



Paper Bag Surgeon by Scott Thomas Smith

I am not my eyes. Surly is jest, I crack open a can of peanut butter from the love nest. Few bugs in place this crusty. Eating makes hurt less than waiting for the other. Found stack of papers in the bar, mr. butter. Anything looks different I take and go to Kelly.

He's sitting at his enormous desk, half-heartedly imagining it as a giant playground, somehow seeing the tiny children playing among the wide blank spaces, the business card holder, and the currently un-clacking Newton's Cradle as the light angles in through the blinds. Thinking of old ghosts come back to haunt him. Old ghosts from the now haunted building, vacant, grown over, and set to be demolished. The planned renovation. Possible mistakes. Unadmitted.

"So the records are just floating out there? James,"

"Yes, sir."

"Find them."

"Yes, sir."

One assistant leaves the room while one stays.

"Evidence of misdeeds is not public fare. If someone on my staff did leak records of our 'corner-cutting', the true story of the 'Old City Hospital' could change from unfortunate, to, at-least-we-have-us-to-blame. 'Us' being us. I want you to find out if these printouts still exist, and if they do I want them tracked down."

"Sir, might not the records be at the hospital itself?"

"It's been closed for over a year."

The contractor slash city councilman looks back into his assistant's eyes, thinking of complicity between enemies everywhere. "You might not be wrong. They could just be sitting in a desk down there waiting for some vagrant to pick them up and be illiterate all over them. It's not a bad bet. They're fencing it up as we speak, but plenty of people still get in, in order to visit the friendly ghosts and... to farm the copper wiring. You'll get in and search the whole place, without being noticed. *Before* the slated demolition, not after or during."

"Of course, sir."

“Permission to get started?”

“Find them and destroy them. If it’s impossible to find them, do your best to delay the release of the information until demolition time, whatever that entails.”

They wanted to keep the public hospital open, he thinks. A public city hospital in the modern era. In that case death on the installment plan made perfect sense. Terraced decay, rooms as death-incubators... and the walls will fall. After that Larry Rice wanted to use the rotting building for a homeless shelter. Putting the moron in oxymoron. Finally after years of letting that charnel house fall to pieces, they stopped paying the property taxes and sent it all back to the jungle. So that now we can tear down what’s unusable and build the whole area into condos. *Expensive* condos. People like a place with a sense of history. Then the children can run free and paid for.

Ghosts are a dumb word. Spirit is good. Or just light. They don’t bother me because they’re just dancing, and I just walk around. Like the sky fit inside a room, it’s packed so it swims. They almost fight but the bad part is not in the room. I have my paper bag to drink from and we all can spook each other. Wander around and breathing the crust. This place only feels right when it rains.

“The papers have to be in here. She was close with the regent of the nurses program. ‘Miss Shipsinker’ would have shared the information with her.”

“The layout map says the nurses’ dorm was this way.”

“Here’s something.”

“What?”

“This is what we’re looking for.”

“What?”

“It’s—it’s not what we’re looking for, but it says what we’re looking for is here...”

They call the boss.

“The records were printed out at a terminal in nursing here. She had the records. Must have sat on them too long and let the warranty expire.”

“Did you find them?”

“No. The fire was localized in this wing... I hate to ask sir, but...”

“You’re right, why indeed. ... No, they’re not here. ... Yes, sir, my problem, truly. Will do. We aim to please.”

The sympathy of confederates in tediousness is sealed in exasperation. “We’re tracking a ghost’s paper trail.”

“Follow the white out.”

The basement. The trail leads to the basement.

“Whoever he is, he definitely goes our way.” They’ve got someone. Something is alive in here.

The scariest floor of any haunted house that knows its business. Maybe a forsaken attic could compete, but you don't get the same effect, still. The basement is where secrets go to lie.

The building has been abandoned for over a year, almost a year and a half. And before that it was like a bad public school where everyone was already shot, sick, or wounded. There was plague, fire, suicide. And now the place is a photo-op for college kids who piss in the hallways 'cause that's how scared they are. It makes sense.

"God, can it get any worse."

Broken glass on an emergency –pull-in-case-of-fire, shows what looks like blood spatters, and in the surrounding area, the axe missing, with ominous chops in the floor. Every room is the opening shot of a high school horror movie.

They prey through the narrow stairs to the hallway where a gurney is wedged between the walls. The degree of decay and its effect likens to the desirability of a comfortable night's sleep on said bedding. Spinning it laterally to afford the passage down the nearly pitch black corridor the henchmen hench the best they can. "If this is homeless psycho time we're gonna shoot first and ask questions later." He has the combination flashlight/pistol wrist stance perfected and is auguring into each new darkened corner, slow and steady, feetwise, and freaking out besides. From up ahead comes a sound like a soda can size rock being thrown into a half filled metal trash can.

In a dead hospital do you pray to be cared for outside its walls? All these holy days hidden up our sleeves.

The conscience of a king captures itself when there's no room to play.
I'm gonna just shoot whatever it is, just because.

"HEY!"

Huhn? I thought I heard noises. Some kids are here again coming to break into my house. I should run away or should I see if they want to fight and fight them. I can't fight them forever. I don't live anywhere. I have mr. butter somewhere but this house is not my place. I have to stay here when it gets inhospital outside. Hospital ok. Inhospital outside. The shelter pays for health.

"If there's someone in there, come out and we won't hurt you! We just want to talk!"

I don't talk.

"Come out now, if you hear us!"

I don't, should I? I'll come out. Quiet. Hands up.

The figure moves through the darkness sideways, like the painted target in a gun carnival game. His eyes reflect the light.

“Go get him.”

“We’re not goin’ to hurt you. We just want to talk to you.”

“I don’t talk.”

“That’s ok.” The second strongman binds his hands behind his back with a set of cuffs. He starts to rejoin the group. “We’re just looking for some papers.”

“I find papers in the books. Look at them.”

“Where are the papers?”

“I said so.”

“Listen, dick, where did you put the papers?” he says now in his interrogating voice, twisting his arm.

“None. No more. Gone now.”

“I’m sick of this guy already. Put him on that gurney.”

They tie him to the gurney. A knife joins the conversation, which has gotten louder.

“If you tell me what you did with the papers, I won’t cut you, like this.”

He cuts deep into the vagrant’s ear.

“I take stuff to Kelly!” He’s wailing the words.

Deeper into the ear.

“Who is Kelly?”

“Kelly lives outside! I can find him!” he begs.

“Thanks pal, we’ll find him.”

He jabs the knife down the side of his head and cuts through what’s left of his ear. The resident erupts in louder sobs and a terrifying scream that seems to gather in the dark. As the two thugs walk away.

He turns to look back toward the basement as if to wonder if they’ve left any evidence, still walking, crunching glass trying to cover the sound of the distant voice, and bumps into a burnt out EKG on his way towards the door.

The people who visit the site leave things that you might expect them to take, to preserve the ecology of the place, like creating a museum; A world map of a life of desire. He lights a cigarette and walks out the emergency entrance, a modest cul-de-sac that was a hell’s pass for thousands of souls rolling out of an informal cavalcade of ambulances.

“I hope I never have to come back to this place,” he breathes out in smoke.

By the time they get to Kelly, the records are already on their way to the press. There’s no reason to kill him; it could only make it worse, of course. But their appetite is whetted, so they beat him up a little and tell him his friend is dead, and leave it at that. The Post-Dispatch will

print the demolishing information about the true story of the hospital, and the loss of a great public façade will become the downfall of a sui generis public servant, to some.

....

They run screaming. Four kids finding what looks like a dead body, the face cut up on a hospital bed, some madman homeless dude's conducting hideous experiments in the basement of the haunted Old City Hospital. "I literally shit my pants." The cops show up an hour later, the anonymous call that is so obviously a prank, a classic, being a little low on their priority, but, curiosity stoked with fear or vice versa brings two cars and weapons drawn.

Kelly is tending to his friend when the cops start yelling at him. Their flashlights are brighter than it seems possible for a flashlight to be.

"Hey. This isn't what it looks like. I didn't do this to him or anything. He's my friend. I found him--"

"Step away from the man."

"Yeah, ok."

There are three officers in the stairwell and hallway next to where the gurney is wedged. A tiny amount of light filters down from the floor above but other than that it's just their flashlights, tossing rings or skipping rocks and rushing to the corners to take on a new plane.

"Sir, can you hear me?"

"You...r...r..."

"How long has he been like this?" the female officer asks, checking his pupils.

"I just found him. I don't know. Could be days. He normally comes to see me every couple days."

She calls the EMS.

"Alright, we're gonna get him outta here. We'd like you to come along to answer some questions, if you would."

"Sure. I think I know who was involved."

In the emergency room, Kelly sits by him and comforts him. Tells him it'll be alright.

"We're gonna get the guys who did this," says the cop. He looks over at her. "With what your friend here told us has been going on."

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" she asks Kelly.

"Be right back, man."

Kelly takes me to here. Another hospital. Last one turned bad. I got bad time. Those bad guys. They cut me.

"Hey, man. It looks like they're gonna set you up here for a while."

"Uh."

"I'll come visit you soon. Take it easy. You've got it made."

Crazy nurse tries to shoot me with needle. She doesn't like it when I yell about how crazy she is. I can't even cry about it because she will make me do something else. I have to go to the screen. Bars outside. Inhospital for me.

My eyes are not me.