia was a Professor of History, dividing her time between lectures at a university and writing books on archaeology. She was a tall, wiry, hatchet-faced woman in her late fifties; her grey hair was as wild as her tongue was sarcastic. To the Professor, everything was black and white, proven or fake, and she accepted no middle ground. Nadia considered the subject of the supernatural to be an insult to her superior intellect, although this hadn't stopped her from being paid to visit Lydchurch. Just being in the presence of this tweed-suited egotist made me want to strangle her.

Tim Jordan was Nadia's opposite in demeanour. One of those really nice guys who would like to explain, in quite a jolly manner, that you were wrong and he was always right. Tim was much shorter than his co-sceptic, no more than five foot two, and his well-muscled bulk was testing the tensile strength of the casual denim clothing he wore – jeans and a jacket, and a cowboy-style shirt underneath. The baldness of his head was more than made up for by the bushiness of his heavy ginger beard. Gold rings on most of his fingers and a thick gold chain around his neck told of the man's considerable wealth. Tim had emigrated from Texas to the UK a few years ago, retiring in his sixtieth year from a career as a TV Presenter – he'd been famous for a series of historical documentaries. Whereas Nadia was here for the money and esteem, Tim was here to break the boredom of retirement.

Jane Wolfe, our solitary Believer, was the youngest member of the party. In her mid-twenties and a few years out of university, she bore the attitude of a downtrodden crusader. Almost as tall as Nadia, Jane possessed the slim, toned body of a gym regular. Her hair was cut to shoulder length and was of an odd, dyed red; her face could once have been beautiful, with intelligent green eyes, high cheekbones and lips which possessed a natural pout. Unfortunately, anger had twisted Jane's former beauty, and made her one of those people you quickly knew could be trouble. She was ready to argue at an instant's notice and was near-fanatical in her determination to be proven right. To Jane, you were either a supporter or an enemy.

Cavendish McFarley was the greedy member of our little group. Avarice seemed to glimmer from every detail of his being. Cav – I called him Cav, much to his horror – wore a three-piece, dark blue Savile Row suit that was ridiculous for the kind of journey we were making. He had a diamond-encrusted gold tie pin; a thick diamond-and-gold right earring; several gold teeth; and a gold pinky ring on his left hand. His shoes were of hand-sewn Italian leather. The sole useful item of clothing he had brought was a deerstalker hat, a la Sherlock Holmes – this covered his slicked-back silvery hair and would have kept his head warm. Cav possessed a gelatinous figure, grown by overindulgence. His soft, pudgy hands looked never to have worked except for shovelling food into his oversized maw. A triple-chinned neck was about to explode from Cav's shirt collar and snap his gaudy silk tie. Tiny, piggy eyes in his rounded face gleamed with desire.

Cav's desire was money. He was a land agent, and in a position to buy up the Lydchurch area for a song. At some stage, Cav had mentioned to us plans of building a series of sprawling homes. If things went right, he'd make more millions. The one obstacle in his way was the question of why no one wanted the land – and hadn't wanted it for three hundred years. Our visit to Lydchurch was to convince Cav that the legend of the Burning Rider was an old wives' tale, so he could go on to make his millions. The greedy businessman had, of course, stacked the deck in his favour: bringing just one Believer and three people he thought would be keen to disprove the legend.

I guess I was the joker in his pack. I neither believed nor disbelieved. I'd go and see for myself and decide. However, out of a sense of fairness to Jane, and a spiteful wish to annoy Cav, I chose to offer support to the Believing cause whenever I could.

At the time of our roadside meeting, I had three books out (two disproving a pair of hauntings; the third exposing the frauds behind a famous Haunted House TV show – which had killed the show). I'd also written sixty articles on the supernatural, science and history. I was thirty-four, in

reasonably good shape except for a slight chocolate-induced paunch, and was going through a scruffy phase. My hair was a little long; I'd needed a shave a day ago; my jacket, jeans and Hawaiian shirt had all seen better times. Plus, the phase included wearing a baseball cap all the time – don't ask me why, I can't recall.

Tim Jordan had just launched into a wonderfully kind explanation to Jane of how young, foolish, inexperienced and in need of mentoring she was. Jane was gripping her coffee cup almost tight enough to shatter it. I sipped my own coffee and weighed in.

"Sorry, Tim, but you're kinda full of shit."

His gentle eyes almost popped out of his head. Nadia bristled at his side, ready to erupt. I just continued.

"You see..." I tried to emulate his nice, condescending tone. "There are over six hundred recorded pieces of data supporting that 'something' is badly wrong in the Lydchurch area. Many describe a man on a horse, on fire, attacking and killing people at night. You can't dismiss all that with a ho-ho-ho and a smile."

I think Jane probably would have kissed me then. The look of joy in her eyes diminished all the bitchiness of her usual expression.

Nadia jumped in, words coming out like staccato gunfire. "There's been not one reported incident in the last thirty years!"

I countered: "Yeah, but since no one was living in the area during that time, there aren't gonna be any reports, are there? We haven't had many reports from the far side of the moon, either."

Sitting back from the table, Cav watched us. Dismay mixed with the glimmers of greed in his little eyes.

Nadia gave a very unladylike snort. "All beside the point. The bulk of the reports come from far more superstitious times. People nowadays don't believe in ghosts and goblins."

Jane got a nice strike in: "Similarly, people never used to believe in gravity, evolution, electricity and so on. What is required is open minds exploring Lydchurch scientifically, looking for answers rather than making conclusions before we even arrive!"

The statement could have been my own – it fitted my own feelings – however, I knew Jane was as guilty of prejudging as Nadia and Tim.

"Perhaps," Cav interjected in his soft, weary tones, "that's how we should conduct ourselves."

Nadia turned on Cav and opened her mouth to argue. Then she remembered who was paying our fees. Her lips closed.

"Good for you, Cav," I said. I savoured his wince at me calling him 'Cav' again. "We should call a truce, drink up, finish our sandwiches, and head off to get things started."

Cav actually applauded me. It looked ludicrous.

"Excellent, Jimmy! Let's be a great team and enjoy ourselves."

"Yes," I agreed. Next, I faked a laugh. "And everyone remember. If there really is a Burning Rider and he appears and starts to hunt us down... We don't have to outrun *him*, we just have to outrun one other member of the team!"

Cav's jaw dropped at the idea. "How very droll."

* * *

A real scientific expedition would have set up in Lydchurch and stayed for at least a week. Cav's interests, of course, weren't scientific. He just wanted the team to sign off on having seen nothing, so he could buy the property and show his business partners that the dumb ghost legend was nothing to worry about. So we were going to visit Lydchurch for a single night, arriving at nine o'clock, after the summer sun had gone down, and probably quitting by midnight. If the clear weather changed to rain, we might leave sooner. Poor Jane really wasn't going to get a fair chance.

At five past eight, we left the cafe and all got aboard the university minibus which Nadia had borrowed. It was a twelve-seater, and the passenger compartment had sliding doors on both sides and a pair of back doors behind the rear four seats. Nadia took the driving seat and no one else dared to join her up front. We all buckled-up: Tim and Jane each choosing one of the two double-seats behind Nadia; me taking the single seat located left of Jane; and Cav keeping the four back seats to himself. I was a little concerned about Nadia driving, as her temperament was so volatile that another argument could have her veering off the road.

Looking back, if Nadia had crashed us on the way to Lydchurch, things could have turned out a lot better. Certainly, more of us might have lived to see the next sunrise.

* * *

Cav broke the awkward silence after five minutes of travel. He addressed Jane, who was sitting in front of him and to the right.

“So, Jane, can you fill me in on the meat-and-potatoes of this legend? All I’ve heard was a spooky tale from the local real estate people. Sounded like something from an old movie.”

Jane frowned for a few seconds. It was hard to believe that Cav would set up this expedition without doing any research himself. I reckon we both concluded he was just making conversation.

“Well, proven history shows there was a thriving smuggling community in Lydchurch in the 1820’s. On certain nights, villagers would light bonfires on the beach a mile away across the marshes. Ships would come in and drop off all kinds of contraband by boat. The goods were hidden all over the area, in caves in the cliffs, in cellars, in barns, and even buried in coffins in the churchyard.

“The customs and excise men tried to crack the smugglers’ ring for years. They ran around in circles and were made to look like bloody fools. Occasionally things got nasty. Smugglers and soldiers would clash, and the fights were brutal and merciless. When a bunch of villagers were killed on a beach one night in 1826, other villagers took revenge in a series of ambushes.” She paused and offered an explanation. “You see, these village folk weren’t simply criminals. They were poor people, taxed to the point of starvation – smuggling was a way of feeding their families and striking back against the rich. The customs and excise men were ruthless thugs who enjoyed their work.

“After the ambushes, a Captain Hargreaves was brought in to crush the smugglers. He was a murderous son-of-a-bitch. His first act was to take three villagers at random and hang them outside the village church. Then he arrested a bunch of suspects and took them away for torture. Everyone in the village knew it was the end for them. They all decided to leave one night – but not without a final act of defiance. Hargreaves was kidnapped and taken to Lydchurch... His soldiers found him the next day, in the centre of the silent, empty village: he’d been tied to a stake, surrounded by kindling and burned alive.”

Cav gave a murmured “Oh... my... God.”

“Now we drift into legend,” Jane went on. “Stories say Hargreaves’ spirit could not find peace and went insane. A week after his death came the first reports of a Burning Rider – a glowing spectre which killed anything in the vicinity of Lydchurch. He first slew his own men, maybe because they failed to protect him. Soldiers were found, butchered or beheaded, their corpses scorched. Travellers crossing the area at night were attacked and massacred. Nothing was ever stolen, so suspicions that the killings were made by some remaining villagers or robbers were soon dismissed. The area was abandoned...”

If Cav expected the story to end there, he was wrong.

“Twenty years later, people who had lost their homes elsewhere tried to move into Lydchurch. They were slaughtered on the first night. Investigations were made and a number of soldiers posted in the area were slain at night. Once more, the region was abandoned... Over the next decades, distant glimpses were made of a blazing figure on horseback at night. People continued to shun the area... And the cycle would repeat. The legend would be forgotten or dismissed after a while and people would venture into Lydchurch again. Those intruders would die and the area was soon vacated. No killers were ever caught. Investigations were soon shelved.”

“Even in more modern times?” Cav asked.

“Oh, yes. There were similar incidents before and after World War One. During the Second World War, the authorities briefly tried to make Lydchurch a location for evacuees from London – because of the Blitz: after a dozen deaths, they gave up. Holidaymakers wandered near Lydchurch in the fifties, sixties and seventies, and were found butchered and scorched. You can look up all of these unsolved murders. During the eighties, the government made the Lydchurch area off-limits due to a so-called biological contamination. During the nineties, the area became a nature reserve, which no one was allowed to enter. These were just excuses to save lives...”

“Unfortunately, in the Twenty-First Century, we’re back around to the disbelieving part of the cycle. Greedy people are wondering why they can’t make money from the land.” Jane paused awkwardly, remembering she was speaking to one of those people. “So I’m afraid we may be due for more deaths.”

A nasty, bitter laugh came from the front of the minibus.

“I take it you disagree, Nadia?” said Cavendish.

“Unfortunately for Miss Wolfe, reality is not some gothic Hammer Horror movie. The fact is,

Lydchurch has been abandoned for a long time. Unsavoury characters have used the ridiculous legend to cover their crimes. Successive Police forces have been too lazy to properly investigate an isolated location, or have suffered at the hands of criminals when they made small efforts. Lydchurch is about as supernatural as my arse!”

“I doubt anything would want to haunt your scrawny arse,” Jane snapped back.

I had to choke down laughter. *Score another one to the Believers.*

The vehicle zigzagged sharply and I recalled my worries about Nadia driving. I was relieved when the course straightened.

Before Nadia could vent her rising anger, Tim offered his own brand of wisdom.

“What I can’t understand, Jane,” he drawled, “is this: if you believe a murderous spirit is on the rampage, why are you coming with us tonight? Don’t you believe we’ll all be killed?”

Jane smiled quite maliciously. “I believe many of you might. You won’t believe in the Rider until it’s too late... I intend to collect photographic evidence of him and get the fuck out of Lydchurch before he slices me to pieces.”

Tim was taken aback. “Oh. I see. Well, it’s good that you have a plan.”

Cav looked like he might be sick.

End Of Sample

Troll

It was 9:05 PM when my iPhone received the panicky email from David Marshel.

I tried to call him five times during the next half-hour. Each time, he either didn't pick up or wasn't near enough to his phone to hear it ring.

By 10 PM, I was in my car, starting a four hundred mile journey back to the city of my birth.

The man who had been one of my best friends when I was six, and right through every day of my school life, was in trouble. We had stopped speaking to each other on his twenty-fourth birthday, some eight years ago – but I forgot all those silent years when I heard he needed help. I doubt very much that he would have done the same for me, but loyalty has always been one of my strongest characteristics, and one of my heaviest burdens.

The email had read:

‘Steve, I think Tom’s in deep shit.’ I could have guessed the message was from David just by the perfect punctuation – the emails I get from most other people are encoded into gibberish. ‘He’s locked up in that house of his. Won’t see anyone. Won’t answer the phone... And he’s been acting really weird over the last few months. Could be on drugs again or it could be something worse. The last time I saw him, he was all hazy and strange, and talking about killing himself. I thought it was drunken bullshit talk... But now, I dunno. I’m scared. I think you’re the only one who could get through to him. Maybe you can make him see sense and get into rehab again. I know you two haven’t spoken for ages, but please come and try. Please, Steve, get down here fast.’

I had no choice. I got down there fast.

* * *

It’s amazing how much some people change during their school years.

My earliest recollections are of being a small, skinny kid who the bullies loved to pick on. I was quiet and usually sick most of the time – everything from flu to chicken pox, with just brief healthy spells in-between. When a new kid was added to the class, from a family who had just moved in from LA, he quickly became my best friend. Tom Howard was big and tough-as-nails. He fought the bullies off and changed my life for the better.

The strange thing was, Tom and I weren’t alike at all. I was a white kid, into old Rock’N’Roll music, building model aeroplanes and learning about anything mechanical or electrical. Tom was black and a hardcore rap enthusiast, who ate like a horse and was fond of just lazing around. Most people couldn’t understand how the two of us ever got to be buddies. Part of it was because we had a similar sense of humour – we could make each other laugh until it bordered on hysteria; part was because we were both outcasts – me being the skinny wimp and him being the new kid in school.

By the time we were thirteen, we had a third mutual friend, David Marshel. His family had transferred into our area after their dairy farm failed. David was naive, a little slow, and in sports he had the coordination of a dead cockroach. Many kids thought he was stupid. Tom and I liked him for his openness and zany humour. The three of us got on amazingly well. We had fun together, looked out for each other and got into trouble together; hell, we even spent a night together in a police cell, but that’s another story.

In the last year of school, Tom and I were vastly different from when we first met. I’d shot up in height, beanpole-style, and gained muscle from all the hours spent working at my dad’s car repair shop. Tom had stopped growing at five-foot-four and his lazy attitude had produced a doughy build. It was now me who fought off any bullies. David had grown into a larger version of the new kid we first met – wide-eyed, freckle-faced and crowned with a blonde mop of hair; only now, he was trying to urge some weedy stubble to grow into a beard.

Our lives took us in different directions. I went to work full-time in the repair-shop and studied Engineering at night. Tom took a job in a supermarket – he could have aimed for something more lucrative, but wanted a job he saw as “easy and low stress”. David became a veterinarian assistant. We kept in touch though, meeting up at weekends to talk crap and drink too much.

Drink became Tom’s first problem. He lost two jobs because of it. Eventually, David and I sat him down and talked him into straightening himself out – me doing the talking, David nodding in silent agreement. Our buddy seemed to take notice and things improved for him.

Over three years, we all did well. I left my dad’s shop and got a job with an engineering firm, and I was earning what I thought to be a fortune. Tom got a job in Sales and found he was a natural for it, leading to promotions and pay-hikes. David got married and a year later, his wife had twins. We

were three guys enjoying life and prospering.

Then Tom started snorting cocaine and his life began heading down the toilet. Once again, I was the one to steer Tom from self-destruction – I literally had to beg him to get him to go into rehab. He was lucky enough to be given time off work. It was through pure generosity that he didn't lose his job.

Tom left rehab and became the best salesman his company had ever known. For a year, at least. Then they were covering for him while he returned to rehab. The dumb ass spent two years going like a yo-yo from rehab to drugs and back again. I was always the one who persuaded him, who got him to realise he was killing himself and ruining everything he'd worked hard for. Unfortunately, he had the memory of a goldfish, or should I say, the memory of an addict.

Our final argument came at his big apartment on his twenty-eighth birthday. David and his family were there, and so was my girlfriend. There had been presents, food and drink. When Tom sneaked off to his bedroom, I got curious about his furtive behaviour – and found him sinking a needle into his arm. It was “just to keep me going”, he had said. We had argued and then exchanged a few blows – I knocked out some of his teeth; he broke my nose. Needless to say, I wasn't enthusiastic about ever seeing him again afterwards.

When a rival firm to the one I was working for offered me a great job in the next state, I went for it. I was happy to start a fresh life, and to abandon the wasted cause of trying to save Tom from himself.

Three years later I was married. At around the same time, poor David got divorced. The experience devastated him – he's been single ever since, never having got over the heartache. David and I kept in contact, though we rarely spoke about Tom.

Until that night – when a frantic smear of words on my iPhone sent me home...

To an appointment with death.

* * *

Conscience is a weird thing.

Your conscience can make you feel responsible for events which are totally out of your control. This was how it was with my reaction to the message about Tom. I knew I would never be able to forgive myself if I didn't try to stop him from harming or killing himself. Another man could have ignored the email and slept peacefully at night. If I failed to try and Tom did die, I'd always believe his blood was on my hands because I didn't make the effort.

My wife Annie didn't argue against my decision to go. She just smiled and said: “You go sort this out. I wouldn't expect any less of you.” I loved her even more for those words, and I missed her dearly the moment I drove away.

When I reached the edge of the city I had been born in, it was after 6AM. I felt awful – tired and nauseous from the strong coffee I'd drunk at stops along the route. By luck, I located a diner that served truckers and travellers all day. One enormous breakfast and two mugs of cappuccino later, and I believed I just might survive the next few hours.

I tried David's phone number for the twelfth time since his email. Still no answer, which didn't make any sense. The number was for a mobile phone, and David should have had it with him wherever he was. Also, you'd imagine he would have expected a call back after his pleading email. If it turned out David had let his mobile battery flat-line, I planned to have some serious words with him.

Tom's number was also on my iPhone, but I didn't call. Face-to-face would be better – it would be the best chance I had of getting through to him. If we argued on the phone first, he might not listen to me when I reached his house.

At least I was sure of Tom's current address. David had mentioned it a few months ago in casual conversation.

I had two choices. Go to David's apartment, in the hope of getting him to accompany me to see Tom... Or just head straight to Tom's house.

Tom's place was an hour away, and David's apartment was thirty minutes further distant. Plus, if David wasn't home when I got there, I didn't want to have to start hunting for him and waste valuable time.

I relieved my bladder of all the cappuccino and headed off to Tom's house.

* * *

In the quiet suburban area, Tom's home stood out distinctively. All the houses were detached, two-storied buildings of pale grey brick with black slate roofing. Each had a small front garden, a driveway, an adjacent garage and a white picket fence. Every property except for Tom's had had the lawn mowed within the last two months; was free of litter; and had clean windows in front of open curtains showing pleasant rooms beyond...

The mere sight of Tom's residence suggested how bad things were. He had never been a fastidious person, but he had possessed enough self-esteem to keep his home in good order. After parking my car, I headed across the pavement for Tom's front gate. I spotted a message written in the grime on his largest front window: *'Clean your damn windows asshole'*.

"At least his neighbours have a sense of humour," I said to myself, hoping none of them would appear to question me.

A high-pitched squeal sounded as I opened the gate. I stepped over some long-dried dog crap and walked to the front door. To either side of my objective, the windows were closed and the curtains drawn. The same was true of the upstairs windows. Above the dirty beige door, the eye of a camera peered at me. To the right of the door was a small metal panel bearing a speaker and a button marked *'CALL'*.

I had to waft apart a thick spider web to gain access to the panel. Frowning, I thumbed CALL.

Somewhere inside the house, an annoying buzz rang out.

I was just beginning to wonder whether the call would be answered when a voice erupted from the speaker.

"Steve! Steve – is that you? Thank God you've come." There was a feverish elation in Tom's voice, as if he was overwhelmed with relief.

For several seconds, I was too stunned to reply. *How the hell did Tom know I was going to call on him? I hadn't known myself yesterday morning. I was here at David's request, in a supposed surprise visit to try to save Tom from the brink of disaster...*

"I'm... here," I managed awkwardly. "You sound all right, though something weird is clearly going on—"

"I know... I know," Tom interrupted. "The place is in a state and I've got poor Dave worried out of his skull... But you're here now and everything will get better. I've always been able to rely on you, buddy. I'm grateful for that..."

"Okay. So... do you want me to stay out here?"

"Shit... Dammit... I'm an idiot. The door's unlocked, pal. Come in and get down to the basement... Sorry, my mind's blown. I've got so much to tell you."

"All right," I said. I was utterly bewildered. "I'm on my way."

* * *

The front door let me into a small, dingy hallway.

I quickly discovered that the inside of the house was more decrepit than the outside. I saw a small table and a coat stand; both were beyond dusty – they were thick with pale brown filth. Webs hung from the arms of the coat stand to form a repulsive decoration; other silken constructions adorned the open doorways ahead and left and right of me. A glance left showed a darkened living room: once a showpiece of plush furnishings and modern conveniences; now a dismal, dirty hovel. The room on my right might have been a dining room, but again a pleasant space had deteriorated horribly.

Tom's house stank too. It was not merely a smell of dirt. There was a damp clamminess to the atmosphere – *dammit, I had to tense myself so I didn't shiver in there* – and some kind of nauseating decay. I'd once come home from a two week holiday to find the fridge broken and the contents spoiled: the smell here was ten times as potent. One of the reasons came to my attention via the light through the door's windowpane... Black mould had grown across the corners of the small hallway, and this was slowly oozing down through the once-chic wallpaper of the room.

"This place is a bloody health hazard..." I hissed under my breath. "What the heck are you doing here, Tom? And why are you down in the basement?"

My eyes grew accustomed to the midnight gloom. When I looked down, I found the carpet was hidden by a layer of collected filth. Oddly, a set of footprints led from the doorway deeper into the house.

In a horror movie, the person in my position – usually a voluptuous cheerleader – would proceed

into the darkened lair without looking for a light switch... Often while I'm snarling "*Turn the lights on, you damn fool!*" at the TV screen... I was neither so brave nor so stupid. I squinted, found a wall switch and tried it. The hall light overhead sparked to life for an instant, fizzled and died. It occurred to me that I'd seen that happen in a movie too.

"Great."

I followed the footprints through into a larger hallway, which was as dark as a tomb. When I found another light switch and tried it, I got no reaction at all. Withdrawing my mobile phone, I activated its torchlight app. A few seconds of arcing the bright beam around and I was wishing for darkness again.

The second hall was about a dozen feet wide and at least ten across. Stairs ran along the right hand wall to the upper level; a doorway beneath the stairs led into some kind of office-space – dark, dirty and criss-crossed by enormous webs. Another door stood open in the wall opposite me, leading through to a kitchen at the back of the house. I could make out a sink and a cooker amongst ominous shadows.

My apprehension about what the other rooms might hold was minor compared to my disgust at my findings in the main hallway. The left hand wall of the room had originally been home for a pair of glass units – the kind a collector might keep their prized possessions in – and a huge rubber plant. I couldn't see what the units held due to the thickness of filth on the glass panes. And the plant was draped dead across the floor, half-smothered in dust. Some kind of insects scrambled between the tentacle-like limbs of the rotting plant.

Worse was what lay near the door to the office: two empty feeding bowls and a long-dead cat. The animal was shrunken-in upon itself, as if partially mummified. I was lucky that the strong smells of the rest of the house obscured the odour of decay from the cat.

"Oh my God... Tom, how long did you leave the poor thing? Did it starve to death while you were down in the basement..?"

The footprints continued through the dirt into the kitchen. No other prints existed. Even the stairs were thick with dirt, showing no one had gone up there for... a long, long time.

My natural instincts for survival were screaming for me to leave the house. *Get out. Call the police, have them investigate.* I'm not one of those people who can get drawn-in by curiosity – I had no desire to explore further... But the thought of Tom, needing me downstairs, made me cross the hallway and step inside the kitchen.

Two things occurred to me on the way.

First, the footprints were at least as large as my own feet. Strange – because Tom was smaller than me... And if the person who had walked through here wasn't him, who else could it have been? And were they still here – which was suggested by the lack of prints leading back out?

Second, I was following the prints. Yet, why? There was nothing to suggest they would really lead to my destination. I just had a *feeling* that following them was what I should do...

I called out "Tom!" when I reached the doorway.

No reply came.

End Of Sample

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