

"Spooked"

A Short Story

by T.D. Smith

I sat in my office staring at a blank, fresh new word document, hoping for words to appear.

There was nothing.

I had nothing.

No ideas.

There was nothing was written.

I had but three days left.

Nervous and flustered, nervous because of the empty page and the impending doom of the due date I stood risking turning nil into the small publication of short fictions, flustered because of the writer's block and lack of any original ideas or creative juices flowing, at length I threw up my arms and exed out of the document altogether, exhaling indignantly, and instead loaded my browser.

Entering the appropriate URL and hitting enter, I navigated the tides of the internet to the electronic billing department of my city of residence. Exiting the room briefly, I returned with my checkbook in hand. Taking care to ensure that my webcam was still covered, (a personal paranoia of mine being the possibility of having the numbers on my checks stolen by some wayward hacker spying on me via the eyeball's gaze from its perch atop my computer) I unfurled a check and began to type in the corresponding routing and account numbers into the web application, such was the nature of my memory regarding those type of things, or lack thereof.

With my bills finished and paid, I stretched out my arms, cracked my knuckles, then sat back. Contemplatively considering the actions of what I had done just moments ago, I was struck with a sudden rush of inspiration. Re-opening the word doc, I typed furiously.

Mark, a naked man, one derived from the naked man in the Gospel of Mark yet whose personality was completely contrived by me, ran down the rainy streets of his fictional town swiftly, trying his darndest to get away from his assailant: twelve anthropomorphic, 8-foot tall United States dollar bills that could walk and talk and kill. He had noticed odd things happening all throughout that month. First there was the shadowy stick man he was sure he saw on the brick wall one night walking home. Doing a double take, it had disappeared. That had been the precursor to much negativity in his life as of late. After that, each of his electronic bill payments, scheduled to automatically withdraw from his account in monthly intervals, had inexplicably failed to do so. After much stress, labor, and extra work trying to remedy this and inquire into the problem's nature, Mark finally uncovered the plot of a dark-web hacker. This hacker had been hired by an underground ring of living, sentient bills, who having awakened, were bent on restitution against humanity for using them as currency for so long. Mark had no idea why they were targeting him specifically, but whatever the reason, the Dark Bills did not want Mark to learn it, and here they were, the bills, with their one-dollar markings, chasing Mark, who was completely uncovered, down the street, barefooted and barebacked, in the pouring rain. They

would kill him and then report back to their boss, Big Franklin. Mark ran from them frantically, painfully...

I finished the story and sat back, fingers interlocked, hands behind my head, and sighed contentedly.

It was good. I knew it.

It was just the right combination of odd and thrilling to satisfy the publishers of the quarterly journal for which I had been asked to write an off-the-wall short story. Smiling, I finished spell check on the document then saved it and put it away til tomorrow, when I would re-read, revise, and edit as needed. I still had three more days, after all.

Upon finishing writing, checking, and responding to some emails, various miscellaneous life stuff, I decided to treat myself to some unplugged time. So often we spend our days as modern people plugged in, constantly looking at a rectangular prism topped with gorilla glass that shines and chatters perpetually on and on, sucking our souls and demanding our full and constant attention and worship, like some kind of tiny, jealous gods.

Not so for this writer! I would not be slave to my electronics.

I powered down my computer entirely, a rarity amongst us moderns these days, shut off my phone, and sat back in my chair. I breathed deeply and longly, and sought to clear my head.

At first, it worked. I thought nothing, felt nothing but a serene peace as the clouded fog of negativity and worry that the world of constant movement and electronic buzzing brought departed from my brain.

A few moments of this, then, despite myself, the muttering spirits of banal everyday life came gradually fumbling back into my skull, which further engendered wandering worries regarding friends and family.

I thought first of my wife, who, a week ago had been trapped in the middle of nowhere with a former patient of hers, the wheels of her vehicle spinning, stuck in the mud. They were in a quite remote area in the territory where she was currently away at a conference, in a situation (while not quite the same as my self-inflicted one, but similar nonetheless!) where there was no cellular reception and no internet signal whatsoever to be found. Nobody knew where they were and nobody could contact or be contacted by them. It was a scary situation that she was lucky to have gotten out of (with the help of a local good Samaritan to whom I am grateful both for helping when such was not a mandatory expectation of him, and for the fact he was not a genetically horrific monster who ate her and the patient!) entirely unscathed, both mentally and physically.

I had not heard from my wife since yesterday. Regardless of the time difference, I found this odd.

What if she had called while my phone was off?

I shook the thought away, forced it back down into the recesses of my mind and refocused on not focusing on worldly affairs once more.

I closed my eyes.

Clarity, freedom, peace!

Then, a ghastly, spectral image of my mother lying in hospital bed floated before my closed eyes in black space.

She was there again for a transfusion to help cure an ongoing, chronic ailment.

Worry and fear crept in and quickened my heart then. I could feel the stress hormones flowing through me, flooding my bloodstream, and obscuring my conscious mind again. Something inside me was softly, gently, but incessantly moaning, a controlled burn of melancholy, once again.

No!

I breathed deeply and pushed even this thought away.

Dark.

Quiet.

Peace.

A shining light began fluttering in my mind's eye from out of the blackness. It moved ever closer and when it arrived, I knew with it would come complete, if fleeting, tranquility. My meditations had almost reached their goal: that of a moment of solace, a time out from the world and its plethora of worries.

Then,

BUMP!

THUMP!

My eyes flicked open.

The kids were at school.

The dog with my mother-in-law a town over, in preparation for my travel to a literary conference the next morning.

As aforementioned, my wife was attending a professional conference, far away.

No one should be upstairs, nor should they be in this house with me right now!

I listened.

Nothing.

Then, just as I began thinking again and my apprehensions about money, career, and kids came rushing back at me, twisting and turning my mind like some fell rip current pulling a defenseless being out to sea,

BUMP!

BUMP!

BUMP!

I listened again, pausing everything, even thought and breath.

A moment's silence, then:

THUMP!

Gaining courage and a plastic lightsaber (owned by my son and totally NOT bought by myself for my own amusement) for good measure, I sprang up the stairs in a sudden flurry of movement.

I would not be robbed in my own home, nor would I be invaded! Not I, not today!

I found the upstairs, the closets, under the bed, and the attic crawl space utterly empty without any signs of human disturbance.

I stood in attention, listening again.

BUMP!

It came from the window, to where I now flew.

Throwing back the curtains, I found the culprit: the neighbor, college aged, lacrosse-playing, and enjoying his short Fall Break, he was throwing a ball against the side of the house, catching the projectile in his net's stick as it bounced off the wall and back to him.

Looking up at me, he smiled and waved.

"Hey Mr. Jones!" he said.

"Hello, Bradley."

After a brief exchange about college and how his first year was progressing, he smiled sheepishly, admitting he didn't think anyone was home and promised to stop the thumping of the ball until later, agreeing he would continue said activity against his parents' garage, not my house.

Then Bradley departed and I returned to my post downstairs at my office desk.

Again I was approaching that euphoric state of Nirvana, detached from earthly anxieties, when a shrill, sinister, whistling piped up suddenly and screeched like a banshee, startling me to the point of jumping some few inches out of my seat.

My eyes flew wide again.

I knew I had not put a kettle on, and regardless, such a sound should not fill the space of my office so!

Darting my glance all about, I eventually found the source of the wretched, attention-breaking racket: a small gap from the sole window in the office room, a fraction of an inch wide, into which now a wailing gust from outdoors was funneling, causing a horrid cacophony of high-pitched shrieking to fill my inner sanctum.

I slammed the window down hard and with ferocity such force that the whole frame shook. How dare the howling wind disturb my peaceful contemplation!

Finally, sitting down, huffing privately for a few moments, and trying to relax again, I let my head fall backward on the chair and re-shut my eyes.

I thought and fought off negative thoughts and feelings yet again, and felt the quiet stillness approaching and begin to fill in reality, wrapping me like a blanket all around.

I took a deep breath and exhaled longly, then, feeling calm and touched with bliss once more, smiled cheekily and joked to myself.

“Gosh, trying to find complete tranquility will drive a man nuts!”

Suddenly, I felt an icy hand on my shoulder.

Starting and with eyes shooting open and upward, I saw a man, his corpse-like hand on my shoulder, his skin glowing blue and cold as the wind in the dead of winter with long white hair, a curly white and gray beard, wearing a cowboy hat.

The stranger smiled.

“I agree!” the ghastly, unknown intruder spoke with an icy whisper.

The hair on my back stood on end. My skin paled to a shade of white that was as pasty and pale as that of the apparition there in my office. I stood, turned, and ran, taking nothing with me but the phone I clutched in my hand.

I ran out the front door, down the steps, into the street, and did not let up or look back until I was well over a mile away.

I did not go back to my home thereafter until my wife had returned safely back into town and the entire police department, a priest, and a team of paranormal researchers had searched, exorcised, and taken readings respectively. Then and only then would I return into my study and write and work.

...we did end up selling the house shortly after that incident. I never meditated there again.

THE END