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Dubious Tales

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Dubious Tales

Charles Kaplan

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Table of Contents

BOBBED	1
SANITIZED.....	15
THE GATE	23
DOC HOLLIDAY.....	34
MOBBED	45
ASSEMBLY OF ELDERS.....	61
JELLY DOUGHNUT.....	68
FOURSOME.....	82
THE INFIRMARY.....	90
DELILAH	99
MOTHERS KNOW BEST	114
ANIMALIZED	125
BAITS.....	131
VLAD.....	139
SHEET-HOG.....	158
HOT WIND	165

BOBBED

Sherlock Holmes stared out of the porthole and mulled over what little he knew of the case, during the hour required for the shuttle to reach Mars. It was his first trip to the red planet, but, still, the 38 year old G-Man was having trouble staying awake. The murder of Windgate Ostrand in his hologram museum had baffled the best minds on Mars; the local investigators had developed no leads and there were no suspects. So Holmes's services had been requisitioned from the Galaxy Bureau of Investigation (GBI) to get a new perspective on the case, and, it was hoped, to solve it.

The GBI computer chose him because, unlike the Sherlock Holmes of literature, this incarnation of the detective insisted on working alone. He could not bear to share responsibility or authority with a partner. So why should GBI pay the expenses of a team when a single detective could be sent? And Holmes's record for clearing cases indicated he was as effective as most teams and partnerships.

After the shuttle docked and Holmes had passed through the decontamination locks, he met his greeter and guide, a young woman he judged to be at the end of her teens. His tall figure and aquiline nose made him stand out among the disembarking passengers. "Officer, Holmes?" she inquired. She wore an iridescent, onepiece, skin-tight jumpsuit. It, and her stunning, porcelain-white face, large black eyes and past-the-shoulder black hair distracted him for a moment before he turned out his lapel to reveal his badge.

"I'm Holmes. And you are?"

Charles Kaplan

“Salley Forsyth, assistant to District Attorney, Arthur B. Ranch. I’ll guide you to your rooms. As soon as you’ve settled in, I’ll take you to confer with the DA.” She tossed her long hair and smiled seductively. “I imagine the shuttle ride must have been exciting. That’s what I’ve been told. I’ve never been off this planet though.”

Holmes had no tolerance for small talk or flirtations. He shifted the shoulder strap of his luggage bag, began walking and grunted a lengthy “Uuuuh...huhhhh.”

His commodious room was in an underground hotel adjacent the spaceport. Holmes changed into a black, many-pocketed jumpsuit of the type favored by Mars inhabitants. As they entered the transporter she was driving, Ms. Forsyth handed him a brochure from Ostrand’s museum; it showed the exhibits for which the museum was famous. Holmes studied the brochure and made some entries in his Blackberry as they drove the short distance to the entrance of the hollow hillock where the DA’s office and the courts were located. After passing through an airlock, they left the transporter with an attendant at the vehicle livery.

“Thanks for guiding me around. And good luck to you,” Holmes said, hoping to be rid of her distracting good looks.

“Oh, I’ll be around to assist you later. While you’re in with the DA, I’m going to the exercise room.”

Holmes nodded, turned and walked to the guard desk.

“We’ve been expecting you, Inspector Holmes,” the guard said. “Here’s your ID badge and an entry card.”

“It’s Detective Lieutenant Holmes, if anyone needs to know my rank.” He fastened the badge to the outside of a chest pocket and held the entry card in his hand.

“Yes, Sir. Mr. Ranch is on the third level. You can’t miss it.”

Dubious Tales

Holmes stepped on to the upbelt, and stepped off into the third notch in the hill; it was about half the size of his hotel room. A guard armed with a holstered phaser sat behind a desk which had a video screen for its top. There were three tall, narrow doors behind the guard. “He’s in there, Detective Holmes,” the guard said jabbing his thumb over his shoulder at the center door.

Holmes inserted his entry card into a slot in the door, which buzzed, ejected his card and then slid upwardly into the ceiling. The doorway was barely wide enough for Holmes, who, though lanky, was above his ideal weight, and only minimally in the shape required for him to pass the CBI annual physical tests. He walked into a large, circular office with its walls covered by video screens. The DA’s office felt cavernous. *Reminds me of the gym at headquarters*, thought Holmes.

Arthur B. Ranch stood up behind his glass desk and held out his hand to Holmes. The DA was much heavier than Holmes, with a light tan and receding, thick, white hair. Holmes estimated his age to be 66. They shook hands and Ranch ushered the detective to a sofa in a lounge area on one side of his office. The DA carried a pen and stack of index cards with hand written notes.

“I trust the voyage here and your accommodations are satisfactory,” Ranch said.

“Everything is topnotch. Now tell me what is known about Wingate Ostrand and his murder.”

Wants to get right into it without getting acquainted, thought Ranch, as he stared into Holmes’ piercing grey eyes. “Ok. You probably already know much of what I’m going to say, given Ostrand’s fame.”

Holmes gave his imitation of a smile and reached into a pants pocket; he removed his Blackberry and held it up. After

Charles Kaplan

Ranch nodded, Holmes set the Blackberry to its voice recorder function, leaned back into the couch and tented his fingers.

Branch began, “Wingate Ostrand had been the most important explorer of Earth after human life on the planet was destroyed by the raptor flu over two thousand years ago. Since then, he was one of only six humans having a unique physiology that enabled those six individuals to be immunized from the flu for short periods, during which they could be sent to Earth. At first Ostrand merely brought back feathers, hair and scale samples from the surviving species for DNA analysis.”

“Where are the DNA samples now?”

“I don’t really know. Probably in cryogenic storage in a lab somewhere.” Ranch paused and looked at a note card to keep his mind on track. “Then scientists at the Galaxy Research Institute asked him to bring back live action holograms of the surviving mammals eating whatever they eat. In particular the scientists wanted to observe primates while they ate. There was the hope that some food or combination of foods humans did not eat might give clues to the immunity from the flu the surviving primates enjoyed. Ostrand agreed on the condition that he be given the holograms after they were through studying them. Reluctantly, management of the Galaxy Research Institute agreed. They had intended to use the holograms for teaching. But Ostrand had enormous bargaining power because he was the only human at the time who could go to Earth and come back alive.

“The holograms were the basis for his fortune.” Branch raised his eyebrows. “You’ve heard of his museum, I expect. It’s so popular, people sometimes have to wait in line for hours to get in.”

Holmes thought a moment. “Probably, but I’ve forgot any details I ever knew. Fill me in.”

Dubious Tales

“In his museum, Ostrand mounted each animal hologram in a realistic display showing the habitat of the displayed creatures. The museum is unique on Mars, and probably there is no other like it anywhere in the galaxy. At least there is none we’ve been able to find out about.”

“So the museum has been a financial success. Where is it located?”

“It’s in his habitation. As a result of his wealth, Ostrand has dug the largest dwelling owned by any citizen on our planet. Like all the others, it’s a cave burrowed into a mountain or hill that has been lined with gas seals and thermal panels that keep the interior at a temperature chosen by the inhabitants. Ostrand’s habitation has only one entrance opening and no portals. The museum is at the front—at the entrance opening. Visitors check anything they are carrying, pass through the entrance right into the museum gift shop and then into the museum itself. There are two armed guards at the entrance, and everyone is screened by a metal detector and a plastic detector when they enter and when they leave. Another guard roams the premises at all times, even when the museum is closed.”

“I was told this murder was linked to a jewelry theft.”

“Yes, that’s what it looks like.” Branch shrugged, paused a beat. “We guess Ostrand caught the thief in the act and that’s why he was murdered. We haven’t been able to come up with any other motive.”

Holmes asked, “The jewels are famous or something?”

“There was only one jewel stolen. It’s called the Star of India.”

Holmes reflected for a moment. “I’ve heard of that diamond. It’s the largest in the Galaxy isn’t it?”

“Not a diamond. The Star of India is a sapphire about the size of a golf ball. It shows star patterns on its opposite ends. Hence its name.”

Charles Kaplan

“I thought it was a diamond.”

“You’re thinking about the Hope Diamond. We don’t know what happened to it after Earth was depopulated. It may still be in a place they called the Smithsonian Natural History Museum.”

Holmes slowly rocked back and forth. “How’d Ostrand get hold of the sapphire?”

“He stole it, and he was not ashamed of what he did. He knew the gem had been kept in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. During his next to final trip to Earth, he went to that museum, broke open the case and took the jewel. He even made a video showing him committing the theft and he transmitted it on the planetary televiewer network for everyone to see.”

“The brazen jackass!” Holmes exclaimed. “He knew he was shielded by the Right of Return laws that permit anyone leaving Earth to return to a habitable place with anything they can carry in their hands.”

“Exactly. All we could do was urge him to donate the Star of India to our national museum. He refused and has displayed it as an attraction in his museum. A lot of Martians admired Ostrand.” Ranch stopped and pondered. “Like I’ve read about some outlaw, I think named Jesse James, was admired way back when.”

Still outraged, Holmes said, “Yeah, but James is reputed to have taken from the rich and given to the poor. Here you have a rich man taking from the masses and keeping for himself.”

“I know, but what could we do? A lot of Martians were amused by his audacity, and really... no one was harmed. What good was it for the sapphire to stay on Earth. At least with it here, people could come and look at it. And it is a spectacular jewel.”

Dubious Tales

Holmes snorted and shook his head. “Let’s get back to the murder. Please describe the scene for me.”

“The Star of India was kept in a small room all by itself in a glass case. The display room was at the rear end of the museum next to Ostrand’s living quarters. And there was a door from his study that opened into the display room. The door was locked from Ostrand’s side. He liked to go into the museum and look at the sapphire and wander around to make sure the holograms were working perfectly. He was very fussy about that. Sometimes he mingled with customers and signed autographs. Because of his exposures to the raptor virus, he was not permitted to have his sperm used for insemination, so he had no offsprings or inseminated-partners to relate to. The museum gave Ostrand an easy way to interact with a lot of people, some of whom venerated him. You know how people are attracted to the rich and famous.”

“Yes, I do,” Holmes said impatiently, “but, now, how about the murder scene?”

“Just before the warning bell was to be rung at 4:45, alerting visitors that the museum would be closed for the day in fifteen minutes, a girl—a child, actually—walked into the room where the sapphire was displayed. She saw Ostrand’s body on the floor and screamed. The roaming guard was in an adjacent room and heard the scream. He rushed to the crime scene, saw the body and pulled the alarm lever. That closed the exit and prevented any one from leaving. Ostrand was lying in a pool of blood with his head bashed in. The guard felt his pulse and he was not quite dead. But he died within minutes. The pry bar that had been used to breach the display case was the murder weapon. The thief left it beside his body. There were no fingerprints or other physical evidence on the weapon. The autopsy determined that his brain had been smashed beyond

Charles Kaplan

reconstruction, or any other medical procedure that could have saved him.”

“Since Ostrand was still alive, he must have been assaulted just before his body was discovered,” Holmes said.

“We believe so. Everyone inside the museum at the time was considered a suspect, and they were all detained. We had a team of detectives at the museum in less than an hour.” Again Ranch consulted a note card. “Everyone was searched—strip searched and body cavity searched—after they removed all of their clothing. Then the clothing was hand searched and scanned by metal and plastic detectors. The detectives even searched the parcels and items the museum visitors had checked on the outside of the museum before they passed through the entrance. And, eventually, they searched the rest of Ostrand’s dwelling.”

“You’d have told me already if you found the sapphire.”

“Right. We have no idea how the thief got away with it...got it out.”

“They didn’t.”

“What do you mean, Holmes?”

“As my namesake would say: Obviously, my dear Ranch, the Star of India is still in the museum. And I doubt that the thief is acting alone.”

Confusion played itself over the DA’s face. “How can that be? We searched everywhere. We used the portable scanners. The thief got it out somehow.”

“I’m not going to argue with you now.” Holmes flashed a false smile. “Get me to the museum, and I’ll tell you where it is after I’ve looked the place over.”

Ms. Forsythe was summoned, a new transporter was checked out of the livery, and Holmes was whisked to Ostrand’s museum. He entered and strode quickly from its beginning to its end. Then he went back to the entrance and began perusing the

Dubious Tales

displays individually. At each display he set his Blackberry to its capture video function and made recordings of the animal holograms from several viewing angles. Then he changed the Blackberry to the Search Galaxy Data Bank setting, tapped in several questions and proceeded to the next display. When he had thus gathered the data he wanted from each display, Holmes called Ranch's office and asked for an appointment, but was told the DA was in a meeting that could not be interrupted.

During the ride back, Holmes took out his Blackberry and began scanning the answers to the questions he had sent to the Galaxy Data Bank. When he arrived, Ranch was still in a meeting. He kept Holmes waiting at the entrance guard station for about twenty minutes. Holmes finished studying the answers to his questions, clasped his hands behind his back and paced back and forth the rest of the time he was kept waiting.

The G-Man's displeasure was evident from his face when Ranch let him come up to his office. "Sorry about that, but I couldn't throw all those people out on such short notice."

Holmes gave Ranch an icy stare, and jumped right in. "I know where the Star Of India is and I know the people involved in Ostrand's murder, although I can't identify any specific individuals at this time. But I can tell you how to expose them."

"Where...who?" Ranch stammered, so dumbfounded he was unable to utter a complete sentence.

"The sapphire is inside the base that is housing the lasers and the circuitry for the lemur hologram."

"How'd you know that?"

"Something inside that base is blocking the part of the hologram beam that is supposed to define the lemur's tail. Now the animal has a bobbed tail," Holmes said. Ranch opened his mouth and then closed it without speaking. "You must move quickly, Ranch, to set a trap for the conspiracy responsible for Ostrand's Murder."

Charles Kaplan

“Conspiracy?”

“Yes, a conspiracy...or...we’ll call it gang if you prefer. Once again, obviously my dear Ranch, this was an inside job. How else could the pry bar have been smuggled in and the sapphire hidden on the premises, except by someone having unsupervised movement within the museum. And only a museum worker would have known **how** to put the Star of India into the control box. The worker would have had the opportunity during the confusion immediately following Ostrand’s murder. In other words, a worker at the museum is a member of the gang.”

“But why wouldn’t someone with so much inside knowledge just sneak the sapphire out the same way he or she snuck the pry bar in?”

“Excellent, Ranch! Excellent!” Holmes beamed a genuine smile for the first time and nodded his head approvingly. “That was the gang’s original plan, but Ostrand surprised the thief. They didn’t intend to murder him, but the thief panicked when Ostrand caught him in the act.”

“How do you know it was a gang?”

“I scanned the Mars census records for the heredity, educational training and background, and the psychology profile of everyone who has worked at the museum for the past ten years and is still living. None of them is capable of disposing of the Star of India and selling it at a profit.”

“Why couldn’t an employee simply want to keep the sapphire for his or her own pleasure?”

“Another good question, Ranch. But the census records reveal no museum employee having the profile of a thief who would steal a jewel for his own collection.” Holmes flexed his fingers several times. “Hear me out and I’ll tell you how to catch the entire gang.”

“Ok. Ok. You talk. I’ll listen.”

Dubious Tales

“How soon can you set up an auction and sell the contents of Ostrand’s museum? I checked the records and learned he left no will in the Galaxy data bank, and you told me he has no heirs. So under Martian law his assets and possessions escheated to the planet at his death.”

Ranch’s head bounced twice in confirmation. “Yes, now the planet owns his assets, but the Board of Governors decided to keep the museum collection intact, and add the admission profits to the tax collections so they’d have more credits to spend.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Holmes said. “It’s the same back at Galaxy Central.” He arced his arms and pulled them toward his chest, as if he were embracing a loved one. “Here’s how the trap will work. You will auction off several animal holograms one at a time. The person or business that successfully bids for the lemur at the auction will be an innocent agent working for the criminal gang. Don’t interfere with their agent in any way. But follow him, or who ever delivers the hologram, to the real buyer. That person will be a member of the gang. When any gang member has been caught and is in your custody, he will rat out the rest of the gang.”

“How can you be so sure of that?”

“Like I just told you, the gang intended this to be a robbery, not a murder. To lessen his punishment, the person to whom the Star of India is delivered will identify the museum worker who murdered Ostrand, and everyone else in the gang.”

Branch looked away and shook his head. “But, even as the planet’s top law enforcement officer, I don’t have the authority to sell the museum assets. And I don’t know if I can convince the Board of Governors to do it.”

Holmes stretched out his arm in the gesture that universally means “halt.” Then he closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the couch. After a long moment, he opened his eyes,

Charles Kaplan

sighed and said, “In the auction announcement you need to explain that the museum needs to raise some quick capital for renovation and conversion of Ostrand’s living quarters into display space. But three holograms are all that need to be put up for auction to raise the required money. The lemur auction will not be fixed. In other words it will be a legitimate auction. But you can arrange for shills to buy the other two holograms, which the buyers will return to the museum, and get their money back, after the thieves are caught.”

Ranch sold Holmes’s auction-trap scheme to the Board of Governors, and the auction was scheduled to be held in two weeks. No longer needed on Mars, Holmes was reassigned to temporary duty rounding up smugglers who were moving illegal power supply modules among the inhabited rocks in the asteroid belt.

The day of the auction, the shuttle brought Holmes back to Mars, and he was taken to the museum in another transporter driven by Salley Forsyth. The first two holograms sold were a prairie dog and a beaver; only a few competitive bids were received for each. Then the lemur came on the block. Ranch had arranged for stand-by bidders so there to be at least three bids for the lemur. As it turned out, the auction was so spirited that the thought flashed through Holmes’s mind that perhaps the thieves had had a falling out and one of them was trying to get the sapphire for himself. But finally it was over when one participant, not a shill, jumped the bid by fifty percent, and no further bids came in.

As soon as the bid payment was electronically transferred to the auction house, the lemur hologram was unplugged, packed in a shipment container and given to a delivery service. The package was delivered to the habitation of an investment

Dubious Tales

counselor named Dana Lemann, and he was arrested when the alarm Holmes had planted in the control box signaled that the box had been broken open. In return for a reduced sentence, Lemann quickly identified a museum handyman, Russell Stoven, as the murderer. Stoven was arrested, pled guilty, and was sentenced to life imprisonment as a maintenance worker in the government owned tunnels.

Back at Ranch's office, Holmes accepted a glass of imported sherry and smiled continuously as he paced back and forth to work off his nervous energy. Ranch asked, "How did you know the Star of India was in a lemur control box?"

"The control box for the lemur with a bobbed tail, you mean."

"Yes, of course."

"While Salley was driving me to the museum for my first visit there, I studied the animal holograms shown in the brochure she had given me describing the exhibits. When I examined the actual exhibits in the museum, I saw that the lemur depicted in the brochure was not the same animal displayed in the museum hologram. The lemur in the brochure had a long bushy tail. The lemur in the museum hologram had almost no tail at all. You told me that Ostrand was so fussy about all the exhibits being perfect. Something had to be amiss here."

"So why couldn't Ostrand simply have changed the setting on the hologram controls to show a different species of lemur?"

"I considered that but it would have been too convenient a coincidence, and we don't believe in coincidences when we investigate a murder." Ranch nodded in concurrence. "No. Some object had been put into the control box for that hologram, and the object was cutting off the light beams that were intended to define the tail of the lemur."

Charles Kaplan

“But I still don’t know how you could be so sure the part of the hologram that defined the lemur tail was not changed on purpose.”

“Because, my dear Ranch, when I had searched the Galaxy Data Base, I learned that at the time Ostrand was on Earth making those holograms of surviving mammals, the only species of lemur that had ever had a bobbed tail was extinct.”

SANITIZED

The ad in the Sunday edition of *The Clarion* caught Sandra Wilson's eye. Have your home sanitized, it proclaimed. For only a small extra charge, germs and viruses would be scoured away while the service's expert cleaning crew decontaminated the inside of your house from top to bottom.

A cousin and his spouse had just departed after a weeklong stay in the guest room of Sandra's two-bedroom apartment condo. It was the end of March, and they were the last in an almost continuous parade of visiting friends and relatives from the north on an annual winter trek though Florida. All had brought their northern coughs and sniffles with them. And Sandra was concerned that they had left their germs and viruses behind when they departed.

So Monday morning Sandra phoned the number in the cleaning service ad. When she said to the young lady answering the phone that she wanted to have her apartment sanitized, she was told to hold a moment while the call was transferred to the department handling that process.

Several seconds later she heard hissing sounds and some clicks. There were a lot more clicks than you'd expect to hear when a call is transferred. The clicks were followed by crackling sounds so loud that Sandra held the phone away from her ear. The crackling sounds died down and a man with a rough bass voice started talking. His voice was so deep it sounded like he was talking to her from down in a well. The man asked Sandra about a convenient time for scheduling an appointment. He told her he had no work scheduled for the

Charles Kaplan

afternoon. So they set up an appointment for that day at 12:00 noon.

When she asked what it would cost, the man with the deep voice told her what he charged for his work. Sandra was surprised. The extra charge for sanitizing was not small, as the ad professed. Sanitization would cost five times as much as the cost for the standard cleaning service of an apartment the size of hers. But it would be worth paying a premium price, Sandra rationalized, if it got rid of the germs and viruses and that kept her out of the doctor's office just once.

And her schedule meshed perfectly with the schedule of the man on the phone. Sandra would be out of the house while the sanitizing crew did their work. Her Monday her tee time was at 12:30 p.m., and she always went to the golf course early so she could hit a small warm-up bag of the yellow balls at the driving range before the round began. She would leave instructions with the building "super" to let the cleaning service crew into her apartment when they arrived at around noon. She would also phone the guardhouse of the gated community in which she lived to tell the guards the cleaning service was expected at apartment 604 of her building.

The ladies in Sandra's foursome dressed at the peak of the golf fashion for each season. On this mild spring day, she put on pale green shorts that extended to her knees, a matching open collared cotton shirt, and black and white saddle oxfords. She thought the auburn highlights in her hair looked good with pale green. Instead of a sun visor, she would wear a full brimmed straw hat having a cluster of tiny yellow feathers sticking out of a green band. At age fifty-eight she was not overweight, and she walked every day and also walked the golf course whenever she could get someone else to walk it with her. Before going out the door Sandra stopped at the full length mirror in the entry hall. "Not bad," she said. Then she waggled

Dubious Tales

her hips and made two bumps toward the mirror. “Not bad at all.” She smirked at her image which smirked back at her as she walked out the door.

Just before noon Sandra was in her canary yellow PT Cruiser on her way to the pro shop. She passed the guardhouse and saw the cleaning service van stopped at the lowered cross bar where the guard was writing something on a piece of paper in the clipboard he held in his hand.

Strange, she thought, I never noticed before that the cleaning service van was bright red. And the worker in the truck looked strange, too. He was so large he had to hunch over to keep his head below the top of the inside of the van, and he almost filled both sides of the front seat. But so what. The worker would easily fit through her apartment door. And maybe a big strong guy is what they needed to carry in the extra machines they used to perform the sanitizing process. Sandra drove on to the pro shop and didn’t give any of those details another thought.

Her foursome only played nine holes Monday. After they finished the round, the four ladies went into the club’s bar. Sandra ordered her usual glass of chardonnay.

“Even as we sit here, I’m having my place sanitized,” she said. “Did anybody else see the ad in yesterday’s paper?”

“I did,” Glenda said. “I thought about it but decided not to. I had my place sanitized a couple of years ago. The smell of the chemicals they use drove me crazy. It was like a combination of menthol and chlorine. I know they use a lot of chlorine, and I think they use the menthol to try to mask the chlorine smell. My place reeked for about a week.”

Sandra hit herself on the forehead with the heel of her hand. “I never thought of the smell,” she said. “Well, it’s too

Charles Kaplan

late now. They'll be finished sanitizing by the time I get back home."

"What's it cost," Shelly asked?

"Five times what a regular cleaning costs," Sandra said.

"Wow, it's gone up a lot since I had my place sanitized. Then—two years ago—it only cost twice as much," Glenda said.

"I'm stuck with it now," Sandra said. "I'll give a full report on sanitization after we play on Wednesday."

The waitress brought their drink chits. The ladies signed them, hugged and said goodbye.

At 3:00 in the afternoon Sandra was driving back toward her apartment building. She saw the cleaning service van coming down the street in the opposite direction. She rolled down the window and stuck out her hand to wave as the van and car passed each other. But the large man in the van didn't look in her direction. He still seemed to fill almost the entire front seat of the vehicle.

And Sandra noticed for the first time that the man in the van was an unnatural dark color. Could he be red? He looked red. Redder than any Native American she'd seen on TV or in any movie. She wondered if he looked red because he was covered with some chemical they used in the sanitizing process. Or maybe it was just the afternoon sun shining through her tinted windows making him look so red. No matter. He'd finished sanitizing her apartment and now it would be germ free and virus free.

Sandra parked her car in the slot assigned to her in the garage that was attached to her apartment building. She walked to the entrance, inserted her key into the switch that operated the door, twisted the key and went in when the door clicked and

Dubious Tales

swung open. Then she removed the mail from her box and rode the elevator up to the sixth floor.

On entering her apartment the first thing Sandra noticed was a faint smoky or maybe sulphery odor. Her nose twitched and she almost sneezed. She figured it must be from the chemicals they use when they sanitize. But it was nothing like the menthol-chlorine smell Glenda had described. The place sure looked clean. Sandra ran her finger along the top of the baseboard, and it was dust free. Every thing she examined looked spotless. She was ready to believe the cleaning service was worth every penny they charged.

But then she saw the first imp. He was standing in an empty vase that sat on a small table in front of the mirror in the entrance foyer. He was thumbing his nose at her. Sandra gasped in surprise. Then she noticed that there were many others. Each little devil was standing in an open topped vessel: a bowl, jar, pitcher or drinking glass. Every one of them was taunting her with some kind of disrespectful or obscene gesture. Giving her the bird. Sticking his tongue out. Putting his thumbs into his ears and wiggling his fingers, like the kids had done when she was in elementary school. Some of the imps were making other gestures Sandra didn't understand because they were what men did in foreign language movies, but she knew they were intended to be insulting. Sandra went from room to room and there were several of the little devils in every room. All were laughing silently at her and being rude and taunting her in some way with their gestures.

The devils were of many different sizes, from just about three or four inches to almost two feet tall. They were all muscular, and they looked exactly alike. Each of the them was a replica of the stereotype image of a fiend from hell: bright red in color, black beard, pointed ears, fingernails curved like claws, pointed hook nose, evil slanted eyes, hooped feet and a

Charles Kaplan

long tail with an enlarged pointed tip. None of them held a pitchfork or any other implement of torture.

At first Sandra was so stunned she couldn't think what to do. She walked up to one of the little devils to get a closer look. This one was standing in a round wooden salad bowl on her kitchen counter. He was about fifteen inches tall. After she walked up to the counter and bent down for a good look at him, the imp insulted her in a way Sandra couldn't tolerate. The little devil had spread his legs apart. Then he reached back between them and grabbed his tail from behind and brought the tail up in front of him as he clamped his legs against its sides. The result was that the tail with its pointed tip stuck out in front of the imp like a long, erect male organ. The hellion was pointing the tip at her with one hand, rubbing the shaft of the tail with his other hand, oscillating his hips forward and backward, and leering at her breasts.

Sandra seethed with disgust; this performance was more than she could tolerate. She lashed out and slapped the little demon with the back of her hand. As soon as her flesh touched the imp, he disappeared in puff of sulphurous smelling smoke. The smoke left no residue. There was absolutely no trace of him remaining, and in a few seconds the odor vanished too. Sandra looked at the back of her hand; there was no mark on it. She raised her hand to her nose and sniffed; it had no odor except for the hand cream she used.

Seeing the imp disappear gave Sandra confidence. With her hands on her hips, she turned to face the next closest little devil. This one was shorter—about six inches tall. He was standing in an empty water glass, wagging his long tongue from side to side and making a gesture with one arm folded over the other. Sandra thought she remembered seeing that arm movement in an Italian movie; it had provoked a fistfight. She moved suddenly and punched the imp with her closed fist.

Dubious Tales

There was another soundless puff of smoke and the little devil disappeared.

The rest of the demons got the message. Whenever Sandra approached one of them, he would duck down into whatever container he was standing in and try to shield himself from her assault. Sandra soon learned that all she had to do to make the little demons disappear was to thump or poke them with a finger. So she moved as fast as she could from imp to imp making them disappear with a flick or thrust of her finger. In half an hour she thought she'd rid her apartment of all of them.

Then she noticed a few peeking at her from containers having openings too small for her to get her finger into. Sandra went to her desk and picked up a pencil. She poked it into some of the containers where the imps were out-of-reach; but no puff of smoke resulted. She put the pencil down, went into the kitchen and took an ice pick out of a cabinet drawer. Poking them with the ice pick didn't work either. Sandra had to touch the little devils with her own flesh.

She got rid of the ones in the out-of-reach spaces by stoppering her kitchen sink and filling it with water. Then she filled with water every small container in which an imp was still hiding. She immersed those containers in the water in the sink. Soon a little demon would come sputtering to the surface where she could poke him with a finger and make him evaporate.

By 4:30 she had cleansed each container of its imp. Her house was demon free, and the odor of sulphur had also vanished. Now Sandra was determined to give the manager of the cleaning service a piece of her mind. There was just enough time to call him before the business closed for the day. She looked up the number and made the call. The operator answered and immediately transferred her to the manager's phone.

Charles Kaplan

“I’m very dissatisfied with your cleaning service,” she began.

But before she could say more, the manager interrupted and said, “Please wait, Ms. Wilson, while I call up the details of your account on this computer’s screen.”

Sandra waited patiently, reflecting how nice it was to talk to living people instead of punching numbers in a call menu.

Soon the manager said, “Yes, Ms. Wilson, I have the details of your account in front of me now. What’s wrong?”

“I don’t like the way my apartment was sanitized by the big man. You know, the big red looking man.”

“Wait a minute, did you say your apartment was supposed to be sanitized?”

“Yes, I saw your ad in *The Clarion*, and I called today and put in an order for my place to be sanitized.”

“You did say sanitized?”

“Yes, sanitized.”

“Well, I’m very sorry, Ms. Wilson. I apologize to you. You have a big refund coming. I don’t know who it was at our end who messed up your order and billed you too much, but we charged you for having your apartment **satanized**.”

BAITS

All winter long I had looked forward to the opening day of bass fishing season. Finagling a day away from the corporate law department without charging the time to my vacation account, and making peace with my wife had not been easy. But I'd done it, and nobody was mad at me. And the Arizona weather was ideal; a cloudless sky provided bright sunshine, and a cool breeze would make sitting in an open fishing boat comfortable. I was now driving our Falcon station wagon, with my jonboat strapped on top, down a secondary country road toward a lake I'd never fished in, or even seen. I'd already rigged three fishing rods with hooks, sinkers and floats. The tips of the rods stuck out of the rear window on the driver's side.

As I neared the lake, I saw the gas gauge drop below the quarter full mark. Since I planned on staying out on the lake fishing in the jonboat until after the sunset, I didn't want to take a chance on having the local filling stations closed when I was ready to drive home and was too low on gas to get back. Also, I needed to buy the worms and live minnows I planned to use for fishing baits.

So I pulled up to the single gas pump in front of a tiny country store. An elderly man wearing grease-stained bib overalls and having ragged grey stubble on his chin and cheeks shambled out. I pointed to the pump and said, "Fill'er up." Then I went to the rear of the station wagon, lifted the hatch, and checked the five-gallon gas tank for the outboard motor. The tank was almost full, so I closed the hatch and walked around to the front of the Falcon.

Charles Kaplan

By now the old codger had the gas nozzle running on automatic. He had lifted the hood and was checking the oil, battery and radiator water level. I stood next to the open engine compartment on one side of the station wagon and said, "I'm going fishing and need to buy worms and minnows. Any baits here?"

He didn't look up, keeping his eyes on what his hands were doing under the hood. "Naw, none of 'em here," he muttered as if the words hurt his lips when they left his mouth. "They're down'd road that-a-way." Still not looking up, he lifted one hand and pointed his grimy thumb over his shoulder in the direction I was going. "Prob'ly in'd two-story house on top uh'd hill, but maybe in'd motel at d'road."

It didn't sound like a sporting goods store to me, so I asked, "Are you sure I'll find baits there?"

This time he straightened up, slammed down the hood, and rasped, "Ain't dat what I jist told ya." He topped out the gas tank, hung up the hose, and after looking at the meter said, "Almost ten gallons so dat'll be two forty-eight."

I gave him two one-dollar bills and two quarters, and he went inside the store to get my two cents change. I heard the cash register clang, and he walked back outside and handed me two pennies.

The motel and house the gas station attendant had described were about ten miles from the station. First I saw the big old house on top of a hill; you couldn't miss it from the road. When it came into view, the small roadside motel seemed insignificant by comparison. The sign wasn't lit and the glare of the morning sun blurred the name of the place, but the word "Motel" was recognizable.

I pulled up to the front of the motel, parked and walked up to a door identified as the office. The office door was locked and no one answered when I knocked. So I went back to my

Dubious Tales

station wagon, started the engine, honked the horn a few times and waited. Still no one came or answered. I turned off the engine, got out of the wagon and walked around to the back of the motel. There was no one in sight. I was sure I was at the right place, but it didn't look like a bait shop. Nevertheless I was determined to find someone and buy the worms and minnows I needed.

I figured they must be in the house, so I started walking up the steps that were built into the hill and led up to the house. There was no doorbell and no one came to the door when I knocked. I decided to go to the back door. As I walked past the side of the house, I glanced in a basement window; I thought I saw an old lady sitting in a rocking chair with her back toward the window. I continued walking and when I turned the corner at the rear of the house, I saw a young man, but he didn't see me.

He was standing on a light colored stone patio with his back to me. He bent over, turned on an outside faucet and started rinsing blood off of a long knife. It looked like the kitchen knife I sometimes used to clean fish. This was encouraging because if he'd caught fish recently and had just cleaned them, then this was probably the place where they had the baits I needed.

I cleared my throat to get his attention and said, "I came here to get baits."

He straightened up so fast he almost fell over backward. The knife flew out of his slippery hands and clattered toward me, leaving red smears of blood on the light colored patio stones. He spun toward me as I smiled at him. I took a step toward the knife and reached out my hand as if I intended to pick it up. He pounced toward the knife and retreated several steps away from me when he had the handle in his hand again. His eyes gleamed and were opened wide with fear. He jerked

Charles Kaplan

the knife above his shoulder and held it there in a menacing gesture. Were it not for the knife in his hand, the young man would not have conveyed a threatening appearance. He had dark hair and eyes, and his handsome face ended with a cleft in his rounded chin.

I was startled by his reaction, but was not fearful because he was backing away from me, even as he was brandishing the knife. “My name is Charlie,” I said, “and I’m a fisherman like you. That must have been a pretty big fish you just finished cleaning.” Holding out my hand in friendship, I took two steps toward him.

“I been fishing and cleaning fish—is that what you think?” he asked hesitantly.

“What else would you be doing,” I replied. Something had kept me from adding *like skinning old ladies*.

He lowered the knife, but kept the tip pointed toward me and said, “I’m Norman.”

Then he shifted the knife to his left hand, dried his right hand on his pant leg, grasped my extended hand and shook it a bit more vigorously than is customary. Norman was obviously upset about something; he kept turning his head and looking behind him, as if he expected someone to sneak up on him from the rear.

I reasoned that if he had been cleaning one or more large fish, he had the kind of information that would help me locate them in a lake I’d never fished in before. Trying to gain his friendship, I continued to beam my most amicable smile. “What kind of fish were you cleaning?” I asked.

“Kind of fish?” Norman paused, frowned and wrinkled his brow. Then a smile lit his face as he established eye contact for the first time and answered in a proud voice, “Trout. Some big trout.” Seeming to be confirming his statement to himself, Norman bounced his head up and down.

Dubious Tales

“Wow. I didn’t think there were trout in the lake. I intended to fish just for bass. Please tell me what you used for bait. And what part of the lake were they in? And how deep down were the trout?”

Again Norman frowned and knit his brow. He dropped his eyes, and his lips and head moved as if he were debating something silently with himself. After a long half minute, he looked up and said, “I have to make a confession to you, Charlie. I’m not a fisherman. I didn’t catch any fish. My hobby is stuffing things. You know...taxidermy. Yeah, it’s more than a hobby with me. If you catch a trophy fish, bring it to me and I’ll mount it for you.” He broke eye contact, turned and looked behind himself again. When he looked back in my direction, Norman nodded his head as if he were trying to convince himself of what he had just told me.

It looked to me as if Norman was trying to be evasive—to avoid telling me about some secret honey hole in the lake where the big fish could be caught. So I pressed on. “Then where’d you get the fish you’ve been cleaning?”

This time Norman answered with only the slightest hesitation. “A friend caught them and gave them to me. I never go fishing.”

I didn’t believe him. I decided to make one more stab at gaining his friendship and finding out where he caught the trout. I said, “As I walked past your house, Norman, I happened to see an old lady sitting in a chair. Is that your mother?”

My question seemed to open a floodgate of his emotions and he broke eye contact. Again he held the knife above his shoulder, and his hand vibrated. Norman began with: “My mother’s not herself today.” Then he stopped and seemed to debate whether to tell me more. He continued: “My mother’s an invalid. I hate what she’s become.” He paused as if still debating with himself. “I hate the illness.” He resumed eye

Charles Kaplan

contact, but his eyes were clouded over—as flat as those of a corpse.

“I’m so sorry to hear that, Norman,” I said with the sincerity I felt.

Norman continued as if I’d not spoken: “A boy’s best friend is his mother. Mine’s as harmless as one of those birds I stuff.”

With that I gave up. Listening to him ramble, I was wasting the precious time I wanted to be spending out on the lake fishing. “I’m happy to hear you two are so close.” Norman winced and his face seemed sad. I continued, “I’d like for you to take me to where you keep the minnows and worms I need to buy.”

“You came here for minnow and worms?” Norman said in disbelief. His eyes cleared.

“Yes, I did. The best minnows are from the lake you’re fishing in. When I have the time, I catch the minnows I fish with in my minnow trap.”

Norman’s eyes went flat again and he said in a dejected tone, “We all live in our own private trap. I was born in mine. We can never get out.”

I said, “Yeah, I guess you’re right,” even though I didn’t believe it.

Then Norman’s eyes took on their normal luster and his voice became cheerful as he said, “I don’t mind it any more.”

I nodded my head agreeably.

Norman asked, “Who told you to come here for worms and minnows?”

“The old guy at the filling station about ten miles up the road.” I pointed in the direction I had come from. “When I asked him if his store sold baits, the codger described your place and told me this is where I’d find baits.”

“Baits! Did you ask him for baits?” he asked.

Dubious Tales

Puzzled by his reaction, I slowly inclined my head.

Norman's face lit up and his eyes glowed. He laughed hard and stomped around for almost a minute. He was still holding the knife, and I feared he'd cut himself, he was so animated. Finally Norman wiped his eyes with his shirtsleeve. "Baits. I can't get over it," and he guffawed. "That old curmudgeon is hard of hearing. I'm sure he didn't understand that you wanted minnows and worms. It's too bad you wasted your time coming here."

I was disappointed and started walking toward the steps leading down the hill to the motel. "Oh, well," I said. "It's been nice meeting you, Norman. I understand why you won't give away the secret of how and where you caught the trout."

"Wait for me," he said as he laid the knife on the patio near the faucet. "I'll walk down to your car with you."

We started down the steps walking side by side. Norman put his hand on my shoulder and asked: "You want to buy this motel?"

I grinned and vigorously shook my head.

"It's not a lot of work. I only change the sheets once a week."

To humor him, I asked, "How much you want for it?"

"Forty thousand. In cash."

"That include the big place up on the hill?" I pointed at his house.

"This place happens to be my only world. I couldn't sell all of it."

Relieved at having an out, I said, "Too bad. The price seems right. I mean right for the whole place—motel and house. But your parking lot is empty except for my car. How many guests are checked in today?"

"We do have a vacancy." Norman shook his head sadly. "As a matter of fact, twelve cabins and twelve vacancies."

Charles Kaplan

“Sorry. It’s just not my kind of place,” I said.

We reached where my station wagon was parked and shook hands. Norman said, “I have some work to do, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. I need to find a place where I can get some baits.”

Norman started laughing again. He jiggled and slapped his thighs. “I can’t get over you coming here to buy fishing baits.” As he turned and climbed the steps, I heard him laughing out loud all the way up the hill to his house.

I started the engine and drove toward the exit from the motel parking lot. By now the sun had changed the angle at which it was shining on the motel sign. I read the sign—Bates Motel— and finally realized why Norman had laughed so hard.

I wonder what became of Norman Bates. He had such a good sense of humor.

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