

Loserville

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Sometimes he wondered if it were just better to be homeless. It couldn't be any worse than what he was doing now. Some days he wondered if the homeless were crazy or just a little smarter than the rest of us. One day he panhandles on a busy corner, just to see what it was like. He made 18 dollars and some change. It was more money than he made all week. At the end of the day he just couldn't bring himself to do it. Even the most pathetic amongst have still have a little pride left in them, even if it is hiding.

It didn't start out this way. Ten years ago he could never have imagined it would be this bad. He was unemployed for almost a year, that's what did him in. He was one of the millions who were lost in the shuffle. He just kind of drifted away from society and people in general. He stopped in at the motel over two years ago cause they were the cheapest in town. He had been there for almost two years, paying the manager four hundred dollars a month. It covered the rent and the utilities. He couldn't afford cable and spent most of his days listening to the radio and the radio sucked.

It was like he was in prison. Stuck in this drab little world, unable to escape, watching everyone else enjoy life around him. Some days he would just sit in his room and wait for his unemployment check to arrive. Once in a while he would find something to pawn. Sometimes he would just take it and pawn it anyway. He passed his days by filling in coloring books and playing solitaire on his computer.

Patheticness can be like cancer, slowly devouring us until there is nothing left. It is not a normal biological function. He knew he was depressed, but anyone in his position would be depressed. Still as pathetic as his life was, he was not yet ready to throw in the towel. He knew he was just one lucky break away from hitting it big. He just needed that one big break. That one little break that could somehow magically lift him out of this place and back into society. Of course, as the old saying goes: misery loves company, especially company more miserable than you.

His loser crew consisted of Blake, Chris, Shane and Nolette. Each of them in their own way was just as if not more pathetic than he was. He was closest to Blake, who up until a couple of years ago was a successful owner and operator of a carpet cleaning company. He was hiding at the hotel from the authorities who wanted to talk to him about his giant child support bill that went unpaid.

Chris and Shane were professional fuck ups who stayed at the motel when they were out of jail, which wasn't very often. They usually were drunk or high, anything to escape from the horror that had become their lives.

Nolette was perhaps the most pathetic out of all of them. She was an Indian or half Indian. She was also deaf. Even for a deaf Indian, she was still pretty hot. In fact at the motel, she was about as good as it got. She would disappear for weeks on end, then suddenly show back up at the motel and act like nothing had happened. He had asked the manager, Barb, where she went. Barb thought she was a stripper or hooker. No one really knew for sure. That was the big mystery surrounding her. She had money and her own car, but no one had any idea how she paid for it all. In another world, the two of them would be together and get married and do the whole American Dream thing, but that was not

going to happen in this world. In this world they were just two broken people, trying to hold onto what little they had.

His name was Mike, Mike Mastrioni and he was the mayor of Loserville, aka the Brown Wood Motel.

“Does anybody have a TV? What about Wi-Fi?” asked Blake

“Why?”

“I want to watch a game and check my fantasy sites. I almost got pinched today. Gotta have something to take my mind off all this.” he said

“I’m pretty sure Nolette has Wi-Fi on her phone.” said Mike

“When is Barb going to get Wi-Fi? She has internet in her office. Why doesn’t she just get a router so we can all use it?”

“She says we’d just use it to watch porn.....she might be right.” said Chris

“No, we would use it just like everyone else uses it, to look shit up and buy stuff.” said Mike

“The hell you gonna buy, you don’t have any money.”

“Speaking of money, Barb is after my rent. I don’t have it this month. I was supposed to work the last two weeks and they gave it to some Mexicans working under the table.” said Blake.

“You know the thing that blows my mind about all these rich fucks is that they’re all Republican.” said Blake

“So?”

“Well, they’re all supposed to be for regular Americans, right? So why do they hire Mexicans for everything just to save a few bucks?”

“The only thing rich people care about is getting richer. They don’t give a rat’s ass about anything else.” said Shane.

They were sitting out back by the pool that was empty. It had been empty for years. They would just sit out back and drink beers, smoke cigarettes and mainly fantasize about Nolette. Once in a while, she would join them. The four of them pretended not to notice her, but she usually wore as little clothing as possible and it was hard not to notice her. Barbie would come out and chase them away if the motel had any guests, which most of the time it didn’t. None of them had any idea how the place managed to stay open. The motel should have been renovated twenty years ago. It was out of date in 1990, now it was just a relic. Barbie had married a much older man who died and gave her the motel. Barbie married the old fart for his money, something she had no problem telling anyone who would listen.

“I had to bang that old bastard every night for eight years! I deserve this.”

In the end though, Bobby did make out. She got the house, the cars, the money in the bank, everything.

At age 46, she never had to work another day in her life.

His group was sitting out back, nursing a six pack. Some days Mike didn't spend any money, not even a penny. When you're poor, even a dime can make a difference between making through the day or not. Mike would sometimes walk a mile to the nearby convenience store and get his supplies. He would put everything in a backpack and lug it home. The owner of the store gave him free coffee. It certainly wasn't the best coffee in the world, but it was free. Coffee and cigarettes were the best medication for a miserable existence.

They would sometimes grow tired of the group and one of them would hide out for a few days. They all had another place they could stay. Blake could stay with one of his baby mommas. Chris and Shane could stay with their parents. Nolette had to be staying somewhere else when she took off, but not Mike. He had nowhere else to go. It was the Brown Wood or the streets.

Today though, Nolette joined the group out back. Shane saw her walking down the street and gave her a ride. Whenever Nolette joined the group, everyone pitched in for beer and food. Nolette smokes Marlboro Reds and only Reds. Mike had a pack in his room just for special occasions when she hung out with them. He'd have a few a day, but he wasn't a big smoker. He had seen what it had done to his father and he knew if he smoked that much, he'd be in the ground sooner than later. He didn't want to die poor. It was as if he died twice.

She was wearing cutoff jeans and a wife beater with a bra. She couldn't talk and when she did, it usually came out all mumbled and garbled. Most of the time, she just sat there and listened. She was a good listener, most deaf and mute people usually are.

Blake was trying to explain his current financial predicament to the rest of the group. He had a knack for steering the conversation in his direction. Sometimes he did it so effortlessly, it was like he could read their minds.

Chris was trying to figure out what the hell had happened on his date last night. He decided to open it up to the group.

"Man, my worst nightmare happened the other night. I was on a date with this chick. She's in the swim team at the University, so I was like awesome, I love athletic chicks. So I take her to this nice restaurant, order her a nice meal, pay for everything, we go to a movie, I mean I really pulled out all the stops here, didn't half ass anything. Man was this chick hot. Problem was, she was such a bitch, I really wasn't into her. I mean she was just obnoxious. My best buddy is dating her best buddy, so we kind of got hooked up on this blind date. They told me, she's really easy, so I figured great, nothing wrong with an easy lay, but when we got back to her place, I just wasn't into her. I really just wanted to go home." "What do you mean she was obnoxious? How obnoxious could she be?"

"She told me if she got pregnant, she would just have an abortion. You know what's my one big pet peeve, abortion. If our mothers had abortions, none of us would be here, right?" said Chris

"You didn't bang her because she said she would have an abortion? I didn't know you cared about anything that much." said Blake

"Not just that, she trashed my buddy and thought her friend could do so much better. I just wasn't having it. No buddy trashes my friends."

“So, what happened?” asked Mike

“Well, we go back to her place, we have a few glasses of wine, I ask her if we can get naked and she just shrugs and says: I guess so. I mean what the hell kind of a response is that? I guess so? Well it took her all of a minute to get completely naked and let me tell you, this girl had a body to die for. Easily the hottest girl I’ve ever been with. So, she gets into bed and goes looking for a condom, then it hit me. I just couldn’t do it. I really disliked her that much.....I guess so.....I’d have been okay with a no, or even if she laughed, but I guess so? No, I told her I had to be up early the next morning and just left. Just couldn’t do it.”

“You left a smoking hot chick, naked in her bed? Jesus, she must really have been a beauty.” said Mike

“Chris, you know, as you get older and cycle through the years, your chances of nailing any girl kind of goes down to zero. Opportunities like this won’t come your way too often.” said Blake.

“No, it gets even better. So the next day she calls me and gets all weird and says she wants to see me. I’m like: why? Well, she just will not leave me alone. She showed up at the motel here the other day, looking for me. Thank God I wasn’t around.”

“You have a hot stalker? I can think of worse things to happen to you.” said Blake

“Guys, I’m just not into her. I think I’m the first guy who ever turned her down. I completely rejected her and she can’t deal with it. It wasn’t her looks, it was her personality. I’ve had gym socks with better personalities.”

“He’s not kidding. I was wondering who she was. Definitely a hottie. I guess our young Chris has found out that just because a girl is beautiful on the outside, doesn’t mean she’s beautiful on the inside.” said Mike

“The hell am I going to do? She won’t leave me alone.”

“You might have to bang her just to get rid of her.”

“But, I don’t want to bang her. I’d rather bang a Gatorade bottle. Will one of you guys take her?”

“Oh no Chris, the last thing I need are any more female troubles, I got plenty of my own to deal with.” said Blake

“My biggest problem is that I just can’t ignore my gut feelings. It’s never wrong.” said Chris

“My biggest problem is that I have to stop getting black girls pregnant.” said Blake

Everyone just looked at Blake somewhat perplexed.

“I got two girls pregnant within a year. Two of them. I have two kids. One of them is with another guy. Seriously, why the hell didn’t I just wear a fregging condom? Now, because of a few minutes of crazy sex, I have to spend the next 18 years of my life paying for it.”

“You got two black girls pregnant? The one who dropped you off the other day?”

“No, that’s another one. I’m not going to screw around on this one. I’m putting all that behind me. Time to man up and be a father to my kids.”

“That’s a hell of a lot easier said than done. I watched my own dad half ass it. I don’t want my kids to end up like me.”

“Blake, that’s the most pathetic thing I’ve ever heard anyone say.” said Chris

“It’s pathetic if it’s true and that is true. I would like to ask all these goddamn cops just how in the hell we are supposed to pay child support if we’re behind bars? The hell sense does that make? Jail should be for criminals, not people that fell behind on their baby momma support. Christ, she bought jeans with the money I gave her for diapers. The other one went to Malibu with her new boyfriend. So, I figured, screw it. If that’s what they’re going to do with my money, they aren’t getting any more.

Taking care of your kids is one thing. Taking care of the baby momma is another thing all together.” he said, lighting up a cigarette.

“We have idiots making our laws. Idiots that enforce rules and idiots that cover everything up. No wonder this country is such a mess.” said Mike

Blake’s phone rang. Mike could see the caller it read “booty call”. Blake answered it and started sweet talking to the unsuspecting lady on the other end of the line.

“Blakey ain’t ever going to change.” said Chris

“He will when the cops catch him.” said Mike

Shane got up and left without saying a word to anyone.

“The hells’ with him?” asked Mike

“He’s using again. I told him if they catch using once more he’s going away and not to some pathetic county jail either. Boy’s gonna screw up his life before it’s too late to change it.” said Chris

“I gotta go to work. Job sucks balls, but I ain’t got any other choice. It’s this or the streets.” said Chris

“What are you doing now?”

“I work in a warehouse overnight. I drive a forklift and load trucks. It sucks, but it pays well.” said Chris

Mike realized that Chris was the only one he knew who still had a job. He was the only one out of the group who might actually manage to turn his life around. In five years, he could be married with kids. In five years, Mike hoped he would still be alive.

The rest of the group melted away a few minutes later. They were friendly with one another but none of them were actually friends. Blake would occasionally show up at his door with a six pack and a pack of

smokes, but he was the only one.

Most of Mike's days were spent wandering around town, hoping he could spot an easy score or someone would just come up to him and offer him a hundred thousand dollar a year job. He had done lots of things in his life. He had been in the Navy. Worked in a Foundry. Worked for a concrete company, even milked cows on a nearby farm. He could work hard when the pay was right. Usually it just boiled down to the simple fact that he felt his time was valuable and he demanded he be compensated fairly for it. It was an age-old dilemma that didn't seem to become any clearer with the passage of time. His Dad told him once that anybody who gets their hands dirty for a living is never going to make decent money.

"It's the suits and ties that make the big bucks. The cigar smokers and the Brandy drinkers. They're the ones who pull in the big bucks. Everyone of em works hard to make damn sure you and I never get ahead in this world. Your choice is either be a prick and be rich or be a nice guy and be broke." he said

That was almost thirty years ago and was as true now as it was then. That's pretty much what it boiled down to. He had thought about going to school and becoming a nurse, since he had a pretty strong background while in the Navy. He had even considered going back into the Navy a few years ago, but when it came time to shit or get off the pot, he just couldn't do it.

"I might be an unemployed bum, but at least I do what I want." he said to himself. "I'd rather be poor and free than comfortable and a slave." he chuckled after his recruiter told him to stop wasting his time. He had heard from Blake that there was going to be some major construction going on downtown.

Bricklayers and masons. He had spent a few afternoons downtown and going to the local unemployment office to see if there was any info. He called the local Union and they said beginning next week they were going to start filling spots. He had let his Union membership run out a while back. It would be a few hundred dollars to get it reactivated and possibly get a spot on one of the crews.

Problem was, he didn't have a few hundred dollars. The only money he got every month was a settlement from a car accident he had been in when he was 24. He had just gotten out of the Navy and was rear ended by another vehicle who was hit by a semi. He came out of the accident with only minor injuries and a few broken ribs. The person behind him was not so lucky. They will never walk right again. The trucking company proposed a one time settlement for everyone involved. Mike would get a hundred thousand dollars for his injuries and suffering, to be paid out in monthly installments over the next twenty years. He quickly signed the paperwork, figuring it would pay for his mortgage or corvette.

He would never have thought that 10 years later, it would be his only source of income. Barbie's rent was four hundred a month. He spent another hundred on booze and cigarettes. Groceries were another hundred or so. That left just three hundred a month for everything else. Next year, the payments would stop. He wasn't looking forward to the day when he would have no money coming in at all.

He was napping when he heard a knock at his door. He was half asleep when he answered it. It was Blake with two 40s and some smokes.

"Hey bud, you awake?"

"I am now." he said

He figured Blake would want to borrow money from him, or borrow something from him. He lent Blake some DVDs a few months back and he never returned them.

“So, what’s up?”

“I got a line on a job. It’s pretty sweet. It’s working for the city overnight. Street sweeping and other crap. You got a CDL, so you can apply. I put in a good word for you.”

“Blake, guys like us don’t get sweet city jobs like that. They usually go to people in exchange for political favors.”

“Come on, at least apply. I would, but I couldn’t pass the drug test. I never see you smoke, so you should be alright.”

“How do I apply?”

“You gotta go to city hall. They’re downstairs in the Public Works Office. The job is posted on the wall. I would say to do it online, but you don’t have internet.....do you even have it on your phone?”

“No, my phone is nine years old. Still works though.” said Mike

“Well, as long as they can reach you. This is a good job man. Once you’re off your probation period, they can’t touch you. You got an easy job for life.”

Mike was rather perplexed as to why Blake had come to him with this. Naturally, he was a little skeptical. Blake was the kind of guy who was always working an angle. Then, it hit him. He couldn’t take the job because of all the back child support he’d have to pay. It would be like working for free. The two of them drank and smoked. Then they drank some more. Mike was pretty well buzzed half an hour later. Just a beer buzz, nothing too heavy.

“Chris told me that Shane is back on the shit again.” said Mike

“Yeah, I heard. Kid wants to ruin his life and go back to jail, that’s his business.”

“Don’t you think we should try and say something to him?”

“Like what? Mikey, you can’t save people from themselves man. Only Shane can save Shane at this point.”

“That doesn’t mean we can’t tell him we’re here for him. Maybe he just needs to talk.”

“I think he needs more than that. Chris is worried about him. Says he just hasn’t been right for a few weeks now. Dude’s got mental problems as well.”

“So, we just let him crash and burn?”

“If you think it will do any good, then go right ahead. I’ve known enough junkies in my time to know that only they can save themselves. We can sit there and talk till we’re blue in the face. At the end of the day, they have to choose not to put that needle in their arm. We can’t do it for them.”

“I just hate to see the kid’s life turn to shit.”

“Junkies are junkies Mikey. He’ll either get over it or it will kill him.”

“Man, sometimes, I don’t know. It’s like his motel just sucks the life out of all of us. I’m losing weight. I don’t sleep at night. All I do is nap during the day and smoke cigarettes. It’s like there’s some kind of force in here keeping all of us down.”

“I’ve thought the same thing. I think somehow Barbie is watching us through little cameras in our rooms or listening to us with secret microphones. I spent two days looking around my room. I found something in one of the AC ducts. I think it’s a little camera she uses to spy on me. That Barbie is a freak. Speaking of which, I’m a little light on rent money this month. Do you think you could help me out?”

Mike was waiting for it and Blake didn’t disappoint. He never failed to fail.

“I can give you fifty. You still owe me fifty from last month.”

“and I’m going to get it to you real soon. Seriously Mikey, you ever tried to keep black girls happy? It’s not easy. They like the money.”

“I think all girls like the money. It’s part of being a girl.”

“Man, I’m telling you, from now on, it’s safe sex or no sex for me. My cowboy days are over my friend.”

“Blake, I’m serious. Does it ever feel like there’s something in this motel, just sucking the life out of us?”

“Yeah. Sometimes it does. Of course, if we would just get off our butts and go out and get real jobs, then we wouldn’t be stuck in this place.”

“I can literally feel myself withering away in here.”

“So, why don’t you leave? Didn’t you say you wanted to move back to Florida?”

“Yeah, I’d love to. Except I don’t have any money. Sometimes I think about just shafting Barbie and catching the next bus back home. But, I’d look like a loser to all my family. I wanted to show them I can make something of myself. I’ve thought about it, but I just can’t bring myself to do it. Plus that and Barbie took me back when I left last year. She didn’t even make me pay rent for two months.....I never could figure it out. Barbie must have a soft spot for me or something.”

“I don’t think she has a soft spot for anyone.”

“Man, I was in rough shape. I started drinking Jack and Cokes one afternoon after work. I woke up five days later in a ditch, literally. I was a hundred miles from home, had no money in my wallet. I drained my bank account and the worst part is, I don’t remember a damn thing, except hooking up with these two Mexican girls. They bled me for all I had. I just expected her to laugh at me, but she didn’t. She

made me some tea and sandwiches and told me to pay her the rent next month, when my money came in.”

“She knew you got paid every month, she knew she’d get it back. She was just being smart.” said Blake, finishing his cigarette.

“No, it was more than that. It was like she wanted me here. There were other places I could have gone. No, she wanted me here, I just can’t figure out why.”

“Mikey, have you looked around this dump? We’re pretty much the only one’s here. Most of the rooms are vacant except for some guy needing the room for an hour to bang some hooker. She just knew you would eventually pay her the rent.”

“Maybe, but Blake, you know how she is. One strike with her and you’re out. I really screwed her over and she just didn’t seem to care. Maybe I should have gone someplace else.”

“No, you belong here, with the rest of us losers. Place just wouldn’t be the same without you.” said Blake

“I gotta head out to do my part, part time job. My big five hour a week cleaning gig.”

“Yeah, I better run.” said Blake.

Mike went into his wallet and gave Blake all he had.

“This is a loan Blake. I expect it to be paid back.”

“Of course. Do you want me to sign for it?”

“When you get fifty bucks, I expect you to give it to me, not blow it away on strippers and weed.”

“Understood, thank you Mikey, you are a scholar and a gentleman.”

“Don’t tell anyone, it would ruin my reputation.” said Mike.

He closed his door behind him and followed Blake down the stairs. They said their good-byes and he caught a ride with Chris on his way into work.

Chris dropped him off at the building he was supposed to clean. Truth is, the cleaning was just a cover to go dumpster diving. There was a bakery next door that threw away their old bread and donuts for the day. He saw them do it a few months ago and waited till they were gone and he went in the dumpster to retrieve them. They were in plastic bags. A little rough, but still very edible. He’d usually take what he could and then take the rest home back to the motel. He didn’t know if anyone saw him or not, but he didn’t care.

He was supposed to clean all the business on the property. Trash, windows, carpet. It sounded like a lot of work, but usually he was done in four hours and made almost forty dollars. He was trying to get the number of one of the girls that worked in the office complex as well.

Her name was Cathy. She was younger than he was, but cute and slightly overweight. It didn’t bother

him. He was just happy to have someone to talk to. Most of the people in the offices didn't even acknowledge him, but Cathy always went out of her way to be nice to him. He wanted to ask her out, but he was much older than she was and he didn't even have a car. It was pretty much a deal breaker in most cases. He offered her a smoke and they took a break together. He knew not to get serious when talking to girls for the first time. Small talk, nothing serious, let them do all the talking. The guy's job was to do the listening. Problem was, she didn't really want to talk, they just kind of stood there and smoked in silence. It was kind of weird. Finally, Mike spoke up.

"So, what exactly do you do around here?"

"I work in the Bakery."

"No shit.....you guys make a pretty mean donut."

"You know, you can just ask us for one, you don't have to go through the dumpster for one." she said
"I'll keep that in mind."

"I guess you can consider it a tip for cleaning our bathrooms and fixing our ceiling tiles."
"It's no problem, I'm glad to help."

"Thanks for fixing our sink. I played around with that thing for half an hour and still couldn't get it to work." she said, finishing her smoke.

"My name is Mike." he said and stuck out his hand.

"Carol.....Mike, I gotta run. I got stuff in our oven. If I over bake it, my boss will kill me. She's such a bitch sometimes. She's a hell of a pastry chef, but a major pain in the rear."

"Not a problem. It was nice to meet you Carol."

"Nice to meet you Mike. Stop by once my boss leaves and I'll give you a coffee and donut." she said as she walked back inside the building.

"I'll do that."

He watched her walk away. Girl had a booty on her, that was for sure. Mike had no idea if the girl was into him or just being polite. He didn't figure any girl would be into a guy who went dumpster diving, but who knows. Mike had been content just to be able to talk to a girl and not have her run away. That was about as good as it got these days. In his younger years, he would have asked her for her number and been much more forward. She could have a boyfriend or a husband, or just not want to get physical with anyone at all. Mike found it was best to take a wait and see approach. He had found the key with the ladies was to let them think they were in charge. As long as they thought that hooking up was their idea, they were usually a lot more enthusiastic about it.

It took Mike a little over three hours to clean the rest of the buildings and businesses. Cleaning someone else's toilet was degrading enough, but one business owner even went so far as to write down step by step instructions as to how they wanted their toilets cleaned. Mike was told to make his customers happy, so that's what he did and initialed by all of the steps, like he was ten years old.

It was times like these that Mike began to truly question how he had sunk so low. Yes, the recession had been devastating. He didn't work for over a year. Entire industries in the city just evaporated. No one built anything for almost three years following the collapse. Old timers would say it was as bad as anything they had ever seen. All of them were collecting pensions and retirement, so it didn't hit their wallets too hard. He had a plan in High School. Go into the Navy, get his GI Bill, go to school to learn a trade, make a ton of money, buy a house, get married and start a family by the time he was 30. None of it happened of course, except going into the Navy. He was not much of a success as a sailor. He looked back on the last five years and wondered what if anything, he should have done differently. The truth of the matter is, that Mike had found as he got older that he just wasn't built to be a slave. He didn't mind working hard, but busting your ass for peanuts was a prescription for misery. He spent two years working like a dog. He made money, but it disappeared just as quickly as he made it. His accident had derailed him for a few months also. He walked off a job because he didn't get along with the foreman. He quit another job because most of the employees were illegals working under the table. He has to pay taxes and have the government's hands on his paychecks, but the illegals didn't? There wasn't one thing that Mike could pinpoint and say he should have done differently. He never thought of himself as a loser, but as the days wore on and he was reduced to cleaning toilets for a living, his strength and pride had begun to take a serious beating.

He finished the last office and said goodbye to the two ladies in their cubicles and called his boss as the janitorial company to tell him he was finished. He knew he was missing some money by calling in early, but he wanted to get downtown and check out that job Blake had told him about. He was usually up at two in the morning anyway, so it wouldn't be much of a change for him. City jobs were either a cake walk or a nightmare, depending on who your boss was. He had found that Civil Servant bosses were either slackers or sadists. There seemed to be no in between. He had worked for the city one summer before he went into the Navy. Boss was a total waste of space, but left him alone most of the day. He paid careful attention to how the city management structure worked or didn't work, depending on how you looked at it. He was always looking for the dream job and quickly discovered that working for the city just wasn't it. But, that was years ago, with different people. He figured the job was at least worth the time to fill out the application.

City hall was only about a fifteen minute walk from the business park where he cleaned. He waved to Carol in the window as she closed up the Bakery for the day. He walked past a bar or nightclub that was looking for bartenders. He had been a bartender for a few years, but found it to be the most depressing job in the world. Alcohol is like a magnet for losers and Mike did not want to think of himself as a loser. Serving watered down drinks to watered down people was not his idea of a good time. Money was good, hell it was an easy job, he just didn't drink or like to be around people that did. He crossed the street and walked up the steps to city hall. The city might be in a depression, but you'd never know it by the looks of this building. Nothing was out of place. The glass doors were immaculate and the steps must have been recently cleaned. Being able to spend other people's money certainly had it's privileges.

He followed Blake's instructions and went downstairs where the Public works had it's main office. Sure enough, in front of the main doors on a bulletin board was the job posting. It was for a city worker on the night cleaning crew. He had a CDL he had gotten years ago when he wanted to be a truck driver. He had experience driving trucks and using the maintenance equipment, so he figured he'd give it a try. He took down the information, then went across the street to the library to use their internet to fill out the application. He didn't own a computer and didn't plan to own one any time soon. He just saw these social networking sites as a means for someone else to follow and track your every move. He didn't even own a smartphone. He followed the instructions for applying. It took him about forty five minutes

and he was finished. He hated going to the library. People that hang out all day in public places were more pathetic than he is.

He checked a few other job sites for his city and took down some phone numbers. He knew his monthly checks from the accident were over in a year, so he had to find something permanent. At this point, he had given up on looking for a career and just wanted a paycheck. He wanted to be able to tell Barbie that he was moving out. He wanted to tell his parents he was getting married. He wanted most of all to remind himself that he was not a total failure at life and that his miserable situation was just temporary.

He looked around at the people in the library. Most were older, probably retired and had no place else to go. He told himself that if he hung around the library all day when he was their age that he would just pay some thug to off him. If this was all these people had, why bother to go on at all? He had been off work for so long, he figured he didn't have much to collect when he retired, that was if Social security was still around when he retired.

He caught the bus back to a stop not too far from the motel. As busy as the street was, there was hardly any business on it. Two massive office complexes were empty. When Barbie's late husband built the place in the 1980's, the place must have seemed like it would grow. It was right off the highway, maybe half a mile from the turn off. A used car lot had gone out of business and a park had become a hang out for all kinds of homeless derelicts. Chris had gotten into a fight one night walking home, on his way back to the motel. Mike usually never ventures very far out at night and had a large window in his room boarded up so no one could break in. During daylight hours, the street seemed fine. Mike had even been propositioned once by a hooker.

"You want to have a good time baby? 50 bucks and I'm all yours." she said

"Are you paying, or am I?" he asked in return.

He made a pot of coffee and went down to the day room. It had a TV and whatever Barbie decided to put out for the day. There were a few new vehicles in the parking lot. Expensive looking ones at that. He ignored them and went into the dayroom to watch TV. He really didn't bother watching anything these days but sports. The news was a joke. Sitcoms were pretty much all the same. All the soul and life just seemed to have been drained from television. Back when he was a kid there were only five or six channels available, but there was always something to watch. Now there were hundreds and nothing on. He couldn't imagine paying money for this crap. Even if he were a millionaire, he doubted he would have cable or Dish.

He saw Shane walking outside on the sidewalk and waved to him. Shane waved back and then came in. As soon as he saw him, he knew Shane was tweaking. He could barely sit still and kept looking around the room, nervously.

"How you doing Shane?"

"Good man, real good, real freaking good. I feel awesome, you know? Like I just one a million dollars and nailed some hot blonde all at the same time. I gotta do something tonight, so I gotta go." he said and ran out of the room.

Mike could only shake his head at what used to be his friend. When he first met Shane, they used to

play football on the lawn outback. They'd have some beers with the rest of the guys. Those days were over now. The terminal disease that was the Brown Wood Motel had reduced Shane to a pile of barf.

That's what this place was: a terminal illness. The kind that destroys you before you even know there's anything wrong with you. Worse than cancer, it all seems too harmless at first. Blake can laugh all he wanted too, Mike could almost feel something in this place just sucking the life out of all of them. It was like some kind of dark energy that ran through the pipes and walls. The kind that never showed itself directly, but was always lurking in the background. Mike once had a nightmare about it. He had seen the monster face to face. It was so bad, he couldn't sleep for the next two nights.

He only drank non-alcoholic beer. Kaliber was his favorite. Almost tasted like real beer, but with no kick. Last thing he wanted was to start nursing a bottle. Drinking alcohol in Mike's position was like pouring gas on a raging fire. He was just about to go down for the night, when he heard the pounding on his door. He figured it was Blake. He hoped it was Blake.

"Mikey, you in there man, open up." he said

Mike ran over to the door and opened it.

"Dude, I just got a very weird text from Chris. He said Shane just texted him and told him not to come home tonight because there would be a mess in the room."

"Ok.....so?"

"Well, Chris asked him what kind of mess and he replied by saying: like blowing my brains out kind of mess."

"Oh, shit." said Mike

"Chris is on his way home now, but he texted me and asked me to go check up on him."

The two of them walked very quickly over to Shane and Chris's room. They were cousins or something like that. Blake knocked on the door. He got no response and knocked again.

"Shane, man you in there? Dude, I need a ride?"

"Fuck off ." he said from inside the room.

"Dude, can you just open the door. We want to talk to you." said Blake

"Who's we?"

"Me and Mikey. Come on, man just open up....please." said Blake.

The two of them heard the door unbolt a moment later. Mike opened the door and the two of them stepped inside. They saw Blake sitting on his bed holding a revolver in his hand, drinking Jim Beam. No one said a word for a few seconds, then Shane started.

"You were right Mikey.....you were right. There is something in this place sucking the life out of all of

us. I saw it one night. I swear I saw it.....it was like something straight out of hell. Had a child's voice. A sweet child's voice. It was so soothing and calm. Made you want to do whatever it said. It told me to put the needle in my arm. Said it would make everything better. So, I did it. I never shot up before I moved here. I thought going to jail would make it stop. It did for a while. For a while in jail, I was ok. I beat it. At least I thought I did. I didn't want to move back here. I really didn't, but it was either here or the streets, so what could I do." he said starting to cry

"You beat it once, you can beat it again." said Mikey

"It's not that. It's not the smack. It's the thing in the walls. It's in my brain. I can feel it. It won't let me leave. It wants me here. Look at me. I'm a junkie man. I used to play football in high school. I was good too, real good."

"I know man, I've seen you play." said Blake.

"You guys are good guys, real good guys. I hope you leave here before it gets you too. You guys gotta leave this place and never come back. You hear me? You never come back here. Don't let this place get you too." said Shane drunkenly.

In one motion, Shane cocked the hammer back on the pistol, stuck the gun in his mouth and squeezed the trigger. He blew his head off, sending pieces of his head in every direction. His lifeless corpse collapsed on the floor.

Mike and Blake were frozen in fear. They simply could not process what had just happened. One moment they were talking to Shane, the next minute, he was laying dead on the floor. Blake sat down in a chair.

"Holy fuck.....holy fuck.....that did not just happen." he said softly.

"I'm going to call the police." said Mike and ran out of the room. He ran into Barbie. She could tell by the look on his face that something terrible had just happened.

"Barb, don't go in there." he said grabbing her.

"Mikey, what's wrong baby?"

"Shane's dead. He shot himself."

Barbie had the same look Blake had. A willing suspension of disbelief. She too could not believe what had just happened. At least she was lucky enough not to see it. She ran into the room and saw Blake still sitting on the chair. She put her hands over her mouth.

"Oh, Jesus God." she whispered.

The three of them looked at what was left of Shan's body laying on the floor. Life is so precious. One minute it was there and can be gone the next.

The police arrived a few minutes later and the paramedics removed his body from the room. The police interviewed Mike and Shane separately. They both told the exact same story to the interviewing

detective. He asked them to come downtown tomorrow, when they had fully recovered. If that was at all possible.

Mike went back to his room around four in the morning. Blake decided to go and stay with one of his baby mommas. Mike was still in shock over what he had just seen. He didn't want to believe it was real. Like he would wake up in the morning and it would all be a bad dream. It was a bad dream, but it didn't end when he opened his eyes. It only seemed to get worse the next morning. He couldn't get a hold of Blake, so he decided to go downtown on his own with Barbie. The interviews lasted only about an hour. As far as the police were concerned, it was a simple suicide, if suicide is ever simple. Chris went back home to stay with his parents and try and sort out this horrible mess. There would be no funeral for Shane, only a burial a week later that was attended by about two dozen people. That was it. Shane had killed himself and a week later, everything was back to normal in the motel. Back to the ebb and flow. The motel almost seemed to have waves of despair and hopelessness that ran into Mike and almost knocked him over. He disliked the motel before. Now, he simply hated it. It was as if he had become allergic to it. He had to get out there before the motel got him as well. He just didn't know how he was going to do it.

He didn't sleep much the next few days. Every time he closed his eyes, all he could see was Shane blowing his head off. He was angry at Shane. Angry at the life he took and the lives of others that would never be the same. Barbie cried on his shoulder for almost an hour. He didn't know what to say. He just let her cry until her tear well was dry. He popped a Vicodin and a sleeping pill and lay back down. He was asleep for a few hours when his phone rang. It was Blake. As exhausted as he was, he knew they had to talk. He was anxious to know if he spoke at all to the police.

"Blake, what's up man?"

"Not much.....how bout you?"

"Not much. You ever coming back here?" asked Mike

"I don't know Mike. That place just has too many bad memories. I spent way too much time there already. I need to be at home with my kids, not hiding out in a motel from the cops."

"Did the cops know about your child support?"

"I told them about it. I figured at this point there isn't any point in trying to hide anything. They're going to find out anyway. I have a court date next month."

"Well, good luck. Barb and I spoke to them for about an hour. I guess since all our stories matched, they didn't really see any need to investigate it further."

"They said they'd be in touch. I doubt we'll be hearing from them. They got bigger things to worry about. The gun was his, that was the only question the cops had. Have you talked to Chris?"

"No, no I haven't. I was hoping you had."

"No. I saw him that night for a few minutes. That was it. I hope he doesn't blame us for this."

"Man. This whole thing just sucks. It just plain fucking sucks. Why did that idiot kill himself? I keep

asking myself that question. Did you hear what he said? Something about there being a freggin monster in here? I was joking about it. I never actually meant for anyone to take it seriously.”

“I knew he was in bad shape. I just never thought it would come to this. I just don’t understand how somebody can do that to themselves.”

“He was tweaking that night. He saw me in the Day room. He said he was going to do something that night. I just didn’t think he meant he was going to blow his brains out in front of us.”

“I told the cops I should have paid more attention to him. I still feel that way. Maybe if I had, he’d still be alive.”

“He made his choice. As bad a choice as it was, it was his choice. You know, the weird thing is, sometimes I think he was right. Sometimes I think there is something in here, slowly sucking the life out of all of us.”

“Come on Mikey, you can’t really believe that.”

“Sometimes I do. Sometimes I even think I know what it looks like.”

“Mikey, there is no monster in that motel. The only reason none of us leave is because we choose to stay in that place. It’s cheap and it has room service. That’s why. We can’t afford to live anywhere else.”

“I don’t know Blake. I’m sure you have a point, but so many terrible things happen to people in here. You know since Barbie has owned this place, five people have committed suicide in here? Five. That’s incredible. This place is cursed or something.”

“Mikey. My girl wanted us to go and talk to her minister last week. I thought it would be a waste of time. I’m glad I went. He really opened my eyes as to many of the mistakes I’ve made in my life. That motel was really hitting bottom for me. It was a major gut check. The reason we are there is because of the mistakes we have made in our lives. We put us in that motel, not some monster. We are the captains of our own ships and we ran the ship into a giant iceberg. I guess it’s just easier to think some evil monster is in there, rather than face up to our own mistakes.”

Mike was floored. Blake had actually said something very adult like. Blake was older than him and yet at the same time more immature. Everybody has to grow up at some point. Maybe this was their time to do some growing.

“Well, I applied for that job you told me about. I guess all I can do now is play the waiting game.”

“You can do that no problem.”

“I’m gonna miss Chris and all his stupid stories. That kid could screw up a wet dream.”

“Yeah, he was a good kid.”

“I appreciate the tip. Look, I gotta get some sleep man. This is the first time in days I’ve been able to fall asleep.” said Mike

"I don't know if I'll be coming back. I'm really trying to make things work with my girl. I got an interview tomorrow at her grocery store. Keep in touch man. I miss you guys,"

"Take care Blake," he said and hung up the phone. He figured the money he lent to Blake was gone forever. Maybe Blake was right. Maybe it was time to grow up. He had been beat down for so long, he didn't know anything else. He figured he'd take a quick nap and then head downtown to the library. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, it was dark outside. He had been asleep for nine hours.

He felt refreshed. He looked at his watch. It was almost ten p.m. He got dressed, brushed his teeth and headed down to the convenience store to buy a local paper. One way or another. He was determined to get out of that miserable motel and get on with his life. He decided to take the bus home. It dropped him off a mile from the motel, but it was in a better part of town. The last thing he wanted tonight was any drama with the locals. He bought a coffee and a paper. He waited for the bus with some old ladies and two young looking kids. It dropped him off at his stop and he walked the rest of the way, bypassing the worst part of town.

Business had been so bad that Barbie closed down for the night at ten. There was no night shift person at the desk. If someone needed a room, they had to ring the buzzer and wake her up. He came back to the motel and looked at the parking lot. There were five cars in the parking lot. One of them belonged to Shane. He wondered when his family would come and get it.

He went back to his room and looked through the paper, hoping he could find some place that was affordable. There were a few places in his price range, but he recognized the names and they were not in decent neighborhoods. One of them was another motel that was known for hookers and drugs. Mike didn't need any of that in his life. He had more than enough drama to deal with already. He checked the want ads and found a job as a housekeeper on the bus route. He circled it. It wasn't much, but it was a job. A job that paid. Anything at this point was better than what he had. He spent the next hour reading the paper and then went down to the Day Room in the lobby. Barb had given him a key so he could watch TV. Mike was a night owl and Barb was a morning person, so the two of them got along great. He figured she wanted somebody watching the property. Pretty soon she would ask him to check people in overnight. He mentioned it before, but she never really gave him an answer one way or another.

The next month or so was a continuation of the last 24 months. A whole lot of nothingness. He would wake up around ten or eleven at night and stay up until five or six in the afternoon, then go to sleep. It was the only sleep schedule that agreed with him. He was only eating one big meal a day and was still losing weight. When he first checked into the motel two years ago, he was over two hundred pounds, now he was barely 160. He looked like a skeleton. He barely recognized himself in the mirror. Even Barbie was worried about him. He called it the "Brown Wood Diet."

He had been called in for an interview with the City for the job on the night road crew. It didn't pay much, but it had great benefits and once he was off his probation period. It was pretty much impossible to get fired. He could join the Union and get a decent pension once he retired. It was a grown up job for grown ups. He went to the interview and answered all of their bullshit questions. He was relaxed and honest. The job consisted of repairing roads and road maintenance overnight for the next two years.

Once that was done he would be on snow removal and other duties. It was no dream job, but it was hell of a lot better than what he had. It was down to him and two others. It was just a matter of waiting now.

He would find out one way or the other. If he was chosen, he would get called for a drug test. If not, he would get a letter in the mail thanking him for his interest and to keep applying.

He had a lot of time on his hands. Time to think. He thought a lot about what Blake said. He had a point. He had made some lousy decisions in his life. Not bad ones per say, he just should have stuck it out for a little while longer. It had been almost three years since his last relationship. He figured it was time to get back into the game. He met a group at the local church for people with addictions. He wasn't addicted per say. He just found it helpful to be in a group setting where he could talk freely and openly. They met once a week for two hours. Some of the people in the group were recovered, some were still a mess. Most were somewhere in between. He didn't say anything for the first few meetings, then one night he just started talking. He told them about his life and his numerous failures and how he was living in a motel and was basically cut off from society and especially women. It was a sob story and a pathetic one at that. The group members had a mental illness that was beyond their control. They were born this way. He chose to be this way. He realized one night walking home from the church that he had made himself into the loser he is. The people in the meeting had to play the card life had dealt them. He actually felt worse for going to the group. He stopped by his little mailbox in the lobby and checked his mail. As soon as he opened the little door, he saw it. It was a letter from the City Works Department. It was his rejection letter. He opened it up and read it. It was a format "thanks for playing.

But we're going with our first choice. If he fails the drug test though, it's all yours" type of thing. He walked back to his room. He reached under the sink and took out his bottle he had kept in there for two years. He told himself that if it gets to the point where you start drinking, you're really in trouble. He took a swig and put a DVD on for background music. Within half an hour he was drunk. An hour later, he could barely stand up straight. He read the letter again and again and each time he read something else into it. He read it twelve times and when he was done, there was only one answer. He was a loser. A born loser. Some parents get the jock. Some get the kid with brains. Some parents get the pretty boy.

His parents got the loser. The one who didn't fail at the game of life, he never even got a chance to play it. Mike was mad, very mad and very drunk. In one explosive moment, he lost control and punched the wall next to his little TV. His fist nearly went through the wall and smashed the drywall and particle board. As drunk as he was, he was sure he saw it. It was some kind of bright yellow whip or tentacle. It looked like yellow moss behind the wall. He took a step back for a minute and looked at it with his flashlight. Sure enough, it was some kind of weird yellow growth behind the wall, in the space where there should be insulation. There was no insulation there. No wonder why his room was so cold in the winter. He reached over and touched it. It felt like plastic. It made a weird movement and then retreated back further into the wall. He was drunk, but he wasn't hallucinating. He was sure of what he had seen.

He had to see more. He cut away the rest of the wall with his knife and peeled away part of the wall. He shined his light inside the panels and saw it. It was some kind of snake or whip. It was moving. He yanked his head out of the wall and fell on the floor. As drunk as he was, he knew what he had seen.

He heard it moving alongside the wall. He had thought the noises were mice. He never imagined it was this thing. He moved his dresser against the hole in the wall and then put the couch next to the dresser. He didn't even want to be in the room right now, but he was too drunk to go anywhere else. He went into the bathroom and threw up. He wiped his mouth on a towel and then lay down on his bed. He couldn't keep his eyes open. Shane wasn't crazy. There really was something inside this place. He would have to investigate more in the morning. Right now, he needed sleep. Life was just too much for him.

He awoke and nearly jumped out of bed. His head was throbbing. For a split second, he thought he had just imagined it all. It could not have been real. He looked at the clock. He had been asleep for nearly five hours. It was drunk sleep and there was no way he was going to go back to bed. He had already puked and cursed himself for being so stupid. He needed a clear head. He went into the bathroom and stuck his finger down his throat. A few seconds later, he was vomiting again, but not much came up.

He went into the bathroom and downed several IBUs. The only thing that was going to make this day better was time. He wished he could fast forward his body's clock and let it do its magic by cleaning out all the poison in his system. He vowed that would be the last time he ever drank again. He moved the objects covering the hole in the wall and took his flashlight out. He also grabbed his hunting knife.

He decided to use a mirror to have a look inside the wall. He looked around but couldn't see anything. He was about to forget the whole thing when he saw something in the mirror dart past the corner. The mirror barely caught it. He quickly pulled away from the wall and put some more objects in front of the hole. Even though his head was throbbing, he knew he had to confront Barb about this. He had to tell somebody, anybody. This was just way too much for one person to handle by themselves.

Barb was making coffee in the day room. It was a daily ritual with her. He never understood why she did it. She didn't drink coffee. There weren't any guests in any of the rooms either. Not one. He came into the lobby and sat down next to her.

"Morning hun.....you look like shit." she said, pouring the water into the coffee pot.

"Rough night.....hey Barb, is there anything you forgot to tell us when we checked in here? Anything at all? Something all of us should have been made aware of?"

"No, what do you mean?"

"Barb.....there's something in the walls of this place. Something that I have never seen before. Some kind of horrible thing. Something that should not exist, but it does." he said

"The hell are you talking about?" she asked. She stopped what she was doing and looked directly at him.

"Barb, I made a hole in the wall last night in my room. Don't worry, I'll fix it and no one will ever know there was a hole there. Anyway, I saw something behind the wall. Something that could not possibly exist, but it does. Do you know what I'm referring to?"

"Mike, I have no idea what you're referring to. What do you mean some kind of monster in the walls?"

"Barb. I saw it. I saw it again this morning. I'm not crazy. There is something in the walls of this place."

"Mike, by any chance, were you drinking last night?"

"Barb, people don't hallucinate when they're drunk. I know what I saw. I saw it again this morning. I'm not crazy here. There really is something in the walls here."

"Show me." she said

The two of them went back into Mike's room. He moved the furniture around and exposed the hole in the wall. Just as he moved the TV, he saw some kind of arm or claw come out of the hole. Mike jumped back and nearly fell over the bed. It came out of the hole and looked around, then went back into the hole. It didn't make any noise, until it went back into the hole. Mike grabbed his knife and went around to the side of the hole. He looked over at Barb, who was just standing there looking very confused.

"You still think I'm crazy?"

"Mike, what the hell are you doing?" she asked

"What do you mean what am I doing? You saw it."

"Saw what?"

"The giant thing that came out of the wall. Tell me you saw it Barb."

"Mike, I'm just wondering why you put a giant hole in the wall. I don't see anything other than that."

Mike couldn't believe what was happening. She didn't see it. Or if she did, she was pretending not to. He knew he wouldn't get anywhere with her."

"So, you didn't see anything Barb?"

"Mike, I just see you acting crazy.....please put the knife down." she said calmly.

Mike put the knife down and moved some more objects in front of the hole. The two of them looked at one another for a second.

"Never mind Barb. Sorry I wasted your time. I'll go down to the hardware store and buy what I need to fix the hole. It's not that big a hole. You won't even know it happened."

"Mike, I'm not worried about the hole. I'm worried about you. Are you ok?" she asked

"I thought I was.....look Barb, you didn't see anything just now? Nothing? You just see the hole in the wall and that's it?"

"Oh, I see that alright. Mike, look. I'm not your mother. I like you, I really do, you seem like a nice guy who's just down on his luck, but I run a motel, not a mental hospital. If this is going to happen again, I'm going to have to ask you to leave here." she said

Mike couldn't believe what he was hearing. She really didn't see anything. Maybe he was losing it. Maybe he was going nuts. He sat down on the chair and smoked a cigarette.

"I'm sorry Barb. It won't happen again." he said.

"I better get back to the office. We're supposed to have a group of soccer players in here tonight. Finally, some real business. For the first time in months, we're going to be booked solid." she said

“Yeah, go head, thanks for indulging me.”

She looked as if she wanted to say more, but just turned around and left.

Mike felt worse now than when he first saw the monster. Was he going crazy? He felt fine. He had to get another opinion. He called Blake. He answered almost immediately.

“Blake.....look, you owe me some money. Actually you owe me lots of money. I’m willing to forget about all of it if you will just do me one favor.”

“Sure, what is it?”

“I need you to come back to the motel. I have to show you something.”

“Right now?”

Right now, Blake. It can’t wait.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t think there are any words in the English language that can do it justice. You just have to see it for yourself.”

“Okay...give me a few minutes. I got to make some arrangements, then I’ll be right over.”

“Blake.....don’t fuck me on this one. I need somebody to see this thing and to tell me I’m not crazy.”

“Ok man. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Mike hung up and sat down on his chair. He put a chair outside the room and sat outside. It was unusually warm for this time of year. The leaves were off the trees and the snow should be right around the corner, but today, fall still clung to the air. He put on a jacket and made a pot of coffee. He was not going to go back in that room, no matter what happened to him. He was done in this place. He just wanted to know if he were schizophrenic or not. He figured that would probably be something he needed to get ironed out.

Blake showed up about an hour later with one of his kids in tow. He had never seen Blake with his kids before. He didn’t want any kids around when he showed Blake the thing in the walls. He was beginning to hope he really was crazy. It would make things a whole hell of a lot easier on everybody.

“What’s up man. I can’t stay for too long.” he said holding his kid. The kid was a cutie. A mixed race baby, he would probably do well in life, in spite of having Blake for a father.

“Drop the kid off with Barb.”

“Why?”

“Just do it Blake, then meet me in my room.”

“You want to tell me what the hell this is all about? Barb won’t want to watch my kid. I don’t really even know her.”

“She loves babies. She’ll do fine. She never had any kids.”

“Ok, Mikey. If that’s what you want.”

Mike sat on the chair in front of his door. Blake came by a minute later with no baby.

“Ok, you got me. I’m all yours. Now can we please get this over with.”

“Blake, I know you’re selling shit to make ends meet. I think you stayed at this dump because if you got caught, you didn’t want your kids or girls to get involved. Am I right?”

“Whatever man, is this why you asked me out here?”

“No, I just need to know, where you hid it?”

“What? Why?”

“Just tell me where you hid it. Is there some way to get access to the attic?”

“Yeah. My room has a door to the crawl space. There’s a lock on it, but I broke it. It’s above the closet.”

“Show me.”

The two of them went into Blake’s room. He opened the door and went over to the closet. He moved a box and Mike grabbed the chair from his desk. It looked sturdy enough to support Blake.

“Why are you so interested in what I have in here?”

“I don’t care what you have in there. I just want to have a look at what’s in the walls Blake, that’s it.”

“Jesus Mikey, you’ve really lost it man.”

“Well, there’s only one way to know for sure. Let’s have a look.” said Mike

Blake pushed the panel covering the entrance away. Mike gave him his flashlight. Blake stood on the chair and looked around.

“Okay Mike, so just what am I supposed to be seeing here?”

“Be patient Blake. It will come.”

They stood like that for a minute or two, then Blake let out a small scream and quickly moved away from the hole.

“Did you see it?”

“I saw a giant rat. Mikey, this is ridiculous.”

“Just a little more time Blake. We owe it to Shane.” said Mike.

Blake stood on the chair and poked his head through the hole. He shined the flashlight down the wall and saw the rat covered in some kind of weird yellow moss. It looked like a vine. The rat was struggling to free itself, but whatever was around it was too strong. It pulled it around the corner. He hears some kind of weird noise, then nothing.

“What the fuck was that?” he said

“See Blake, I’m not crazy. Neither was Shane. There really is something in this place.”

Blake stepped down and turned off the flashlight. His face was as white as a ghost.

“I didn’t see anything man.....nothing.” he said and walked out of the room.

“Bullshit you didn’t. You saw the same goddamn thing I did.” said Mike

“No Mike. This can’t be real. There can’t be any monsters in the motel. Shit like that doesn’t happen in real life.”

“Well apparently it does. There is something hiding in the walls of this place Blake. You saw it with your own two eyes. I can tell by the look on your face. Are you gonna deny what your own two eyes are telling you?” asked Mike as they stepped outside the room.

He could see Blake was confused and scared. Blake didn’t really know what to do. He was a guy that ran from life’s problems. He would have to run far, far away from this one.

“Jesus man.....what the hell was that thing?” he asked as they smoked a cigarette outside.

“I don’t know Blake. I do know it’s big....real big. It probably goes around the whole motel. It was in my room as well.”

“Mikey....monsters don’t exist. They make for great TV, but they don’t exist, they’re not real. There has to be some other explanation.” he said nervously, smoking the cigarette.

“I wish to hell it wasn’t Blakey. I wish I was crazy.....but I’m not. We both can’t be having the same hallucination.”

“I gotta go Mikey.....this is just too much for me to handle right now.”

“So, what the hell are we going to do about it?” asked Mike

“What are we going to do about it? Well, I’m getting the hell out of here and never coming back. You can have whatever is in my room. I don’t want to ever set foot in this place again.”

“Well that’s fine Blake, but what about the next poor bastard that checks in here? You know last month there was a girl’s softball team that stayed here. One of the coaches raped one of the players. When the cops asked him why he did it, he couldn’t remember. He said his mind just went blank. Guy had a

spotless record. This motel....bad shit happens here. I think that monster in there is feeding off us somehow, slowly sucking away our life energy. Sure, we can run, but we'd only be passing the torch to the next person and the next person after that. How many more lives will this place destroy?"

"Mike, this isn't my problem. I got enough crap to deal with. You're on your own here with this one. Does Barb know?"

"I watched that thing come out of the hole in my room. It was only a few feet from her and she never moved. Says she didn't see anything. Now, how the hell is that possible?"

"Maybe we're both crazy."

"Or maybe that monster has her under its complete control. I realize now why Barb took me back. It wasn't about the money Blake. That thing wanted me to stay here so it could feed off me. I'm willing to wager Barb cut you a deal as well. I'm sure you were behind on your rent as well. Didn't you think it odd that she was just willing to overlook it and let you stay on here?"

"I thought she liked me. I figured she was just being nice."

"She isn't nice Blake. That's the problem."

"Yeah.....you got a good point there. Man ever since I left this place, I feel a whole hell of a lot better. You look sick Mikey. I mean are you okay?"

Mike grabbed Blake and shook him.

"Look, what this goddamn thing is doing to us! It's killing us like some kind of parasite. It's got Barb. It's up to us to stop this thing!"

"How are we going to stop it?"

"The only way I know how. We burn this bitch to the ground."

"What? Mikey, you're nuts. What if there are people in the rooms?"

"We'll wait till it's empty. I'll make sure no one is inside. The cops might suspect it's us, but as long as we have a solid alibi, they can't prove shit. Barb has insurance on the place. We'd probably be saving her life as well."

"Jesus Mikey, are you listening to yourself?"

"If you got a better plan, I'm all ears."

Blake looked at him and shook his head.

"It's up to us Blake. There is no other way."

"I gotta go Mikey.....you staying here?" he asked

"I don't know where I'm staying. I can't stay here."

Blake looked at Mike. He knew where this was going.

"You wanna stay with us?"

"Sure.....hey, you better grab your kid. No telling what he could be exposed to in this place."

Blake and Mike ran back to the office. His kid was watching TV in the day room and eating a bowl of dried cereal. Barb was nowhere around.

"Barb is one hell of a babysitter isn't she?"

"Let's get out of here Blake." said Mike.

The two of them gathered up a few things in their rooms and walked out. Blake never even bothered to close his door behind them. The next time they returned to the motel, they would be there to destroy it.

Mike met Janice, Blake's girl at their shared apartment. Janice was stunning and Mike wondered how a guy like Blake managed to land a girl like her. She seemed a little upset and asked Blake just where Mike was going to sleep. Blake said he can sleep on the couch. At this point, Mike was so exhausted, he didn't care where he slept. Blake made some breakfast and Mike took a nap as soon as he was finished. He figured he'd get to know Janice soon enough.

Mike was asleep for hours. He woke up to find Blake playing video games in the living room.

"Hey, you're up."

"I feel about a million times better. Still hung over, but better."

"We gotta tell Janice about what we're going to do."

"You sure that's a good idea? She'll probably think we're nuts."

"We are nuts Mikey."

"Good point."

They sat Janice down once the kids had gone to bed. She had a hard time believing what they were saying. Anyone would. It sounded ridiculous.

"So wait. There's a monster in the motel that sucks the life out of people? Blake are you doing drugs again?" she asked

"No....I wish I was. I know it sounds ridiculous Janice. I know it sounds absurd.....but Mike's right. I saw it with my own two eyes. Freakiest goddamn thing I've ever seen." said Blake.

"So, you're going to burn the motel down and kill the monster? This is your plan? What if you burn some of the people staying in the rooms?" she asked.

"We'll make sure the rooms are empty before we do it. About six months ago, Barb fired the

housekeeper. She was in a bind and asked me to help out in exchange for free rent. She gave me the master key to the rooms. I never gave it back. We'll wait to do it until we think the place is empty. We don't want to hurt anyone." said Mike

"Blake. Look. I don't mind lying to the cops about little shit, I hate them fucking pigs. But, lying to them about something like this? We get caught, we're screwed. I can't do this to our baby. We get arrested and I'll never see him again. I'm sorry, I just can't do it." she said

"Janice. We're not getting anything out of this. Nothing except a horrible thing that should not exist will die. You're going to be doing the whole world a favor. It's up to us to stop it."

"You two are out of your minds. I must have married the craziest goddamn cracker ever." she said

"I know what's at stake for you if we're caught. I also know what's at stake if we don't do anything. This goddamn thing caused our friend to blow his head off right in front of us. He saw it too. We can't be all crazy."

"You're serious. No bullshit here. Blake, if there is one time in your life you need to be honest with me, this is it." she said

"As stupid as it sounds, we're not lying. We need you to cover for us. Just say we were here all night playing video games and watching TV. We watched "NEVER EVER" and played "ENDZONE" all night. We passed out around midnight. We don't know anything about any fire. We ate pizza we bought at the store. Mike didn't drink and I had a few beers. That's all."

"That's all. Lying to the cops is serious business. I already got a record Blake. I can't go back to jail." she said

"Just stick to the story and you won't. We aren't stupid baby. We won't get caught. We just need you to do this little favor for us."

Blake put his hand on hers. She gave him a little smile. She agreed to do it. All they had to do now was just wait for Mikey's phone call. Blake wrote her out detailed instructions about what to say and gave her a timeline in case she was questioned by the cops. Mike read it too. Once they had all rehearsed it, it was just a matter of when, not if. This meant that Mikey was going to have to go back and stay at the motel, if that was at all possible.

Mike woke up the next morning to find Janice making coffee. She was hardly wearing any clothing at all. For the first time in years, Mike felt himself getting a boner. He missed that feeling. He hadn't been with a woman in so long, he had almost forgotten what it was like. He talked to her, mainly small talk about where she was from and how she met Blake. They both worked at the hospital, in the kitchen.

She said that the day her mom died, Blake stayed with her the whole night and never made a move on her. He just stayed with her and they talked the whole night. She said even though Blake was a total fuck up, he could be the sweetest man she's ever known. He felt guilty about dragging her into this.

She was clearly trying to get her life back on track after her arrest for possession. She was a big pothead, but that was it. She got busted by some cop who had a k-9 unit in his car and was charged with felony possession of a controlled substance because she had over a specific amount of weed.

Absurd, but that was the way it went. The more he talked to her, the more it bothered him.

“Mike. I thought a lot about it last night and I think maybe you might be going off in the wrong direction. Maybe instead of burning the place to the ground, you should just burn part of it, you know enough to get the cops and fire department to the motel. If this thing is as big as you say it is, then they will see it too.”

She did have a point. Maybe he was going too far. He just figured that if only part of the motel were damaged, then somehow the thing would find a way to hide itself. It must have a way to hide, when outsiders come and work on the motel. It's like believing in it was part of being able to see it. Then again, maybe Janice was right. Maybe that was the way to go. Make a small fire, just enough to get the fire department there and then he would know for sure if he was crazy or not.

“You know, I've got a better idea. The cops didn't seem to care at all about Shane's death. They kept asking me over and over if I knew where he kept his drugs. Now, why on Earth would a homicide investigator ask me that? Didn't make any sense at the time, but now that I look back on it, I think Shane was a major dealer. If we had a few people call the police department and say that Shane had a major stash hidden in the walls of the motel, I wonder what they would do?” he said

“Knowing these idiots, probably nothing.”

“No, they were onto Shane. He was involved in something much bigger than just this motel. I bet if I placed an anonymous call to the cops and gave them a little bait, they'd go for it. I just need some bait.”

“We can get you some bait Mike. Shane gave all his shit to Blake before he died. You can just hide it in the motel someplace and call the cops. No fire, no dead people, no drama. You're just being a good citizen. It sounds a lot better than torching the place.”

“Yes it does Janice.....it certainly does.” he said

Two weeks went by. Mike carefully hid the heroin in Shane's old room and then in two other spots in the motel. It was hidden well enough so that it would require some major effort on the part of the cops to dig it out. He poured cannabis oil all over it to make certain the drug dogs could smell it. Once it was done and everything in place. He made the call. He spoke to a narcotics detective and filled him in.

Mike had no idea just how much heroin was worth. Turns out it was over a hundred thousand dollars in street value. He sounded very convincing on the phone. He made certain he called from a payphone and used a calling car he had bought years ago. The detective thanked him and informed him as to what was going on. He had done his part. All he could do now was wait. He hadn't seen the monster when he hid the drugs, but saw several signs of it's presence including some weird yellow goo on the walls and several dead mouse and rat carcasses that looked as if they had been devoured alive. The thing was in there, just waiting like he was, only now, Mike had the upper hand and the monster was on the defensive.

It was two days later around nine AM when the narcotics unit showed up at the motel. They showed Barbie the search warrant signed by the judge. She was upset, but there was little she could do. Several drug dogs scoured the motel room and grounds. It wasn't very long before one of them had a hit. Sure enough the dogs had found a bag Mike had hidden in one of the rooms behind an air duct. The cops

were in the room for over an hour. They didn't seem too alarmed when they came out. They even found the two bags Mike had hidden in the wall in Shane's old room. This time, they used a sledgehammer and had to knock down one of the walls. Barbie was furious and swore like a sailor at the police. All in all, it took about three hours and they were done. They had sent the dog into every room and had been in the crawlspace in Blake's old room. None of the cops seemed too bothered by what they had seen. It seemed to be a very routine search for them. They were just packing up, loading the dogs into the trucks, when Mike walked over to Barbie and sat down next to her.

"What the hell is going on here Barb?" he asked

"Oh, Mikey.....the cops are looking for drugs. I tried to stop them, but they have a warrant. I can be arrested if I get in their way."

"Drugs? What here?"

"Yes, Shane was dealing drugs to make ends meet. He was holding a lot of drugs for a major dealer. The cops think he killed himself rather than face the dealer he stiffed. The dealer told him that if he ever stole from him, he would kill Shane's parents. How on Earth does someone get into a situation like that?"

"Man, I had no idea. I knew he had problems, but this is crazy. Is there anything I can do?"

"I'm going to need help putting this place back together. I'll give you a pass on the rent this month if you can put this place back together."

"No problem Barb. I'm here to help. I got some business to take care of, then I'll be back." he said
He gave Barb a little hug, then went into his room to quickly collect a few more things. He walked away from the motel and walked a few streets over to where Blake was parked.

"Anything?" he asked

"Nope. Nothing at all." said Mike

Blake just shook his head. Mike got in his car and the two of them drove away.

"Mike, how the hell did they not see it. If it's real it had to be in there."

"I don't know. Maybe it can make itself smaller or something. It's not like they checked every room and crawlspace."

"Janice was right man. She was right. I can't believe I almost let you talk me into burning down the motel. I was actually ready to do it. She stopped us from making the biggest mistake of our lives." he said, shaking his head.

"Blake, just cause they didn't find it, doesn't mean it isn't real. It is real, we both saw it."

"Man, I don't know what I saw. I may have seen it, I may not have. At this point, I don't really care. I'm never going in there again, so it doesn't matter."

"If you don't think it's real, then why won't you go back in there?"

"Cause it's Loserville in there. The place attracts losers. I should know, I am one." he said

"Maybe, maybe not Blake. You really don't think there's something responsible for all the misery that place has caused?" asked Mike

"It's a motel. Weird shit is bound to happen in there that people would never do in their houses. Look.....Shane was dealing man. He ripped off a major supplier who had connections to the Dixie Mafia. Some real nasty people. He was as good as dead once they found him. I'm not much better. I just didn't sell nearly as much as he did. I sold bags. He sold kilos. You can't do that and not bring the heat down on you."

"So then why did he say the monster made him do it?"

"Who knows man, he was a junkie. He was putting half the shit back up his arm. He was so strung out the last time I saw him, he had tombstones in his eyes."

"What happened to you Blake. You saw it just like I did? Just because it's crazy and no one would believe us doesn't make it any less real."

"It isn't real Mike. It's all in your head. Like I said, it's easier to pretend that some evil monster is responsible for our misery instead of our bad decisions we made and I've made some real bad ones. I'm not going back to that life Mike. I got a girl and two kids to think about."

"You only hid out in the motel so that if the cops caught you with your stash, your girl wouldn't get involved, right?"

"Well, yeah.....kind of. I never sold anything from the apartment. I would never take that chance."
"So how much child support do you owe?"

"A lot. I got two baby mommas. They ain't cheap."

"You're a real piece of work Blake."

"Well, shit you're not perfect, none of us are. Sure I made mistakes. I made lots of them, but I'm trying to fix them and never make them again. You're just doubling down on yours. Man, you were actually going to torch Barbie's motel.....think about that for a minute. What if someone got killed?"

"You can't blame me for something I almost did."

"Sure I can, cause it was Janice who talked you out of it. We'd both be in deep shit right now if we had done things your way. Real deep shit. You would have destroyed her life and you don't even feel bad about it. You're the piece of work Mike." he said

"Fine, so we're both losers."

"No Mike. Losers Blame everybody but themselves for their mistakes. I'm not blaming anyone else for mine anymore. I put myself in this shitty situation. I accept my failures. You never will. You'll just find something else to blame."

"Well, I guess we really do rise to the level of our own incompetence, don't we?"

“I guess we go Mike. I guess we do.”

“Blake. In spite of all this bullshit. You saw it and so did I. Facts are facts.”

“Mike.....you can stay here for a few days. I’m not going to kick you out. That wouldn’t be the Christian thing to do and Janice says we got to be better Christians, but I don’t want you around my family from here on in. I hope you understand.”

“Yeah Blake, I understand.” said Mike and turned away from Blake. It was pretty evident that whatever friendship the two of them may have shared was beginning to sour. It happens. It was a polite breakup. Blake’s life was headed in one direction and his in another. The two of them had to part ways at some point.

Neither one would ever set foot anywhere near the motel again. It was like the Brown Wood Motel had just been a bad dream for both of them. Mike stayed at Blake’s for a few more days, then headed west, back to Florida. His brother had called to say their mom was not doing well. The pack a day habit had finally caught up with her. She was diagnosed with COPD. She would need oxygen for the rest of her life. Mike got a bus ticket and headed back to Florida. His grand experiment had ended in total failure.

Worse of all, he might be totally insane. Blake had simply pretended like he hadn’t seen anything that day in the motel. Mike probably should have as well. Within a few days, he was back home, sleeping in an old bedroom, like the last 15 years never happened.

About six months after he moved back to Florida, he got a letter from Nolette. He was surprised and somewhat excited to hear from her, though that chapter in his life had since closed. She told him that she missed him and their talks and she hoped he was doing well in Florida. It was a polite letter, the kind you would write to your grandmother when you were away at camp. She went on to say that she was engaged and she hoped Mike would be able to attend her wedding. He read the letter twice then put it down. Something about it just seemed off. He and Nolette had spoken a few times and she had once crashed on his couch overnight. The mystery of where she went was never answered. Mike had to wonder if the monster had her under its wing as well. He tried not to think about her or Blake or the horrible thing he saw.....at least the horrible thing he thought he saw. As the months wore on, he became less and less convinced that he had seen anything. Perhaps he really did imagine all of it.

Perhaps it was just easier to imagine a monster was controlling his life than to accept the dismal reality of his existence. He wasn’t sure why she wrote to him. He never expected her to write to him. Most people don’t write letters, they use social media. Mike had never used any social media before, so maybe this was her only option. He had no intention of ever going back there and that meant no wedding for Nolette. He wrote back to her the next day and wished her well. He figured that would be the last he ever heard from her.

His mom lasted a year until one day he went to wake her up and she was cold and blue. He didn’t know if she died of natural causes, or took her own life. The last few weeks had been brutal. She was struggling for air even with the oxygen tank and feeder line stuck up her nose. His mom once said that we all face death alone. You could be surrounded by a thousand people when you pass, but when the Grim Reaper comes a calling, it’s just you and him. Mono on Mono. He stopped smoking the day after the funeral. He quit cold turkey. They were like little monsters that controlled his life as well. Something all too real and all too horrible for most people to ignore.

He decided to clean out the attic and put the house up for sale. He had gotten his life back on track and was working as a receiving clerk for a major box store in his hometown. He was dating again. Life really had turned around for him. He had put off cleaning the attic as the very last item on his list before he put a for sale sign out front. Once the house sold, he would never have to work again, unless he wanted to and on his terms. He felt like he was slowly coming out and waking up from the loser coma he had been in for the last several years. He was glad he got to know his mother again before she passed, even if the time with her had been difficult. It was all in the past now. Mike was beginning to look towards the future and the future for the first time in ages was looking pretty bright.

The realtor we were using put a decent price on the home. It was only a mile from the beach and had two acres. It was a retirees dream come true. He hadn't been up in the crawlspace in years. He opened the door and turned on the light. It was small and very hot inside. He found his old baseball card collection and started looking through them when he saw it. A bright yellow whip-like tentacle moves from behind one of the boxes. Then he saw another and then another. He turned around and saw the horrible thing lower itself from the small ceiling right in front of him. What he saw was simply too horrible to put into words. It was like he was looking right into a busy corner of hell.

"Hello old friend.....you didn't think you'd get rid of me that easy now did you?" It said in a very soothing almost childlike voice.

Mike tried to scream, but the tentacles were all over him. He was frozen in place.

"So nice to see old friends." it said and pulled him into its darkness. Mike was right all along. We really do rise to the level of our incompetence. It might take a lifetime, but we'll all get there in the end.