

THE TONTINE

by

DAMOND FUDGE

“Sir, you have a visitor.”

Stewart Moline was standing in front of the bay windows in his study, watching the last miniscule bit of sunlight fade beneath the horizon. The waves of the Pacific were crashing on the beach hundreds of feet below him. The typically deafening roar was merely soothing at this height. It was a sound he enjoyed drifting off to sleep to every night.

Stewart glanced at his watch. “A little late for company, Wrightson.”

“He said to say, ‘The imaginary gun has become real.’”

Stewart froze. Every hair stood on end. He turned and stared at his butler, searching the man’s face for a sign - any sign - that he was pulling a prank, despite there being no chance in hell that Wrightson could even know that phrase. Satisfied that everything was on the up and up he replied, “Show him to the living room. I’ll...I’ll be down shortly.”

When Stewart finally got to the bottom of the main staircase he stopped, drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Very slowly. No sense rushing the inevitable. He walked toward the living room, each step heavier than the last.

Stewart didn't need Harry Brubaker to speak to know exactly what this visit meant. He looked worn out. How long had it been since they last stood face to face? Did his hair have that much grey last time? "Masters?"

Harry nodded. "Boating...accident," he said, answering the obvious question. His emphasis on the word 'accident' was unnecessary.

They both knew the truth.

* * *

Vietnamization may not have been the best policy Nixon could have come up with, but to four buddies scheduled to head home that week it was a brilliant idea. Stewart Moline, Harry Brubaker, Jason Masters and Mike Williams had been through way too much together. They may not have been the best of friends but, given the situation, they were the best any of them could hope for.

Jason was the one with the plan. He'd heard a rumor about an old man living in a hut not too far from their camp who was guarding a "boatload" of gold.

"Boatload? Really, Masters?" asked a skeptical Stewart.

“That’s probably an exaggeration, sure. But he has to have a lot of it.”

“How do you know that?” Mike asked.

“Rumors start somewhere, don’t they?”

“This guy just lives out in the middle of nowhere with a bunch of gold? Why hasn’t anyone already stolen it?” Stewart inquired.

“That’s the kicker. It’s all in religious shit. Like crosses and stars of David and stuff like that.”

Mike held up his hands. “Whoa. No way. I’m not stealing any crosses.”

“Then take the Jewish shit. I’m sure there’s things from those Pagan religions the gooks worship, too. Take some of that.”

“Yeah, don’t be a pussy, Williams,” Stewart chided him. “You’re gonna be rich. You can donate all you want back to the church to save your soul.”

Mike still looked hesitant. “I don’t know.”

“What’s to know?” Jason asked. “Some old guy in the jungle doesn’t need that much gold. He can’t very well take it with him when he dies.”

Stewart nodded, “Exactly. He’s not respecting what he has. We will. We’ll put it all to better use than he ever would.”

The only one of the four who had been silent the whole conversation was Harry. Mike turned to him like he did for every tough decision they had made since boot camp. “What do you think, Harry?”

Harry rubbed his chin. His gaze dropped to the floor in contemplation. “This does sound promising. I mean, the timing is perfect, with us shipping out. Besides, we’ve all seen the treatment of soldiers back home. They hate us for fighting over here. They don’t see we’re just government puppets. This money would definitely help us start to build our lives. Better lives.”

Harry fell silent while keeping his gaze on the ground in front of him. The others stared at him with anticipation. Eventually, he looked back up at his friends and said, “I say we do it.”

* * *

Something they had come to know all too well during their tour was that, no matter the distance, every trek through the jungle seemed to take a lifetime. The trip to the old man’s hut took twice that to complete, owing to the sparse directions Jason had. They eventually arrived at the outskirts of a small clearing with a ramshackle hut standing in the exact center.

“See?” Stewart said. “What did I tell you? Look at that piece of shit. Why live like this if you have all that gold?”

Mike shook his head. “Looks like we’ve gone on a wild goose chase, if you ask me.”

“That’s probably what he wants people to think,” Jason suggested.

“Fine,” Mike said, “let’s just get the gold and get outta here. I’m getting the creeps standing here.”

“You get the creeps putting on your socks,” Stewart poked at him.

“Enough,” Harry shushed. “Be extra quiet from here on out. And watch for traps. If there is gold, and *I* had it out here, I know I’d protect it any way I could.”

Harry led the way as they advanced. The foursome spread out and approached from separate sides. Mike stopped short after only a few feet and signaled to the others. He pointed at the almost imperceptible mound where a landmine was buried. Everyone else nodded their understanding.

Stewart was the first to reach the dwelling. He carefully opened the door, checking all around it. He found a tripwire running along the floor just inside the doorway. He slowly stepped over it and into the room. He followed the path of the wire to find it attached to the pin of a grenade right above the door. He took out his knife and cut the wire while holding the pin securely in place. After a quick survey of this front room, Stewart motioned to the others that it was safe.

The front room was sparsely furnished: just a table, one chair and a straw mattress in a corner. Another door was directly opposite the front door. Harry examined the second door as carefully as Stewart had examined the first. He found nothing on the outside so he slowly opened it, watching for any indication of a trap. The door made it all the way to the wall and nothing was triggered. “No need to booby trap the room inside, I guess,” he said.

The quartet stood at the precipice of the inner room, eyes wide and mouths agape. There were no windows in the room, yet there was so much gold on the tables and floor that the room glowed, even in the tiny amount of light that was able to get past the soldiers. Like Jason had said, it was mostly in the form of iconography representing major religion from around the world.

“Gentlemen,” Stewart offered, “shall we?”

They had each brought an empty duffel bag, which they piled next to the door. There was barely enough room for one person to be in the room, so Harry went in first and quickly filled his bag. Stewart was next. During both men’s turns, Mike kept an unofficial watch.

While Jason was in the process of collecting his share, there was a noise at the front door followed by a voice calling out in Vietnamese. Mike spun around in surprise. His machine gun erupted, punching holes through the walls on either side of the door, not to mention almost completely opening the stomach of the old man who had just entered the hut. Shocked, the old man dropped to his knees. His hand went to his gut, inadvertently pushing a part of his intestines back inside, before he fell over onto his side and then partially rolled onto his back.

“Holy shit, Williams! What did you do,” Jason cried out. All Mike could do was stammer.

Stewart was on Mike in an instant, snatching the rifle from his hands. Harry walked over to the old man and knelt next to him. The old man opened his eyes and, when he saw Harry looking down at him, let out a sound that could have been a cough but sounded eerily more like a laugh.

“He still alive?” Mike asked hopefully.

“Barely,” Harry replied.

They all crowded around the crumpled body. The old man looked around at them, meeting each soldier’s gaze and holding it for a number of seconds. He opened his mouth and tilted his head to allow the blood that had filled it to drain.

“You are all cursed.”

With that lone sentence, the old man died.

* * *

Back at camp, they sat on their bunks in silence. Mike was the only one who was visibly agitated, though under their tough facades the other three were soiling themselves in equal measure. Jason was the first to speak, but only because he occupied the bunk under the trembling Mike.

“Hey,” Jason exclaimed, kicking the bottom of the top bunk. “Calm down. You’re making me seasick.”

Mike hopped down from his bunk and began pacing. Stewart watched him for a couple of seconds before he exclaimed, “Not much better, Mike.”

“I can’t fucking help it. You try to calm down next time you shoot a defenseless old man.”

“You’ve killed tons of gooks,” Jason stated. “What’s one more?”

“That’s different. They’re all Commies. This was just some old guy.”

“How do you know he wasn’t a Commie?”

“Besides,” Stewart chimed in, “he wasn’t defenseless. You had to walk around all of those mines, too.”

“But he was just protecting his gold. He didn’t have a gun or anything. Jesus.”

Harry sighed and got out of bed. He stepped up to Mike and carefully took him by the shoulders in order to stop his pacing. “Listen, Mike. Listen. Yes, he was defenseless. But he startled you, that’s all. It could’ve happened to any of us.”

“But it didn’t. It happened to me. *Me*.”

“I know. I know, Brother. I’m not saying getting over it will be easy, but you have to try to at least hide it. It’s going to take all our senses just to smuggle this haul back to the States without getting caught.”

Mike took a step back. “That’s all you guys care about, isn’t it? The money.”

Jason nodded vigorously. “Well...yeah,” he said, without thinking.

Harry glared at Jason. “No, that’s not all.” He turned back to face Mike. “I won’t lie. It is a great deal of concern, right now. But so are you...to us. We’re all friends here, and no amount

of money will keep us from caring about each other's well being. We need to know you'll be OK for the next few days. We'll help you get through this...but you need to do your part, too."

Mike lowered his head and stared at his boots.

"You going to be good, Buddy," Harry asked.

Mike took a moment before nodding half-heartedly. Harry pulled him close and gave him a tight hug. As he patted Mike on the head, he looked at the other two soldiers. He knew the concern he saw in their faces was a reflection of his own.

* * *

Minus a few small skirmishes with Charlie, their last couple days of deployment went smoothly. Harry and Stewart were able to find a guy in Saigon who, for a hefty fee, would be able to have their treasure waiting for them by the time they got stateside. Mike's agitation became less and less noticeable, but the others could still tell he was not one hundred percent by the time they boarded the transport plane.

Mike looked out across the airfield as they stood in line. A shimmering at the edge of the runway caught his eye. At first he thought it was just heat coming off the tarmac, but when it slowly grew in intensity he rubbed his eyes to see if it would clear. When he opened them again, there was no mistaking what he saw.

Standing at the edge of the runway was the ghost of the old man.

The ghost held Mike's gaze and his whole body stiffened. He couldn't look away. The ghost slowly raised its right arm and pointed a thin, gnarled finger at him. Even at this distance, Mike could see the malevolent smile spread across the old man's face. His head began to throb, as if that finger had poked inside and was feeling around his brain.

A slap against his shoulder shook him from his daze.

"Hey, Man," Jason said. "Wake up. We're boarding. Don't wanna miss your trip home, do you?"

"Huh? Oh...yeah...no, right." Mike looked back at the ghost, still pointing at him. "Hey, Jason."

"What?"

"Do you see anything out there?"

Jason looked in the direction Mike indicated. "Yeah. A shithole country that deserves to burn. C'mon. The sooner it's behind us, the better."

Jason tugged the front of Mike's shirt and pulled him along toward their awaiting flight. Mike took one final glance back to the edge of the runway.

The old man was gone.

* * *

Mike carried that image with him every second of every day after he got back home. It occupied his thoughts so much that, despite the untold riches in a bank account he rarely touched, he took a menial job at the Post Office. He hoped the monotony of the work would keep his mind from wandering to those corners he didn't want to go, seeking out memories he didn't want to remember.

It worked, for the most part. Every once in a while he would think he saw something out of the corner of his eye. Initially, when he turned his head, nothing would be there. Initially.

The visions got clearer as time went on. He started catching glimpses of the old man at random times. Walking in the park. At the grocery store. In the mirror at the barber shop, an incident that startled him so much that he ended up with a scar above his right ear from the scissors. The sightings increased at a rate which made him begin to question his sanity. He would lie awake at night, hoping - sometimes praying – that he was actually losing his mind. He wasn't sure he could take the alternative.

One Thursday he was having lunch at his favorite little restaurant, sitting at one of the tables in the front. The waitress had just set his food down in front of him when he happened to glance out the window. Standing across the street was the ghost of the old man.

He quickly looked back at his plate, desperately trying to maintain his composure. He attempted to eat, taking a few flavorless bites of his sandwich. Eventually, he dared a second glance, his eyes slowly turning in their sockets. The ghost was now pointing at him, the same way he did on the tarmac back in 'Nam.

Mike froze. His hands started shaking, bits of sandwich dropping onto the table. He tried with all his might to avoid looking back a third time, but movement in his peripheral vision, and the inherent human need to look, betrayed him. His head slowly turned to the window.

The old man was standing right outside. Mike's mouth dropped open, all sound catching in his throat. The ghost reached out for Mike, his arm passing through the glass. Just before the fingers reached him, Mike fell backwards in his chair, his head smacking against the floor. Everyone in the restaurant looked his way, and the hostess was ready to call an ambulance if this man didn't recover quickly.

Mike scrambled to his feet, dazed but otherwise physically fine. He looked out the window and saw no trace of the old man. He ignored the worried stares he was getting as he rushed to the Men's room.

He turned the cold water knob to full blast, holding his hand under the flow until it was numb. He wiped two freezing handfuls of water over his face. He steadied himself with both hands on the sides of the sink, his head down, chin against his chest as he tried to get his panting under control.

Once his breathing had calmed somewhat, he checked his appearance in the mirror and saw the ghost standing directly behind him. The old man reached out both hands toward his prey's head. The ghostly fingers slid into his temples. Mike felt a tingling deep inside his brain.

The restaurant's patrons watched as the man who had entered the restroom a frazzled mess calmly strode across the room, placed a large amount of cash on his table and left the establishment.

Mike walked straight to his lawyer's office. He was one of only a handful of clients who his lawyer would see without an appointment. The meeting took most of the rest of the day as Mike outlined his provisions, giving the lawyer contact information for his former platoon-mates, then waited for the paperwork to be drafted. He signed the documents and left the offices.

Mike walked down the street, on his way home. At one point, he waited at a crosswalk, just casually looking around at the area. On the corner directly opposite from him was the old man. The ghost smiled that awful smile again, beckoning to him. Mesmerized, Mike stepped off the curb. The Crosstown Express shattered eighty-seven percent of the bones in his body.

Two years after killing the old man, Mike was dead.

* * *

His funeral was well attended. Mike was the one of them with a large, extended family. Relatives came from all over the country, some who hadn't seen him since he was a toddler. There was probably more guilt over the treatment of veterans than sorrow at the loss of a relative in the room. The remaining trio of their quartet eventually ended up by themselves in a quiet corner. After the initial meet-and-greet pleasantries had been dispensed, most of the crowd went out of their way to avoid coming into contact with the men. To be perfectly honest, they didn't mind at all.

The three of them weren't shocked when Mike's lawyer came up to them and told them they were in his will. They had an idea what had been left to them, and there were no surprises in

that regard. The surprise came when they got to the lawyer's office and found no one else in attendance.

"Michael made two separate wills," explained the lawyer. "This one is specifically for you three only."

After the meeting, they ended up in their hotel's bar. It was relatively empty and they had the side game room to themselves. Harry sat at a small table with a pen and paper, periodically jotting notes, while Jason and Stewart played darts.

"A bus," marveled Stewart.

Jason sighed and dropped the arm that had been cocked and ready to throw. "How many times in one weekend are you going to say that word?"

"What? I'm sorry, I just find it hard to believe."

"I don't. I was shocked he didn't do it before we came home. Guy was a time bomb."

"No, it's the bus part that confuses me. Someone like him, I figured it would be a gun or he'd hang himself. Something at home after suffering for too long."

"It's scary how much you seem to have thought about this."

"It was a long flight."

"I just keep thinking back to something he said the last time we spoke," Harry said, finally joining the conversation.

"What? You guys still talked," asked Stewart.

“We kept in touch more than you guys did with us.”

“I was...you know...busy,” Jason said a little too quickly.

Stewart looked at Jason and rolled his eyes. “I’ve *actually* been busy. I’ve been traveling, checking out companies to invest in.”

Harry held up his hands and replied, “Not judging. It’s just the last time he called me he said, ‘You eventually get to that point when the imaginary gun you keep putting against your head finally becomes real.’ It was completely out of the blue. When I asked what he meant he said it was nothing and then hung up. He died the next day.”

“See? I knew he was a depression risk,” Stewart said.

“He wasn’t depressed,” Harry said. “He was scared.”

“Of what?”

“Late last year, his voice started sounding...well...I don’t know any other way to put it but...distracted. Like he had more on his mind than he was saying. About four months ago, he finally admitted he’d been seeing the ghost of the old man he shot.”

Jason almost dropped his beer. The dart Stewart had in mid-toss went wild, ricocheting off the wall and the pool table before sticking into the wood floor.

“Seriously,” Harry said, answering the unasked. “He told me he had seen the ghost ever since the day we left. It was only here and there, at first, but by that time it was happening more often. I could hear it in his voice. He was scared shitless.”

“I would be, too, if I were going nuts like that,” Jason said.

“That’s the thing. I don’t think he was nuts. I think he really *was* seeing the ghost.”

Jason made a dismissing noise. “Fuck off with that. There ain’t no such thing.”

“Real or not, *he* believed it. So much so he almost had me believing. And I think that’s what killed him.”

“No,” said Stewart, “the Crosstown Express killed him.”

“Maybe the ghost pushed him. Or...I don’t know. All I *do* know is the conviction I heard in his voice. I made sure we talked at least once a week, more if we could, thinking that talking it out would maybe help him. It became painfully clear there was nothing I could do for him myself, so I recommended a shrink. Friend of the family. He never called him, though. Maybe if he had...”

They all were silent.

“Yeah, maybe,” Stewart wondered.

“Hell, with the money he had, he could afford the best head docs in the world. Why wouldn’t he get the help,” Jason asked.

Harry picked up the paper he’d been writing on and passed it to Stewart. “Speaking of the money, check this out. I know we each didn’t get equal shares, but close enough.”

“Tell me about it,” Jason grunted.

Stewart grunted back at him. “Let it go. Your bag was only a little lighter. So was mine, remember?”

“Anyway,” Harry continued, “I worked out the numbers on what we got today. He hardly spent a dime.”

“Now I know he was nuts,” Jason remarked, the paper with the Harry’s figures now in his hand.

Stewart pointed at the paper. “And that right there shows he was depressed, not scared. He was feeling guilty about the money. Always had. Guilt got too much, one day, and he finally takes that last step from the curb. That’s all. End of story.”

Harry shook his head. “No, that can’t be ‘end of story.’ He was frightened of whatever he was seeing. It may have only been in his mind, but the ghost is what killed him.”

Stewart picked up his mug and downed the rest of his beer. “Fine, believe what you want. But I’m going with suicide, no matter what the method and no matter if it makes sense. I’m going to take his money and buy this nice little pharmaceutical company I saw last week. In his honor.”

* * *

The other two followed Stewart’s example and invested their wealth, which made them even richer. Harry stayed mainly with stocks and bonds, nearly tripling his worth within the first year, not to mention the gains he made year after year. Jason initially tried a combination of Stewart and Harry’s strategies on his own, to varying degrees of success. After barely breaking

even that first year, he decided to just copy whatever his friends did. That worked much better for him.

Until he began to see the old man.

It started simply enough: There would be bright glimmers just at the edge of his sight, even on the darkest of overcast days. These flashes got to be so annoying that he made an appointment with an eye doctor.

Jason was the sole occupant of the elevator in the medical complex. When it started to climb, he was looking up at the advancing floor numbers above the door. After a few floors, he looked straight ahead. His reflection in the polished steel of the door had doubled. He spun around and found himself staring into the ghostly visage of the old man.

The lights in the car started to flicker, slowly at first, then faster and faster and faster, as the sadistic grin spread across the old man's face. Jason backed away as far as he could within the confined space, trying with all of his might to press every molecule through the door and into the safety beyond. The ghost raised its long, thin arm and reached out for him. The bony fingers spread open wide as the hand moved to cover his face.

Jason screamed.

The doors opened.

He spilled out into the hallway and smacked into the wall opposite the elevator. Shaking off the impact, Jason looked into the car. Empty. Lights working perfectly. Without hesitation, he bolted for the stairs and didn't stop running until he dove onto the floor of his bedroom closet.

* * *

The men had kept in contact over the years, though they only met in person two more times, on the first and second anniversaries of Mike's death. Things and life got in the way of further reunions. Postal services and phone companies became their link. Both Harry and Stewart noticed the subtle changes in Jason's letters. His sentences got shorter, more succinct. He never was a verbose wordsmith, by any means, but after reading his notes for so long it was easy to see the recent differences.

Stewart was getting ready for a dinner in honor of the charitable efforts of one of his companies when Jason called. Before the receiver got to his ear, he could hear the rapid breathing on the other end of the line. He barely said, "Hello," and Jason interrupted.

"Stewart? It's Jason."

"Hey, Man. What's...?"

"I'm seeing him."

"Seeing who?"

"The old man. I'm fucking seeing him. Everywhere. Fucking everywhere."

"Wait. Hold on. Take a deep breath. Slow down. Who are you seeing?"

After a deep breath, Jason continued. "The old man. The ghost Mike was seeing. I'm seeing him now, too."

“You’re pulling my leg, right?”

“Fuck! No, I’m not pulling your leg! He’s real. He follows me everywhere. I can’t get rid of him. You’ve gotta help me.”

There was something in Jason’s voice that frightened Stewart. What was it Harry had said all those years ago about Mike? It was the conviction in his voice? That is exactly what he was hearing now. “Anything, of course. What do you need?”

“I...I don’t...,” Jason started. He paused and the frantic breathing began again. “What can you do? What can anybody do? It’s a fucking ghost. It’s gonna kill me like it did Mike.”

“No, it’s not. I promise. You just hang tight. Are you at home?”

“Yeah.”

“OK. Stay by the phone. I’m going to call Harry and see what we need to do. All right?”

“Just hurry.”

* * *

He told Harry everything Jason said. “I’ve got it,” was Harry’s reply.

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“I’ll be there tomorrow,” Harry assured Jason. “Next day at the latest. I think I know what to do.”

* * *

Harry showed up at Jason’s apartment with two suitcases: One with his clothes and toiletries, one with everything he would need to help his friend. When Harry opened the smaller case, Jason took a step back. It was filled with strange jars, weird looking weeds and a leather tube.

“What the hell is all of that?”

“Ever since Mike’s funeral, I’ve been looking into anything and everything involving ghosts and how to get rid of them. I found a lot of information, but it was all crap. Then I found these.”

He removed the tube and opened it. A roll of ancient-looking parchments slid out into his hand. Harry carefully unrolled them and laid them all out onto the table. He reached into a pocket in the lid of the suitcase and produced a stack of more modern papers. He placed one sheet next to each page of parchment.

“I discovered these pages in an abandoned monastery in Thailand. It took me a long time to translate them; I had to find someone familiar with dead languages. He thought I was crazy when he finished, but he changed his mind once I paid him.”

Harry emptied the entire contents of the suitcase onto a nearby counter. Jason’s nose rebelled against the variety of scents. Harry began opening the jars and it got worse. In a few short minutes, Jason’s apartment smelled like an entire Farmers’ Market had spoiled.

Harry moved back and forth from table to counter as he consulted the translated pages and the illustrations on the parchments. He mixed things, mashed things, burned things and chanted things. He waved the burning things through the air. He smeared the mashed things on Jason. He fed the mixed things to Jason. At one point, he had to help Jason hold his mouth shut to keep from vomiting. Harry was finished with all of the rituals by dawn the next day.

“That should do it,” he told an exhausted Jason. Harry stuck around for another week, just to make certain. Seven days later Harry was comfortable declaring Jason ghost free.

* * *

About a year later, Jason was sprawled out on his couch watching the old Cary Grant film *Topper* when his phone rang.

“Jason, Man, it’s Bobby.”

“Hey, what’s up?”

“What’re you doin’ this weekend?”

“Haven’t got any specific plans. Why?”

“My lake house. You, me, Gord, Hot Dog and a few girls the Dog knows. A weekend of booze and babes in bikinis.”

“How can I say no?”

They all packed into Hot Dog’s oversized Ram van and drove up to the lake Friday night. Jason hit it off with Kelli, a brunette who may not have had the best tits of Hot Dog’s female friends but she definitely had the best personality. She spent the night in his room and they were nearly inseparable all day Saturday.

Late that afternoon, they went tooling around the lake on Bobby’s boat. Bobby knew better than to speed in those waters, but he wasn’t going super slow, either. At one point, Jason got up to get another beer from the cooler specially built into the seats at the front of the boat. Jason was trying to remember if that was the stern or the aft as he popped the top on the can.

When he turned around to head back to Kelli, he found himself nose-to-nose with the ghostly visage of the old man. He was so startled that he screamed and stepped backwards. His feet got all tangled up around themselves and he fell end over end into the lake. The boat forced him under the water, and when it passed over him, the propeller sliced open his gut. His intestines became wrapped around the blades as his body floated away.

* * *

“I thought you took care of everything?” Stewart asked the man standing in his living room.

“I thought so, too.” Harry ran a hand through his hair. “I was wrong.”

Stewart moved over to the counter next to the grand piano, opened the decanter and poured two whiskies. He handed a glass to his friend and couldn't help noticing the sound the ice made as it betrayed the man's imperceptible shaking. He looked Harry in the eyes and asked, “You've seen him, too, haven't you?”

Harry downed the drink in one swallow and made his way to the decanter for a refill. “Yes. It began about two months ago. He just stares at me and points. Like he's saying I'm next.”

Harry sat in one of the three chairs that occupied the room while Stewart remained standing. “So, you never found anything to help get rid of this thing?” he asked, calmly sipping his whiskey.

“No. There were a couple other spells I found that looked promising, but nothing worked. Nothing.” Harry began to get very agitated. “We're fucked. Goddamn Mike. He fucked us so bad.” He stewed for a moment, his legs bouncing from nerves. He suddenly leaped from the chair and threw his glass across the room. It shattered against the wall at the same time he yelled, “Fuck!”

“Hey, no need to abuse my crystal,” Stewart spouted, more out of concern for the rest of his possessions than for his friend's well-being.

Harry calmed down a touch. "Sorry. Sorry...I...yeah...sorry."

"It's all right, but no more refreshments for you."

Harry paced the room while Stewart just watched, casually sipping his drink. Eventually, Stewart needed a refill. Harry watched him as he crossed the room, and it was as if he was only now getting his first good look at Stewart. His stride, demeanor, concern - hell, his entire being - was too calm.

"What the hell, Man?" Harry asked.

Stewart was confused. "What?"

"You haven't seen him yet." It was more of a statement than a question, and probably came off more accusatory than Harry meant it to sound.

"No."

Harry leaned in to study his friend's face. "You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

Stewart broke away and took over the chair Harry had abandoned. "I don't think you're crazy. I don't think you're seeing a ghost, either. I don't know what you're seeing, whether it's psychosomatic or what, but I'm certain that it's not a ghost. And I'm even more certain that our friends' deaths are mere coincidences. Nothing more. Ghosts aren't real."

"Yes they are. You don't know what you're talking about. I've seen him."

"No. You've seen...something. It's a figment of your imagination. Like I said, psychosomatic. Maybe brought on by all of this ghost talk. If you just forget about it, then it will go away. Out of sight, and all."

Harry resumed his pacing. “No. No. No. No. No. You don’t know, Man. You don’t know.”

Stewart stopped Harry by grabbing his arms. “Harry,” he got right up in his face. “Ghosts. Do. Not. Exist.”

Harry broke from Stewart’s grasp and said, “Fuck you.” He stormed out of the room and out of the house.

Stewart moved to the front window and watched his friend leave. He felt he’d done a good job of hiding the fact that he didn’t believe even half of what he just said. He couldn’t afford to let whatever mass hysteria that had overcome his pals take hold of him.

* * *

Just like Mike before him, Jason left every bit of wealth he had accumulated to Harry and Stewart.

* * *

Harry was prepared. The old man had yet to appear in his apartment, but he knew it was only a matter of time. He had been seeing him on a daily basis, now. Mostly he would stand

across the street or on an overpass or a rooftop, always pointing, always smiling that fucking smile.

One night, eight months after he and Stewart had met with Jason's lawyer, Harry came home after a long jog. He hopped into the shower to get the workout grime off his body. The hot spray on his shoulders and back felt so exhilarating that he stayed in there until the water changed to lukewarm. He turned off the shower, toweled his body dry and put on his robe.

When he came out of the bathroom, still rubbing his hair with the towel, he found the ghost standing at the foot of his bed.

Harry said nothing; he just walked over to his dresser and opened the top drawer. Every room in the house was equipped for this situation. He turned to face the old man, smiled what he imagined was an accurate parody of the ghost's grin and replaced the imaginary gun with the real one in his hand.

* * *

Stewart calmly listened as Harry's attorney delivered the standard message: Condolences, minimal details about the death, when and where for the reading and a rerun of the condolences. "Thank you," was all Stewart replied when the man was finished talking, then he just dropped the receiver back home. After a moment of thought, he removed the phone from its cradle and set it to the side.

He went downstairs and gathered his staff. He assured them that they were not being fired, but he felt it was a good time for an extended, paid vacation for them all. He could not do enough to emphasize *paid*. He told them he didn't know how long it would last, but he would call them as soon as he could.

He hardly ate or slept for the next five days. When he did either it was maybe a sandwich and only for about two hours, respectively. Drinking, on the other hand, he did in spades.

He was lounging in a chair and enjoying an extra dry martini, his third of the evening, when the old man appeared. Stewart looked up at the ghost with indifference and slurred, "It's about fucking time."

The old man smiled. When he spoke it sounded like he was talking through fog within a cave. "Congratulations. You have won the prize."

"I don't care about the money."

"Oh, it is much greater than money, my friend."

The ghost shot across the room in an instant, his ethereal being dissolving before Stewart's eyes. The mist that the old man had become enveloped his victim. Stewart felt a cold and tingling sensation in every pore as the spirit began to enter his body. As it progressed, the feeling changed to a burning so intense Stewart needed to scream. He was certain he had opened his mouth, but no sound came from it.

With the entirety of the old man's ghost in his body, Stewart's mind saw it all.

* * *

Millennia ago, in the early days of recorded history, a young warrior chieftain ruled a small region of what would later become southern Russia. He was never satisfied with the amount of land he controlled, so he and his soldiers were constantly setting out to conquer the nearby lands. By the time the chieftain was thirty he had more than quadrupled his territory.

Throughout all this land-grabbing, the other thing he acquired was gold. The more wealth he accumulated, the more he coveted it. He loved everything about the precious metal: The color, the feel, the way light reflected off it. He kept it all in a special room in his palace. He would spend hours in this room just sitting on a special gold throne. It sat at the front of the room, facing inward, so he could see all of his treasure at once. He knew that every moment he was away from the palace was a moment when someone might sneak in and rob him. Once he felt he had enough to keep him obscenely comfortable the rest of his days, he gave up his conquering ways.

Eventually, the warrior came to love his gold more than anything else in his life. He let control of all his lands revert back to the people. He set all of his wives free. He kept a small core guard for his palace but disbanded the rest of his armies. The surrounding forest grew and grew, hiding the chieftain's home from the world. The Gold Palace, as it came to be called by those on the outside, became the subject of many legends. And even more whispers.

As time moved forward, the young warrior chieftain became an old warrior chieftain, one who could not bear the thought of being without his gold in the afterlife. He started sending members of his guard to the corners of the known world in search of solutions to his encroaching

mortality. Six years later, one of his soldiers returned from the mystical lands of sand with the solution: A spell of possession.

He heard the stories that floated among the nearby lands, rumors the people told of a man who lived in a world of gold. The chieftain was described as either an overlord or a hermit, depending upon who told the tale. Everything he had was made of the precious metal. Some tales even had him with a mouthful of golden teeth or, his personal favorite, he had rubbed the gold so much that his skin had turned into it. His guards would amuse him with the latest of these myths whenever they heard a new one. The chieftain knew this was exactly what he could use to gather the most integral ingredient for the spell.

He needed to reach out beyond the lands which he had previously ruled, since most of those citizens remembered him with fear. He once again sent members of his guard out into the world, this time to spread the story of The Gold Palace. It didn't take long before a greedy thief came to visit.

The chieftain's guards awakened him in the middle of the night to tell him a man had been seen sneaking around the outskirts of the compound. He told his men to stand down and let the thief get all the way to the Gold Room. Then he gathered what he needed to prepare himself for the spell.

The thief made his way through the palace, taking a piece of art here and there. Carefully timed guard patrols steered the thief in the right direction and he quickly reached his destination. The first thing that caught his attention, of course, was the abundant amount of gold. As he stepped around the golden chair just inside the door, his attention was drawn away from the riches before him to the seated body.

The chieftain's throat was wide open, his life spilled down his front. The cut was fresh enough that the blood still bubbled at the carotids. The knife sat within an ever-loosening grip in the right hand. The thief gasped and turned away from the gruesome sight, ending up face-to-face with the ghostly figure of the recently deceased. The chieftain said nothing as he enveloped the thief. He was too anxious to find out if the spell worked.

In a matter of moments, he had become an intruder within an intruder.

One unexpected side effect of the spell was that it caused the host body to age at a slower rate. Whether this was due to the combining of their ages or just a nice surprise, the chieftain never knew. Nor did he care. The more time he got, the better.

As they are wont to do, the body would eventually decay. When he felt this happening, he would send a group of his guards off to spread his legend once more. Greed is the greatest motivator, and a new host would make his way to the palace within no time.

Time marched on, the world slowly became more populated and single thieves became bands. Eventually, the warrior chieftain's obsession became less and less about his gold and more about living forever. He was initially excited by the prospect of having so many choices, but quickly discovered that not every body was a good candidate for being a lasting host.

After a few missteps, he discovered the best way to decide who was the most suitable person was to sit back and let nature choose for him. The last person to live was usually the best host, a process that centuries later would gain a popular name: Social Darwinism.

It meant that he would have to spend a great deal of time in a limbo state, floating around the world as a spirit. He didn't mind the cost, since he was well aware that the payoff was worth

it. The chieftain found he could expedite things by preying on the latent fears mortal humans had developed. Superstitions ran wild, especially when connected to books of stories like the one involving a person named Christ. To play to this, he had all of his gold made into the iconographies of the world's various religions. Saying the line about cursing the thieves seemed to drive his intended message home, hastening the deaths of the more superstitious. Appearing to them as a ghost didn't hurt, either.

Having the gold in its new form also made it easier to transport. As the world grew, it became harder to maintain the secrecy of such a large palace. He let his guards go and took to the life of a nomad. So that his new host would not stand out, he would inhabit the bodies of those from the lands he decided to make his next home.

This entire story flashed through Stewart's mind while the old man settled into this new host. It included a rundown of every person the chieftain had inhabited, as well as every death caused in the pursuit of immortality.

Stewart also got to see his friends one last time:

Mike stepping off the curb, his body nearly exploding from the way his bones shattered during the impact.

Jason carried away by the lake waters, a thin trail of red connecting him to the boat.

Harry pressing a gun to one side of his head as his brains exploded from the opposite.

* * *

Stewart stood and crossed the room. He checked his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Everything looked to be in place. Later that week, Rebecca, the woman Stewart had been seeing for the past ten months, did a double take while they were curled up together on the couch.

Deep within his eyes she could have sworn she saw an image of Stewart screaming for help.

The End