

What's Back There

By Jacob Duarte Spiel

[this episode opens with the sound of a propellor plane engine in the background, the sound slowly fades into nothing as the narrator says his first few lines]

Clare. Baby it's me, Clare.

I hope they give this to you, I really hope they give this to you. Actually, I hope they never give this to you. I hope they never have a reason to give this to you. I'm sorry. I'm distracted, baby. I have to focus. I'm on my way back from "a trip" for work. They've got me flying a turboprop today, Engelhoffer Mark 3. It's a smooth ride, but I gotta pay attention. Remember that potholed road when we drove through Nebraska? The turbulence in the arctic is just like that.

[shouting to the back] Fellas! Where are ya? Fellas? Daniels? You still back there Daniels?

Daniels went back to the cargo hold, keeping an eye on the core sample I guess. He can't hear me back there. Problem is nobody else can hear me either. Probably catching shuteye after a long day, or maybe they're trying to get one over on me. High spirits and all that. Normal after a successful mission. But then again...

I'm not... I'm not worried. I'm really not. I think it's all a gag... yeah. I'll get home, I'll get back. I'll land on the tarmac, drive back to our perfect little house, open our blue front door you love so much, and you'll tell me it needs to be repainted like you always do and I'll say "I'll do it" like I always do, but this time I'll actually paint the door. I really will.

But just in case... No. Never mind. I'm just talking here, Clare. Just trying to stay awake.

You remember Charlotte's 4th birthday party? Of course you do. Us in the backyard, Charlotte running around in her new yellow dress. The bright spring air, hot enough that you could confuse it for summer. I brought out that old lemonade pitcher, the one I inherited from my gram, except it was too full and the bottom just cracked and fell out. From the belt down I was soaked in lemonade and you and Charlotte couldn't stop laughing. Then you brought out the hose and sprayed me down which turned into that water fight with the leftover birthday balloons until we were all in a heap, giggling like crazy while the sun dried our clothes. You looked at me with that look you get sometimes.

There's a mystery I still can't figure out. I think about it once a week maybe, in moments like these where there's nothing else to do.

Why did the lemonade pitcher break like that? There were no cracks, nothing even hairline. I always checked because the damn thing was 80 years old. I guess sometimes things break down for no reason. No reason at all.

So this “trip” I’m on. We were in Russia. Well, not exactly Russia, they can’t have guys like us operating in the cities or on the mainland. Not after what the Ruskies did to Francis Gary Powers. Huge black eye to the organization and the entire country.

No, we went to Franz Josef Land. Never heard of it, right Clare? Me neither. Lemme tell ya, it ain’t Cape Canaveral. It’s this big frozen wasteland in the arctic above Russia. Not quite the North Pole, but let’s just say I could hear Santa’s sleigh bells while I was there. You’ll tell Charlotte that, won’t you? Tell her I said that.

They had us flying over Canada, refuel on Baffin Island, then across the Arctic Circle. Some Ruskie eggheads had set up a temporary research facility on the northern tip of Franz Josef Land to study glaciers. Our intelligence boys had intercepted their radio communications. Daniels played it for me, but I don’t know Russian from a hole in the ground. Just a lot of excited babbling. Apparently they’d found something while collecting ice cores.

Well, Uncle Sam wanted that something and what do I always say? “What Uncle Sam wants, Uncle Sam gets.”

So I kissed you goodbye, told you I’d be back in a few days, and took off for the Arctic. Five other men came with me – Daniels, Stock, Marlowe, Hess, and Lewis – men experienced in winter operations like this one.

We’re all on this Engelhoffer together, but you wouldn’t know it. It’s only me and the yoke in this cockpit. I’m starting to worry, just a little bit. You’d think one of them would come up here, keep me company. Guess not. I always get a little nervous when I’m in the cockpit alone. A little paranoid. Feels like I’m cut off, like they could be planning something and I’d never know.

But they’re all in the cargo hold, sleeping or... or...

[to himself] Focus, Dave. Focus. Keep flying, goddammit. You’ve got your orders.

I’ll tell you what happened next Clare. It wasn’t long until we touched down on Franz Josef Land. Thank God we had a clear day, those arctic storms will wipe even a great pilot blind. The snow on the ground was no picnic either with all that sun, each of us had these special glasses just to keep our retinas from leaking out our sockets. Ah, not the prettiest picture. Wind came in at about 40 knots. Dry as a bone too. These Ruskie eggheads picked a hell of a spot to do their research.

We’d spotted their camp while flying overhead and touched down far enough away that they wouldn’t notice us.

We came up over the ridge to find maybe 30 men. They weren’t expecting us, or anybody, not halfway across the world on a frozen rock. They just stood there staring as we came over the last ridge, slowly walking back-and-forth. No resistance, they knew their goose was cooked and

eaten. One of em even walked up close to me, not violent, looked like he had some last words. He said something I couldn't understand.

Only took about 5 minutes to clear 'em out. Bodies scattered around, broken spectacles, shredded documents drifting out to sea, lotta bullet holes leeching red into the ice. Hey, when they core this place in 20,000 years maybe they'll find that blood. That's neat. Whole thing reminded me of that operation in Cuba...

Now what in the heck am I saying all this for?

I'm sorry Clare. I know what you must be thinking. I don't mean to talk about my work, I know you don't want to hear about all this stuff. "Too violent". I get it, I really do. "Keep it at the office", that's what the guys in the organization are always talking about. Everything nice and compartmentalized, barriers and all that. It's just I'm flying home and trying to focus and I guess the barriers are leaky right now.

The guys line up the, ah, remains while I bring the plane around. We pack everything we can into the cargo hold. Daniels is leading the operation, his briefing was a bit more substantial, ya know? He's got a special thermal case, about 5 feet long, to carry our target, plus all the relevant notebooks he can find. Did you know Daniels can read Russian? Hell of a guy. You met him once, not sure if you remember. Grills a good steak.

Once we cleared the glacier about 300ft in the air, I gave the signal. The guys held on tight and let the cargo doors open. The Ruskies rolled out into the open air, splashing down into the icy water. Ocean water gets lower than zero you know, cuz the salt stops it from freezing. Just like the road salt on our driveway.

We'd weighed the corpses— sorry, the "remains" down with whatever we could find at the camp. Wasn't long before the little bobbing Ruskies were sucked beneath the waves. Little white pinpricks in the vastness of all that water. Then nothing. Job done. Time to head home.

The cockpit is pretty roomy up here. Not that it matters right now, when it's just me. But a few hours ago all the guys were up here chatting, laughing, talking about weekend plans and holidays. Daniels is getting into it. On the job the guy is a professional, a *real* professional. I think he handled 10 of those Ruskies all by himself. Bang, bang, bang. Doubt he used more than a dozen bullets.

Clare, I'm sorry, I know you don't like the violent stuff. I'll try to keep it clean. Things are just hazy right now, I keep thinking "don't talk about the violence" but it's right there, like that big bowl of fruit on the dining table. Remember a few weeks ago? When I came down and saw the bowl and said "when did we put that out?" and you said "that bowl's been there for years". Ha! Sometimes you can ignore stuff for years and then, suddenly, it's all you can see. I'm just tired probably. I'll keep a lid on it.

So what was I saying? Right, Daniels, he's a professional on the job but off the job he's a bit of a wild man, y'know? Hot-rodding around, out late drinking most nights, goes through girlfriends like air through a flyswatter. Point is we're off the job now and Daniels keeps patting this thermal briefcase, almost like he wants to show us.

Course he can't do that. I saw the security clearance for this operation. I didn't even know the clearance levels went that high. Who's even allowed to know what this thing is? John McCone? LBJ? Kennedy?

But Daniels, he's off the job now. Now that wild streak comes out. He turns to us with this big shit-eating grin and he says: "you guys wanna see?"

And hell yeah we do.

So Daniels opens it up. The guys crowd around. I'm flying the plane of course, so all I hear is Hess saying "ho-lee shit" in that big Texan accent of his. I sneak a peek over my shoulder.

At first it doesn't look like much. Just a big cylinder of ice. You know these ice cores, honey? They pull them from deep in the glaciers, down where the ice is really old. Eggheads can tell all sorts of stuff about the past by testing 'em. That's what the top of the core looks like: regular ice. Then I get to the bottom and suddenly there's goosebumps all over my body.

Daniels is saying something about how this core is over a million years old, pulled from about a mile deep in the glacier. The guys are all nodding, but not really listening. They're staring at the same thing I am.

The core is about 5 feet long. The top half is just like I said, all ice. But that bottom two-and-a-half feet? It's not ice, it's not soil, it's not rock.

It's flesh. And bone.

A great long slab of gray, already starting to thaw, topped with what looked like porous, white stone. Daniels was grinning ear to ear, like he'd just reeled in a 15 pound bass.

"Does this look familiar to you fellas?" He asked.

Course it did, Clare. I've seen guys blown apart too many times. We all had. Couldn't be anything else. But Daniels likes to be a bit theatrical sometimes. You saw him in the community theater production that one time. South Pacific, right? Anyway, Daniels waits a beat to let us soak in the tension of it all, then he says something damn crazy:

"Fellas," he said. "You're looking at brain matter."

The whole cockpit fell into an uneasy silence. You could see the guys working it out in their heads, just like I was.

Then Stock lets out a low whistle which, for him, is the equivalent of me jumping up and down with my pants on my head.

“So this brain matter,” he says. “This was a mile under the ice.”

“Yessir,” says Daniels.

“And from looking at it, whatever brain we pulled it from must’ve been at least,” Stock’s lips moved as he measured and did the math. “3 feet around.”

“No sir,” says Daniels, grinning wider now. “Notice that the Ruskies didn’t catch skull on the other side. Simple fact is we don’t know how big the brain is and, more importantly... we don’t know who the brain belongs to.”

At that, I snapped my head around.

“What the hell are you trying to say, Daniels?”

“Fellas,” says Daniels, closing up the briefcase. “Fellas, I’m telling you that whatever this thing is: it’s big, it’s dead, and it’s been under the ice for well-over a million years. If it’s an alien on top of all that... well that’s just Uncle Sam’s luck ain’t it? We won’t know anything else til it’s back at the lab.”

Marlowe started handing out cigarettes. “So we’re the men who made first contact, huh? Smoke up boys, you earned it.”

And then it was all backpats and firm handshakes. Daniels excused himself to find a good spot in the hold for our precious cargo. When he came back, he was reading one of the Russian notebooks. That’s Daniels for ya, scientist brain in a linebacker body. He sat up with me for a bit, reading, then he went back to the hold. Didn’t say anything to me. Real focused on whatever’s in that notebook.

And that’s fine. He wants to make sure he does his job right. I respect that.

It’s just... Clare, it’s been two hours since Daniels went back there. This whole time I’ve been alone in the cockpit. I can’t stand up, can’t step away from the controls, not with this Arctic wind tugging the yoke every which way. I keep hollering back there, but they can’t hear me. Not over the propellers. Or maybe... maybe...

No. That’s stupid...

When we refuel on Baffin Island I'll go check on the guys. They're probably asleep. Til then it's just me up here, just me and the dark.

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Clare, Clare, do you remember Charlotte's 4th birthday party? It was such a beautiful day, the sun was out and shining, it was spring, almost summer. Or at least it looked beautiful. I remember it was so cold, so deeply cold, the kind of chill you get all the way down to your bones. I had that old lemonade pitcher filled with cold lemonade, why did I think cold lemonade was the right thing for such a cold day? No wonder the pitcher broke. The cold made it brittle. That's just the guy you married I guess ha ha! Always a little scattered, a little strange. That's why you, me, and Charlotte spent the day throwing water balloons at each other.

Can you imagine? Water balloons in the middle of a snowstorm. Your mother would've killed me for that stunt. Just glad you never told her.

It's still dark for me Clare, coming over the Arctic this time of year it's almost always night time. I'm alone again in the cockpit. Talkin' is a good way to keep the mind awake. There's only darkness coming through the windows. It's making me feel fuzzy, y'know?

[shouting to the back] Fellas! Fellas! This has been funny, real funny. Marlowe I know you aren't that cuckoo, I know you were putting me on.

[pause]

Fine! Have it your way, ya pricks!

Ah jeez, there I go, using language. Sorry, Clare. It's not my fault. The guys are being real ass-jerks. Jerks.

Daniels, Daniels came back up to the cockpit. He was still absorbed in that little notebook, flipping back and forth from the first few pages to the last few.

After a few minutes I couldn't take the droning of the engine anymore so I called out to him.

"Hey Daniels, did the Mets win?"

Daniels started like he'd heard a gunshot.

"What?"

"The Mets? Did they win? I never see you that focused unless you're reading the sports section."

“Right,” said Daniels. “It’s this journal. Something those Ruskies mentioned here.”

I didn’t say anything, just let it sit. Daniels would start talking sooner or later. Or he wouldn’t. About 2 minutes passed before he said:

“Seems like those eggheads might not’ve been all there. In the head, I mean. First part of the journal is research notes, but this part.” I heard pages flipping. “This part is all nonsense, poor guy can’t keep anything straight. Just keeps writing about something cracking or crumbling or something like that. I’m no Ruskie, I just read a bit of it.”

“Maybe some bad winds tore up their camp?” I suggested.

Daniels was quiet, I heard more pages flipping. “That’s all it says for 20 pages ‘walls cracking’ or maybe it’s something like ‘no more barriers’. Then it’s all just scribbles. Last legible entry was days before we arrived. Poor guy must’ve had a nervous breakdown.”

I shrugged. “You know how it is with experts. They can explain the world but they can’t keep their own shit organized.”

Daniels just furrowed his brow more. He brought the journal up to his penlight, turning the pages translucent, turning the drops of blood on the paper black.

“Say, these aren’t scribbles after all,” he said. “It’s writing. Overlapped writing. Like someone tried to write over the same page 4 or 5 times.”

We were both stumped by that one.

Now why would someone want to write over their own writing, Clare? I’ve been sitting up here thinking about it. Can’t make heads or tails. Good to have a puzzle to focus on right now. I’m feeling a bit off if I’m being honest.

Daniels and me, we sat there a while. I refocused on flying the Engelhoffer. Figured the journal and sample were above my paygrade anyway. Let it be Daniels’ problem.

Then... well something real strange happened. I don’t know how much to make of it. At first I couldn’t even hear it, I more felt it, this *dup dup dup* vibration through the metal floor of the cockpit. I pulled off my headset and listened close. It was getting louder.

Daniels looked up from the journal. We made eye-contact. The banging suddenly stopped and then, a minute later, Marlowe came in through the door. He looked dazed, you know. A little off. I figured he was just tired after the mission. Daniels turned to him.

“Marlowe, you alright,” he said.

"Yeah," Marlowe replied. He sounded real far away. He kept walking around the tiny room touching the metal of the plane, bumping into me and Daniels cause there isn't much space in these cockpits.

It got to Daniels fast. "Marlowe, what the hell? Go back to cargo. And keep it down."

"Yeah," said Marlowe. And then: "Remember when we were in East Germany? I killed that Commie with his own belt."

Daniels furrowed his brow. "We don't talk about work after the job is done, soldier." Daniels almost never pulls rank.

"Sorry, sir," said Marlowe.

I stifled a chuckle. I'd been there. Daniels can be loose, but he's like me when it comes to this stuff. There's work and there's life and never the twain shall meet. Get too sloppy after a job and he wouldn't hesitate to put you down.

"I'm just wondering," said Marlowe. "What did you think of my brother?"

Daniels peered up at him. "Didn't know you had one."

Marlowe scratched the back of his head. "Now that's funny, cuz he was there with us when I killed that Commie. Was back when, gosh, musta been before he moved California-way for treatment."

"Your brother was in East Germany," I said. "That doesn't make sense."

Marlowe kept scratching the back of his head. "No, no I guess it don't. But he was, I remember it so well. Killed that Commie right in his hospital room, all those tubes coming out of him and me, over by the window strangling that Commie."

Marlowe's eyes were all glassy as he said this, Clare, and he wouldn't stop scratching.

He was scratching so hard, Clare. Daniels told him to stop but he just stared out the front windshield, into the black night sky. He... his hair was falling out in clumps and underneath the scalp was red as a sunburn.

Daniels took him by the arm, brought him back to the cargo bay. They were in there for a few minutes before Daniels came back in, shaking his head.

"Nerves," he said, but he didn't sound sure. "His brother died two years back. Guess it's still on his mind."

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I get it. Say, what was that banging sound earlier?"

"It was Hess," he said, not really looking at me. "He was... he was..."

Daniels trailed off. He stood there for a minute, chewing his lip. He was tapping the Russian notebook against his open palm, as if considering his next move.

Daniels opened the cockpit door. He stood there a moment then turned back to me.

"Dave, I need to ask you something," he spoke carefully. "Were you at my wedding?"

"No sir, no I wasn't," I replied.

Daniels just nodded, seemed a bit distracted, and then walked back to the cargo bay. He locked the cockpit door behind him.

Now what do you make of that Clare? Daniels got married at least 5 years before I ever met him. That's what I've been mulling over, repeating it in my head. It doesn't make sense, but maybe it does. Maybe it does.

[SFX: Banging noises and a guttural shout in the distance, muffled by the cockpit door]

What the hell is that?

[Recording goes dead]

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[Recording resumes]

Stock... Stock is dead.

I, uh, I don't know when it happened. Hard to remember. He smashed himself against the cockpit door. I turned and saw his dark red face filling the small window like blood in a vial. Two more kicks and he was through. He had a gun. I didn't have anything except the yoke. He looked insane up close, his hair was falling out, like Marlowe's.

"You fucker," he spat at me. "You knew, you fucking knew! You knew and you told them didn't you?"

A huge gust of wind smashed against the plane, setting off the indicator lights like flashing Christmas decorations. The controls were bouncing in my hands. I tried to settle him without turning from the console. "Easy there, Stock."

"We fucked behind the bar that night and you flew the plane we were all in. You dropped those bodies into the ocean while I screwed him and he screwed me," Stock was gibbering, rubbing his eyes, one with his fist and the other with the gun barrel. "You watched and knew and you didn't say anything to my wife... my wife... oh god Marissa... she was there in the park, she could see it all."

He dropped the gun and started weeping into his hands. His fingers tore at his scalp until clumps of hair fell to the cockpit floor.

"Stock," I said. "Stock what the hell are you talking about? Just settle down big fella."

He rounded on me again, pushed the gun to my temple. It was all I could do to keep the plane steady. "You were there. The whole time. You flew us. The bar. The park. You told the org I was queer, didn't you? Had to, right? You saw it. Man of duty. No choice."

I swear it Clare, I didn't know what he was talking about. Seemed all blended together, he was slurring his words, sentences running into sentences, like he was trying to say two things at once, or one thought on top of another thought. I said something to him, tried to get him to stop, but he clapped his hands over his ears, like hearing my voice was too much. His fingernails dug deep into his scalp until blood welled up and poured over his wrists. He let out a long, low scream.

I tried to get to him, lord I tried, but as soon as I stood up the Engelhoffer pitched nose down and I had to grab the yoke to stop us plunging into the sea. Stock lost his balance and careened forward, smashing his head on the console. That was that. All it took.

Daniels ran up from cargo and pulled Stock's body from beneath my seat, dragged him to the back of the cockpit.

I asked him where the rest of the men were. What happened.

Daniels just shook his head. At first just saying no, but then more vigorously, like a dog with something stuck in its ear that it's trying to dislodge. His hair fell out the more he did it, strands pluming into the air like smoke.

He shook his head hard for a good 2 minutes, just like that, and when he stopped his eyes were all glazed over. There was something leaking from his ear, this clear fluid. He was turned away when he spoke so I don't know how his mouth made those sounds.

It was like he said three things at once, all overlapping. I caught snippets, stuff I recognized. The mission in Argentina, something about when he started at the org, that kind of stuff. Then there were all these words I didn't quite get. Daniels talking bout a first wife, I didn't even know he had one. Said something like shame or being ashamed or maybe I misheard... then he turned to me, finally looked at me:

"Dave," he said. "Thanks for coming to the wedding."

And then he walked out of the cockpit. That was... 30 minutes ago. No, longer. No, shorter. Dammit, it's hard to keep it straight now. I haven't heard from him since. I haven't heard anything from anyone back there, these damn propellers are so loud. I don't want to think it, but it feels like I might be the last person on here.

And Daniels left the ice core in the co-pilot's seat. I swear, Clare, I can feel this itching in the backs of my eyes whenever I look at it.

I'm coming home baby. I just need to focus for a bit. I promise.

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I'm remembering Charlotte's 4th birthday party. The bodies, the blood, and through it all Charlotte running around, acting like those dead men weren't littering the ground. What kind of daughter did I raise, Clare? What kind of kid can just ignore dozens of dead men, just pretend like she's fine, like it's all okay?

And you, Clare, you with those water balloons, hurling them at me and Charlotte, not even mentioning the bloodstains on my fatigues. Not even telling Daniels to stop shooting at the Russians behind the picket fence. Not even stopping while we got married. Who would've thought to get married on their daughter's 4th birthday? Your mother would've said we were living in sin, but there she was, smiling in the front row next to the Cuban informant I'd strangled that day behind the bush.

And it was all so cold and dark. Cold and dark as an arctic winter. And me, with lemonade staining my pants. A broken pitcher in my hand.

That's not right, raising Charlotte like that. I know it's not right, it can't be, I just don't understand how I let it happen. She'll grow up twisted, she'll grow up to hate her daddy and mommy. She'll grow up to hate the world. I'll leave the org, I'll leave it just as soon as I'm back. I'll find something else to do, something that doesn't leak through and poison everything. God I tried to hold it back, you believe me, don't you Clare? I thought I could but it doesn't work like that, does it...

Clare, I think something is wrong. My hair is falling out, did you know that? I've got this headache like nothing else.

Finish the mission, Dave. Finish it and then you're finished too.

Daniels left the core sample in the cargo hold. God, just thinking about it makes me feel like my head is on fire. Like this buzzing all up and down my spine and head. All these memories... I can't focus...

I think I need to... wait... wait...

Oh my god, Clare! I forgot you were on here, with Charlotte too. We're going to the zoo to see the gorillas. I didn't say anything when you saw Stock die. Why didn't you stop him? Why didn't you help me? Because you know I deserved it? I'm coming baby, I'm coming! I have to explain, I have... to apologize. Don't go to the back, don't let Charlotte see the blood in the cargo bay for God's sake.

I'll stand, Stock is dead up here but Stock is alive in the back. Stock take the wheel, I need to get my family. I'll be right back. I'll be right back. Fight the turbulence, Stock. Keep us level. Easy, just like riding a bike.

It's going to be okay, I just need to pull it apart. I just need to pull it apart and then I can fix it. I know it can all be okay if it's just separated. You just need to give me a chance to separate it Clare. Goddammit Clare, why won't you answer me?

[becoming more distant]

Clare? Charlotte? Where are you?

[the sound of a plane going down and then crashing into the water]