

COLD WEATHER FRIENDS

West Virginia, 1998

The winter waged war against the small-town roads. Wind wobbled cars as they cruised down the slick asphalt. The snow was already enough of a problem before the wind began picking up, so when I spotted an old family-run motel not long after crossing the bridge into the state, I decided it was best to stop in for the evening. It was the kind of place that had probably never had any repair or cosmetic treatment, at least on the outside, and a place I wouldn't have normally been caught dead in, at the time. But between the harsh conditions and the eight hours I'd already put into the drive I decided, "*The hell with it,*" and pulled the high-end rental into the pothole-strewn parking lot. I was mortified by the thought of any of my clients finding out I'd stayed in such a place, sure they'd find a new antique broker if they did. This thought was punctuated by one of the axles slapping the pavement when I drove over a pothole and I seriously considered getting back on the road for a long moment, before I shuffled my way to the main entrance.

I was only thirty-three at the time and I remember thinking that the man sitting behind the old wood desk, watching football on a small TV, looked way too old to be running a business like this, but, in hindsight, he probably wasn't much older than I am now; the years just hadn't been kind.

"You lost?" the man asked, barely looking up from the TV, whose signal was so blurry you could hardly make out what was happening.

"No, sir. Traveling for business. Thought I'd get off the road for the night, and this seemed like a good place." I tried to fix him with my trademarked smile, the one that did more for my job than the multiple degrees ever did, but he didn't look up enough to notice.

“It’s forty for the night. I ain’t got no food or booze but Roxy’s is just down the road and there’s a convenience store barely a quarter mile. Ol’ Marvin owns both places and he’ll keep ‘em open in ten feet of snow.”

I hesitated for just a moment but the thought of walking for food seemed less daunting than looking for a new motel, so I said, “Sounds good to me, friend.”

The old motel owner finally looked away from the TV and frowned when he took in my clearly expensive three-piece. “You some kinda government agent or sumton?”

“Come on now. Do you think the government pays this well?” I asked with what I felt was plenty of goodhearted mirth, but the old man just stared at me blankly. “Uh, no, I work for art and antique collectors.”

“Hmm,” the old man grunted, “you sure? I know you government types still like to poke y’alls heads around here from time to time.”

“I’m sure.”

“Hmm. Very well. What’s your name?”

“Gary. Gary Chamberlin.”

After he took down my information and I handed over forty dollars cash, I was given a key, yes, a physical key, and was led down a long hallway and was let into a room that might not have been opened in over a year. There was a staleness to the air, but the room itself was nice enough. Nicer than what I had expected given everything else I’d seen.

My plan was to get cozy and get to sleep so that I could hit the road early but after checking the weather channel and seeing that the storm was going to continue into the morning, I spent some time staring at the sleeping pills I’d bribed my doctor into prescribing me and decided to put on something a little more casual, threw on an overcoat, and made the trek to Roxy’s, a bar-diner combo that was well packed and lively despite the weather. I got quite a few stares when I got there, even my casual clothes were nicer than what anyone else was wearing, but I

quickly made conversation with a few of the locals, and it wasn't long before I ingratiated myself with my fellow patrons.

The drinks flowed fast and heavy and it didn't take long before I was feeling good enough to loosen my tie and unbutton my shirt a little, as I began regaling whoever would listen with some of the spicier tales from my days in college.

At some point I laid my eyes on a very lovely woman near the pool tables and started to make my way across the bar until I watched her brush her hair back and would have sworn in court that she had sharply pointed ears. Deciding I'd been knocking them back too quickly, I opted to sober up a little before I tried putting the moves on anyone.

As it goes, when one puts large volumes of liquid into their body it eventually has to come out, and I found myself in a dangerously long line to use the bathroom.

"What's taking so long?" I muttered to myself but the woman in front of me turned and explained that one of the bathrooms was out of commission so there was only one for everyone to use.

"I think most of the guys that just gotta piss are goin' around back."

Heeding the woman's advice, I made my way behind Roxy's, which was a bunch of gravel that separated the building from a bit of woods that stretched on for at least a few hundred feet. There were others out there so I found a spot relatively to myself but before I could do the deed, another man stumbled up nearby and went right to work.

"Seriously? There's plenty of..."

The man standing next to me had to be 6'5 and close to three hundred pounds but that's not what caused me to trail off. What made me speechless was the man's horn. And no, I don't mean *that* kind of horn. I mean an honest to god horn, on his head. Four of them in fact. They jutted from his forehead like crimson arrowheads. This strange person said nothing and stumbled away when he finished his business.

"You know, it's not polite to stare," Came a squeaky voice from nearby.

“I’m sorry but did you not see his horns?” I turned to look at the newcomer but didn’t immediately spot him.

“Some people have horns. So what?”

My gaze slowly fell until they landed upon a man who might have stood a foot and a half off the ground. Thin, membranous wings reflected the moonlight and fluttered in the wind.

“Whoa! Dude, not cool! My dick is literally in my hands.”

“I... uh...”

I quickly looked away; at a loss for words for one of the only times in my life. The impossibly small man muttered something that I didn’t quite catch and left me out in the cold dark night to wonder if someone had spiked my drink.

After listening to a cheerful middle-aged woman from Denver talk about why she thought the Broncos were going to choke in the playoffs for several minutes – it was my fault for opening the conversation by acknowledging the jersey she was wearing – I got directions to the convenience store and once again braved the frosty winter night which thankfully had settled to a light but steady snowfall. I had killed my last smoke in practically a single drag after my strange bathroom encounter and desperately needed more, both to calm my nerves and because the alcohol coursing through my veins demanded it.

Although the winds had calmed, it still didn’t change the ripe chill in the air and it wasn’t long before I was starting to question my life choices, such as my lack of heavier attire. When at last I spotted the convenience store in the distance, the light coming from within the store was like a beacon to my eyes and I became a moth who manically fluttered towards the light.

It was mercifully warm inside the aptly named *Convenient Mart*. The end of “*I Want You Back*” by NSYNC was blasting on a small radio sitting on the counter and a woman was softly singing along from a small back room. The radio then played, “*This Kiss*” by Faith, which brought out a more inspired sing-along from the woman in the back. She wasn’t bad. I imagine she did well at karaoke. I waited

patiently for a minute, content to bask in the warmth of the store, but I eventually reached for the silver bell on the counter and said, “Hello?”

“Sorry! I’m coming!” The woman smiled as she stepped out of the room, still humming the tune to the song. “What can I get for you?”

You know when you’ve been drinking and you’re not sure how drunk you are, so you look at your hand to get some perspective? Well, that’s what I did when I laid eyes on the convenience store worker and her pet and then proceeded to stare at her long enough that “*This Kiss*” became “*My Heart Will Go On*” by Celine Dion. Her skin had a distinct pale pink hue to it, which I think looked nice with her dark hair and deep grey horn. Unlike the man I saw earlier, this woman only had the one horn and called to mind a fifteenth century painting of a unicorn I’d once brokered a trade for. The problem was, or perhaps I should say that the reason I stared for so long was, after I looked at my hand to make sure it hadn’t begun melting or breaking out into geometric patterns, she no longer had pink skin or a horn, and no matter how many times I blinked or looked away it didn’t reappear.

“Umm... can I help you?” She finally asked.

All I managed to say was, “Menthols, please.”

I decided it was time to return to the motel after that, thoroughly convinced I’d been drugged or was losing my mind. Problem was, I forgot which way I came from and by the time I realized it, I was lost. After wandering for a bit, I spotted a partially enclosed bus station and decided to take a seat while I tried to get my head on straight and see if I could piece together which way I’d come from. I lit a cigarette and absently lit the silver, metal lighter, letting the wick burn for a couple of seconds before flicking it closed to snuff out the flame.

While I mentally retraced my steps, I was pretty unaware of what was going on around me. I didn’t notice the storm practically clear up, nor did I notice when someone sat down next to me until they held out a long-fingered hand and said, “Εξχυσε με, σιρ, χουλδ Ι βορρω τηατ φορ α μομεντ?”

I don't know what he actually said, but I speak enough languages that I got the gist. Without really thinking about it, I handed him my lighter and continued working on my mental GPS. The lighter's flame came to life and danced in accordance with the steady breeze. For the next minute or so I solidified the route in my mind before I felt confident making the trip back. I hopped to my feet with renewed vigor and started to walk away but remembered my lighter.

“Excuse me, I need my...”

The lighter was still burning brightly, and it bathed the large creature that held it with an eerie glow.

“Σο σορρψ. Ι διδνϑτ μεαν το υσε αλλ οφ ψουρ φλυιδ.”

The creature was covered in gray, fuzzy hair and sported a massive pair of wings that it had folded against its back. It stared at the flame intently through a pair of glowing red eyes that seemed to match the fire's dazzling light. Now, at 6'2 I'm not used to people being taller than me very often, let alone tower over me, but when this guy stood, he had at least a foot on me, if not two. Naturally I thought, *'Holy crap I'm going to die'*, as this creature bathed in shadows turned its glowing orbs onto me. Inside I'm yelling at myself to run but my legs were suddenly filled with concrete. He started to reach out with the lighter, but his hand was still wrapped tightly around it.

I stared at the lighter and the strange hand gripping it for a long moment before something clicked and I said, “You know what pal; you can keep it.”

“Αρε ψου συρε?”

“Really. It's all yours.” The creature looked from me to the lighter several times before letting loose a happy chitter and strolling off into the night.

When I finally made it back to the motel, cold, wet, tired, and sure I'd lost my marbles, I found the old man sitting behind the desk still, the TV now tuned into an old western.

“You look frazzled,” he commented, with barely a glance.

“Yeah, well, either I’m going crazy, or I just saw some shit you wouldn’t believe. Pardon my *French*.”

Once more the old man deemed it fit to look up at me, but this time a crooked grin accompanied the look. “I guess you really ain’t from the government.”

New York, 2014

Robbie and Ilya sat opposite Gary in the booth they were sharing, enjoying drinks and a meal at an uptown restaurant, and stared at each other for a long moment before turning back to Gary and simultaneously claiming, “Bullshit.”

“You did not meet Mothman,” Robbie said.

“Exactly. Besides, Mothman was in the Sixties, not the Nineties,” Ilya added.

Gary rolled his eyes and took a sip from his beer. “What, do you think he just fucked off and died after that bridge collapsed? No. He went on to live a full life.”

“You’re so full of shit,” Ilya laughed.

“I’m serious. You asked me what my first encounter with the supernatural was and I told you. It was because of that night I dove into the supernatural world searching for the truth. In fact, if it weren’t for Mothman, I probably would have never met you two.”

“I thought you got into the supernatural world through a client with a cursed painting?” Robbie asked.

“No, that was how I got involved with it on a business level. Completely different.”

“Sure,” Ilya said placatingly, “And next you’ll tell us about when you met Bigfoot hiking in Washington.”

Gary slowly set down his drink, a devilish grin spreading. “Actually, it was mountain climbing in California. However –.”