

The Outhouse That Dripped Blood

By Fiberglass

I awoke at first light from a dream, in which a nuckelavee and a dire bear were fighting over a sack of deer corn, to the sound of breaking timber. I rose from the bed, slipped on my spectacles, and parted the curtains to find my neighbor, Phillip the hedge wizard, standing in his backyard, ostensibly felling the trees on the perimeter of his property by flailing his arms about.

I raised the window and stuck my head out. “Do you have to do that *now*?” I shouted.

He lowered his arms and turned around, straightening his homburg. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to disturb you, but I’ve got to get this done before I head into town for my monthly breakfast engagement with Joey Lawrence.”

“The guy who sang ‘There’s Nothing My Love Can’t Fix for You, Baby’?”

“Most people mention his stint on *Gimme a Break!* first, but yeah. Incidentally, it’s just called ‘Nothin’ My Love Can’t Fix.’ He has it on repeat in the tape deck in his van.”

“I mainly just remember the video. It was mesmerizing in an execrable way.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know enough about music television to make a call on that. They lost me when they started playing that Herbie Hancock video with the house full of automatons. I didn’t sleep for a week after seeing that.”

“Yeah, Joey’s video was far more terrifying.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” He glanced at his watch and licked his lips, trying to redirect his thoughts to sausage and hash browns, no doubt.

“You have breakfast with him regularly, then.”

“First Saturday of every month. He’s quite an interesting person, actually. He’s the *Marble Madness* world champion. And did you know he has a safe in his torso?”

“He what?”

“Keeps his valuables in there. He collects Byzantine coins and cabochons, you see. Prefers to have them with him at all times.”

“What about his heart and lungs?”

“Had them placed in canopic jars and sealed in the family crypt. He has a machine that pumps his blood and breathes for him now. Everyone just assumes it’s a rolling suitcase.”

“I find the idea of a Lawrence family crypt strangely compelling.”

“It’s even better than you think. Six levels, five of which are underground, with hieroglyphs and statues and everything. There’s a pool filled with blood out back, but it keeps getting leaves and grass clippings in it, and it’s hard to find a pool cleaner who’ll deal with that sort of thing.”

“Kind of a white elephant, then.”

“That’s where they got the blood from, yeah.”

“Where’s this crypt?”

“Cemetery on the edge of town.”

“Not in Hollywood?”

“Nah. They prefer to keep a low profile.”

I nodded and pointed at a hornbeam on the ground nearby. “Why are you felling those trees, anyway?”

He blinked a few times. “You haven’t noticed?”

“Noticed what?”

“They’ve been working toward forming an independent political party.”

“Yeah, no. I was certainly unaware.”

“I had to squelch it before they chose a candidate.”

“Why would that be such a big deal?”

“It’d split the vote.”

“I see. Are you about done?”

“Yeah. Just a few more. Two minutes tops.”

I shut the window, dropped onto the mattress and watched the ceiling fan, isolating one of the blades and following it with my eyes as it spun. I put my hands behind my head and thought about the dream I had been having before the tree business began. I didn't usually remember my dreams, but this one had stayed with me.

After a couple of minutes, as promised, the sound of falling timber ceased.

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I must have dozed off because when I looked at the readout on the clock radio it was past eleven. I rolled off the bed and made my way to the back door, dodging cardboard boxes of shirts and shoes that I couldn't remember ever having owned. I threw the door open and followed the cobblestone path to the outhouse. When I reached it, however, the door wouldn't open.

“What gives?” I exclaimed.

“Get lost!” the outhouse said.

“Since when have you had the authority to decide whether or not I use you?”

It regarded me with its single eye, which was situated in the middle of the door. “I know what you ate last night. There's no way I'm letting you inside.”

“Looking in windows, are you? That's pretty low, even for an outhouse.”

“Why don't you get indoor plumbing?”

“Why don't *you* quit being stubborn and let me do what I came out here for!”

I grasped the piece of rope that served as a handle with both hands and pulled as hard as I could. The outhouse began to pitch violently, causing me to lose my balance and tumble awkwardly to the ground. Before I could regain my feet, it had grown legs, increasing its height by several feet. It tested its new appendages and then dashed across the yard, ducked around the side of the house, and ran into the middle of the street.

I attempted pursuit, but just as I reached the front yard a Winnebago appeared seemingly

out of nowhere and plowed into the outhouse before it could get out of the way. I braced myself against a tree as the little wooden building exploded in a cloud of shattered planks.

The Winnebago screeched to a halt, and a teenaged kid in a red shirt leaned out of the passenger side window. “Sorry about that. Mentor’s been hitting the bottle pretty hard lately. The formulaic nature of our travels is really getting to him. I’ve tried talking to the Immortals about it, but, you know, they’re just a bunch of cartoons.”

“These things happen,” I said, trying to project an air of nonchalance though my heart was breaking. Despite our differences, I had been fond of that outhouse.

He gave me a thumbs up, and the Winnebago pulled away. As I watched it go, I knelt down and picked up a shard of wood from the gutter and held the flat edge against my cheek. When I stood up again, I saw a man standing at the edge of the yard.

“What happened here?” he asked. “Did an outhouse get hit by a Winnebago or something?”

I dropped the piece of wood on the grass and approached him.

“Do I know you?” I said.

“It’s me,” he replied. “James.”

I squinted and realized that it was, in fact, my good friend of that name. “Sorry. I didn’t recognize you without your beard. Decided to shave it off, eh?”

His expression darkened. “Actually, it was stolen. Thieves broke in and took it during the night.”

“That’s terrible. I thought your apartment building had good security.”

“So did I.”

“Did they take anything else?”

“Just a bag of deer corn.” He paused. “Now that I think about it, I’m not sure why I even *had* that. Deer corn, of all things. Bu it was just there, and then it wasn’t.”

My brow furrowed.

“What is it?”

I shook my head to clear it. “Nothing. Just trying to come to terms with the loss of your facial hair.”

“Yeah. Me, too. Even worse, they poured salt on my face so I can never grow another one.”

“What a strange crime.”

“It’s actually a lot more common than you’d think.”

“It is?”

“Let me ask you something: Have you noticed that no American politicians have had beards, moustaches, or sideburns in, like, a hundred years?”

“I thought that was kind of odd, yeah.”

“It’s because they were stolen, just like mine was. It’s a political maneuver.”

“What difference does facial hair make?”

“Are you kidding? It has power. It can imbue people with a more commanding mien, can turn nerds into, well, nerds with facial hair.”

“Are you planning on running for office or something?”

“Well, the trees and I have been discussing it recently. They want to run me as the Bark Party candidate.”

“Even though you’re not a tree.”

“Well, they’re rooted to the ground, which is a considerable obstacle to public service, so they need someone with mobility. They like me well enough, and I certainly fit the bill.”

“I imagine voting is a challenge for them.”

“They vote by mail.”

“It doesn’t bother them that the ballots are made from processed tree carcasses?”

“I don’t think they know what paper actually is. Honestly, if you weren’t aware of its origins, would you have ever guessed where it comes from?”

“Yeah, probably not.”

“I’m certainly not going to tell them.”

“So,” I said, suddenly thankful for my legs, “who’s behind these thefts?”

“They’re specialists trained in covert facial-hair removal. There are only a handful of people in the world who can do it, and not much else is known about them. I heard the authorities captured one of them in the 1940s, but he bit into a suicide capsule before they could interrogate him.”

“That’s serious business.”

“It is indeed.” James glanced over at the wizard’s yard, and his mouth dropped open.

“Hey! What the hell happened to the trees?”

“Phillip felled a bunch of them this morning.”

“Did he say *why*?”

“As a matter of fact, he...” A thought struck me. “This might seem like a weird question, but what do you know about Joey Lawrence?”

“Well, other than his television appearances and musical career, I hear he has a safe in his chest, which is pretty noteworthy. He’s also become active in the political arena lately. Our platforms are fairly similar, though his views are more extreme.” His eyes went wide. “You’re not suggesting...?”

“I’ll drive.”

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We climbed into my car and raced to the cemetery. It took a while to locate the Lawrence Family crypt because it was concealed in a dingle several hundred feet beyond the rest of the graves and tombs.

“You really think Lawrence is behind this, then?” James asked.

“He seems the most likely party. He has connections in Hollywood, and everyone knows those people run everything.”

“And your neighbor’s in cahoots with him?”

“Well, it’s hard to say. He and Lawrence have a monthly breakfast engagement, but his designs are kind of vague. The thing with the trees could have been nothing more than his doing a friend a favor.”

“Chopping down a bunch of trees is a pretty big favor.”

“He didn’t chop anything. He did it with sorcery.”

“He has magical powers? Why didn’t you say so?”

“He’s just a hedge wizard, really.”

“What’s that? Something to do with investment funds?”

“It just means that he isn’t very good. Just knows some basic stuff.”

“Felling trees seems like pretty powerful magic to me.”

“Perhaps so, but all he managed to accomplish was annoying me.”

I grasped the crypt door’s handle and pulled. It came as no surprise that it refused to budge. I thought back to my earlier difficulty with the outhouse and sighed.

“So, what’s the plan?”

“We’ve got to get in there and destroy the canopic jars containing his organs,” I said.

“It’s probably the only way to put an end to him.”

“Do we really need to do that? I mean, it’d be nice if he’d ditch the political scene, but...”

“I strongly suspect that the lovably goofy Joey Lawrence of the past is no more. He’s been replaced by a heartless monster. Literally. We’ve got to get rid of him before matters get out of hand.” I looked down and noticed some kernels of corn scattered around. “Keep your eyes peeled. There are monsters about.”

“Why the hell didn’t you mention *this* before?”

“Duh. We’re in a graveyard. There are always monsters. I mean, sometimes they take a day off just like everyone else, but—”

“What kinds of monsters?”

“A dire bear and a nuckelavee.”

“That’s oddly specific. And what on earth is a *nuckelavee*?”

“Your constant questions are tiring me out, man.” I picked up a piece of corn and rolled it between my fingers, looking at the overcast sky. “I had a dream last night, a dream that I’m increasingly convinced was of a prophetic nature. You’re just going to have to trust me on this.” I tossed the kernel away and scratched the back of my head. “A nuckelavee is kind of like a centaur, but the horse’s head is still there. The humanoid part doesn’t have any legs but has really long arms and clawed hands. It’s like a rider fused to the back of the horse, in other words. Oh, and its musculature is completely exposed.”

“What does deer corn have to do with it?”

“I suspect that that’s nothing more than an excrescence of last night’s dream, a surreal incursion into the waking world, such as it is.”

He grimaced. “Maybe the political arena isn’t right for me after all.”

“Don’t you go backing out on me now. I have a great idea for a campaign button: ‘Vote James of the Bark Party. He’ll go out on a limb for you.’”

“That’s really good.”

“I thought so. Hang on. I’ll be right back.”

I left James and walked around to the back of the crypt. Ten feet behind the structure, a pool filled with polluted blood, just as Phillip had described, was surrounded by a low wrought-iron fence. A doughnut-shaped float bobbed on the surface, suggesting the pool had been used recently. I had never seen a pool like this before, but they were popular with the undead, as I understood it. At the end of the patio, a skeleton in a bikini and sun hat languished on a deck chair, an unfinished Mai Tai in its phalanges. It reminded me of how I had often tried to recapture the magic of certain summers, only to find that such a thing was impossible and that snow cones didn’t taste as good as I remembered.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of movement in the trees. I looked just in time to avoid the

claws of an enormous black bear. It roared as I backpedaled, drawing the pistol I kept in the pocket of my jacket for just such an emergency. I fired off four shots into the monster's chest, and it went down like a sack of dire potatoes. I shot it twice more in the head to make sure it had expired.

James came running. He stopped a few feet from me, staring at the dead bear.

"One down," I said, panting.

We made a circuit of the crypt, trying to figure out a way in, but there didn't appear to be any options. There wasn't even a window, but I guess a crypt doesn't really need one.

Suddenly, a gout of smoke sprayed from the leaves at our feet, and a ghostly outhouse appeared before us.

"Hi," it said. It had no visible mouth, but I could sense its scowl.

"Um, hello. Nice to see you again."

It looked here and there before returning its gaze to me. "I can't help but notice that you haven't given me a proper burial."

"Not yet, no."

"You probably haven't even given any thought to what to do with my remains."

"Well, I didn't have an opportunity to ask your preference, you know, which complicates matters. You deserve to have a say, after all, so it's good I ran into you here."

"I suppose you were probably just going to burn me. How predictable."

"May I say something?" a voice asked.

We all turned and beheld an enormous, nightmarish creature glistening with raw musculature, a grotesque blend of the worst aspects of both equine and human. It stood about ten feet away, its form dappled by leafy shadows, mist rising from the nostrils of the vermilion, striated horse's head that hung low to the ground and swayed at the end of its veiny neck. Its second head, the humanoid one, which sat upon the shoulders of an emaciated torso with ribcage clearly visible, was no more pleasant to behold, with its squinting yellow eyes and the rows of fangs in its distended mouth. It loomed before us like a ghostly reimagining of Fraser's *End of the Trail*.

“Of course,” I replied.

“First of all,” it said, “thanks for dispatching the bear for me. That makes things easier.”

“I didn’t exactly do it for you. I had a gun, and it attacked me. Shooting it seemed the logical course of action.”

“The result’s the same.”

“What was it doing here?”

“It was an agent of the Bark Party.”

I looked at James.

He raised his palms. “I swear I had no idea.”

“Secondly,” the nuckelavee continued, “I’d like to ask what *you’re* doing here.”

“I believe I can answer that,” the spectral outhouse said.

“Don’t listen to him!” James exclaimed. “He was hit by a motorhome just over an hour ago and isn’t thinking clearly.”

The nuckelavee moved toward us, waving a clawed hand dismissively. “For the record, I know exactly what you’re doing here. My question was entirely rhetorical. You want to destroy Joey Lawrence’s canopic jars. I’m afraid I can’t allow that to happen.”

“What difference does it make to you?” I asked.

“If you must know, I work for his campaign.”

“In what capacity?”

“Well, so far, I’ve mostly been putting flyers on car windshields, but once things get moving I’m going to have more responsibilities.”

I refrained from telling him that he’d be better off not getting his hopes up.

Just then a phone rang. Like a skinless Zack Morris, the nuckelavee produced a brick cellular phone out of thin air and, walking a few feet away, perhaps out of a misguided show of courtesy, answered it.

“Hello? Yes. Uh-huh. Okay, great. See you soon.”

He ended the call and returned to where we were standing. “That was Joey. He’s on his way here. Let’s just say he’s not very pleased with the way things are unfolding.” It tapped the nails of both hands together; the phone had apparently gone back to wherever it had come from. “He *is* a reasonable man, however, so he has a proposition for you.”

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Ten interminable minutes later, a dirty white van pulled up to the crest of the wooded valley, “Nothin’ My Love Can’t Fix” blasting distortedly through the speakers until the driver killed the engine. The stentorian creaking of opening and closing vehicle doors ripped through the graveyard, bouncing back and forth among the nearby tombstones and tree trunks like pinballs, and Lawrence, grinning dementedly, emerged in its wake, Phillip beside him.

They descended the steps that had been cut into the side of the slope. I was relieved to see that neither of them was armed. I was in no position for a gun battle, having used up all my bullets on the dire bear. Lawrence did, however, have a suitcase-like machine with wheels, which he steered down the steps with surprising deftness. A hose extended from the top of the case into a box in his waist.

When the reached the floor of the dingle, the nuckelavee approached.

“Ah, Herb,” Lawrence said. “Thanks for keeping things under control in my absence. I’ll take it from here.” He pointed over his shoulder. “There are some flyers in the back of the van. I’d appreciate it if you’d see that they’re distributed.”

“Of course, sir. I’d be glad to.”

It began climbing the steps but made sure to turn around and glare at me about halfway up.

Herb?

“Greetings, gentlemen,” Lawrence said, turning his attention to us. “Hope you’re well this afternoon. I see you brought the ghost of an outhouse with you.”

“Isn’t that the one from behind your house?” Phillip asked.

“It followed us,” James said, crossing his arms.

The hedge wizard smiled and stood back as Lawrence walked to the door of the crypt and pressed his hand against it. It swung open as he stepped back out of the way.

“Shall we go inside?” he asked.

Not really having any other choice, we followed as he and Phillip entered the building.

We were greeted by two life-size ushabtis with gold crowns and staves. The walls were covered in hieroglyphs and strange paintings of Lawrence’s ancestors interacting with Anubis, Thoth, Isis, and Sobek in various ways.

On the left-hand wall, beside wooden berths containing the remains of several mummified members of the Lawrence clan, stood a *Marble Madness* machine. Unlike everything else, it wasn’t covered in dust and cobwebs.

“Are you familiar with this particular game?” Lawrence asked.

I nodded.

“I enjoy making wagers, especially ones with high stakes.”

“What are you getting at?”

“It’s very simple,” he said, caressing the bezel. “If you can beat my score, which is displayed at the top of the leader board, I’ll see that James’ beard is returned, I’ll drop out of the race, and I’ll stay out of politics forever.”

“That all sounds good. And if I can’t?”

“You’ll make a nice meal for the thing at the bottom of the pool.”

“There’s something in there?”

“Of course. What, did you think it was merely for recreation?”

I shrugged.

What was I going to do? Phillip had told me that Lawrence was the *Marble Madness* world champion, and I had no reason to doubt it. I had gotten pretty good on the machine in the laundromat in my old home town, but that was years ago, and I knew I hadn’t come anywhere near champion status.

As I pondered my options, the outhouse sidled up to me. “Can I talk to you?” it whispered, indicating the doorway with its eye.

I smiled at Lawrence. “Would you excuse us for a moment?”

He nodded, set his blood-and-air machine next to the cabinet, and focused his attention on the game’s attract mode. James leaned against the wall, shaking his head. Phillip pulled a spell book out of his pocket and began reading.

I followed the outhouse through the door and to a spot behind some bushes.

“I’m willing to put our differences aside for the time being,” it said.

“I appreciate that. What’s on your mind?”

“I can help you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve absorbed the essence of everyone who’s ever relieved themselves in me. Many years ago, that game’s programmer was visiting the previous owners of your house, and, of course, he made use of me during the visit. Therefore, I know everything there is to know about the game.”

“That’s awfully convenient.”

“Easy for you to say.”

I glanced back through the door of the crypt. “Okay, so you're an expert on the game. How does that benefit me?”

“Simple. You let me take control of your body while you play. Lawrence will never know the difference.”

“You mean like in that Patrick Swayze movie?”

“*Dirty Dancing?*”

I sighed. “Yes, that one.”

“I don’t see how that relates to this situation, but okay.” It looked me up and down as if

considering what it might feel like to navigate a human body. I thought about its remains, scattered across the street, about how, with an adequate degree of carpentry, it would be conceivable to reassemble it and how that wouldn't work for a human who had suffered the same fate. We were fundamentally different, yet somehow we had found ourselves ensnared in the vast fishing net that the gods drag behind their boat on its journey across the cosmos.

I saw something inside its ghostly eye as it regarded me, a profound sensibility that I could never understand and probably wouldn't want to.

“All I ask in return,” it said, “is a nice burial.”

I considered all of this. What if I were to let it possess me and it refused to vacate? The prospect of sharing my body with an outhouse for the rest of my life was one of the most unpleasant things I could think of.

Despite my better judgment, though, I couldn't see any other path to success.

“All right,” I said. “It's a deal.”