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## Time for Real Light

Spending the night in the old Waxford house wouldn't scare me. Nothing could scare me. Nothing. I kept telling myself that while Scotty and the others nailed the door shut behind me.

To be wholly truthful, though, I had to admit that I would have preferred to be elsewhere right then, some place with plenty of light and some normal noises. The hammering had an air of finality about it, and the darkness was complete. I heard Scotty and the boys laughing, then heard the doors of the pickup slam, the engine come to life, the crunch of tires on gravel. And I knew I was alone.

Which is why I couldn't be afraid. I was alone. Nothing around could threaten me--that is, if you don't count the monsters from old movies that my imagination could populate the Waxford house with, if I wasn't careful. My impulse was to light the one candle Scotty had given me. Monsters don't like light, at least not my monsters. But Scotty had been stingy with the candle. He picked one that couldn't possibly last more than an hour. And I had the entire night to get through. Upstairs, though, there would be light.

Not much light. Just whatever came in the windows and through the holes in the roof from the full moon. That was part of Scotty's plan for my initiation: choosing a night of a full moon. He thought I would object to that, but he was dead wrong. Only a person with an over-active imagination would believe the full moon could make imaginative monsters into real ones, and I've always been one to keep my fantasies in check.

When Scotty and I had gone through the Waxford house in the daylight, I noted that there were plenty of windows upstairs with chinks between the boards and enough holes in the roof to be useful on a moonlit night. Downstairs was a different story. No windows. So I went upstairs where I had a chance at seeing something.

I stumbled over a chair and sneezed from the dust. The stairs creaked in a horrible way that made me shiver. I clutched the paper bag with the candle and a couple of Snickers in it that Scotty had given me. The paper crackled like I was wadding it up in front of a microphone to a loudspeaker. But the trip up there wasn't too spooky. And I felt better to get into the east bedroom where a faint moon glow stabbed through the chinks in the window and the ceiling. I sat down in one of the shafts of light and leaned against a wall, sighing with relief to have escaped total darkness.

Then I got a whiff of the cologne, and I knew I was not alone in that room.

For a second there I was scared. Maybe not so much scared as startled. There is a difference. I recovered in good order when I thought about the cologne.

Slave-Master Cologne. Cheap stuff that nobody wore, or nearly nobody. Old man Karloff practically bathed in it whenever he went to funerals. So likely it was him, and for sure I wasn't scared of Karloff.

Old man Karloff liked to attend funerals. And his favorite place to eat was the Dairy Queen. Rumor had it that he also ate dogs and cats, but I didn't put any stock in those reports. Scotty told me about Karloff and the funerals, but I didn't believe it, not right away at least. Scotty believed the stories about his eating pets, but that was mainly because a bunch of animals turned up missing in our neighborhood dating from about the time Karloff first showed up. But it was true about his love of DQ food. I had seen him in action there.

Karloff had gathered all the French fries he could, including some that had fallen on the red plastic cushions of the booths and a couple from an ash tray. He muttered and grinned the whole time, bobbing his head and tapping a table top as if making a point. It didn't take him long to find every abandoned French fry in the Dairy Queen. He wrapped the fries in a paper napkin, crammed them into the vest pocket of his jacket, and set about assembling a drink to go with his meal. It was a simple process. He sniffed paper cups left on tables, rejecting some, pouring the others into the largest cup he could find. When rummaging through the trash on one table, he came up with what must have been his find of the day, half of a hamburger. His grin spread at his luck, revealing more teeth than I thought could have grown in one mouth.

When his cup was full enough to suit him, he sat in one of the booths, spending longer than necessary folding a napkin over the top button of his shirt and pressing all the wrinkles out. Then he set the fries in front of him, unscrewed the cap from a salt shaker, and methodically dipped each fry into it before taking a bite. It was something of a comical sight.

I would have felt sorry for old Karloff except that he had taken such delight in his meal. Certainly I wouldn't want to make my living gleaning refuse from booths at the Dairy Queen, but he didn't seem to mind it a bit.

So when Karloff's cologne hit me there in the dim room, I jumped, to be sure. I figured out the source fast enough, though, and I remembered funny old Karloff stuffing cardboard-cold French fries dipped in salt into his mouth. The memory put me at ease. "Mr. Karloff?" I said.

And immediately I felt foolish for calling him that. The truth is, nobody I knew had any notion what his name was. Scotty always called him *Karloff* because he claimed the old bum looked like Boris Karloff from the Frankenstein movies. "You know why he always walks around town looking nowhere but at the ground right in front of him?" Scotty had asked me when we saw the old man one afternoon. I shook my head. "Because he's looking for the pin that fell out of his neck." That line nearly doubled Scotty over with laughing. He got a little mad because I didn't get the humor and thus couldn't appreciate how frightfully clever he was. Later, he showed me a picture from a book he had of Boris Karloff as Frankenstein's monster, and he repeated his joke so I could admire his wit.

The old bum for sure had a square head and nearly no neck, and he moved stiff and awkward. But he wasn't that ugly. Ugly, yes. But not that ugly. His arms were longer than normal, but you wouldn't notice it unless he dropped them to his side. When he did that, you could see they were out of proportion, enough so you might almost expect him to drag his knuckles when he walked. His jacket sleeves might

be what created the illusion of monstrously long arms, though. He probably got the jacket from a Salvation Army counter, or maybe he just fished it out of a Dumpster. The jacket might have been blue at one time. His hands stuck out of the sleeves all the way past his wrists. The shirt he wore when he wasn't going to funerals was pink, sort of, with what looked like ketchup stains all over the front. His everyday pants were checkered brown and gray--though in happier times they probably were brown and white. And he usually wore red sneakers, only they were nearly brown from stains. They had been too small so he had carved them up so several of his toes leaked out. If he wore socks, they had abundant holes in them, enough for his toes to be bare. All-in-all, old Karloff was not an attractive sight.

But, of course, his name wasn't Karloff. "Are you there?" I asked. He cleared his throat and scraped around some, enough for me to locate him. All I could see was a dark blob across the room, hunkered down on the floor. "I hope you don't mind my being here," I said. "It'll be just for the night, then the guys will come and pull the nails out of the door. They'll want to hear about how scared I was and all, and I'll make up some bull about how I didn't sleep a wink from being terrified and they will laugh and tell me that I finally made full membership in the East Texas SJ club. Stands for Super Jock. A stupid name for a club, but the guys are great guys, especially Scotty."

Karloff still said nothing, and that made me nervous. Not scared; I got scared later. Just nervous.

"I've seen you at . . ." I started to say at the Dairy Queen but caught myself. What if he was sensitive about being a garbage mouth and my reference to the DQ insulted him? ". . . the funeral home," I said. "Old lady Brammer's funeral. Saturday, remember? I think you saw me there." That was where I had smelled the Slave Master cologne. He must have used a gallon of it.

"I remember," Karloff said. I relaxed some when he spoke. It was Karloff, after all. Not that I really doubted it, but having it confirmed made me less nervous. That and the fact that he was willing to talk with me.

"Miss Brammer taught my daddy when he was in the fifth grade," I said. "Didn't know her myself."

"Why did you go to the funeral, then?" Karloff asked. It seemed like a reasonable enough question, but not one I could answer truthfully. I went there to see if I could figure out why Karloff went to funerals. Or that was my assignment from Scotty and the Super Jocks. Part of my initiation, they said. I was trying to form an answer when something wet and cold jabbed my ear.

I jerked my arm out and hit something furry. A dog yelped, but by the time it registered on me that it was a dog, I was out of the room into the hall. "Dang it, dawg, get away from the boy," Karloff said. "It's just a puppy. Wouldn't hurt you none."

I eased back into the room. "A puppy?" I asked.

"German shepherd, mostly. Big one, but just a puppy. Come here, dawg." I heard the puppy whimper then settle down. "Got him tied up, now," Karloff said. "Won't bother you again."

I sat down by the door, straining to see Karloff and the puppy. There were some dark shapes across the room, but I couldn't be sure what I was seeing.

"So how come you went?" Karloff asked. For a few seconds I was confused by the question, then I remembered that he was curious about my being at Miss

Brammer's funeral.

"To see what was going on, I guess. Why did you go?" I figured if I turned the question around, it would get me off the hook.

"Me, too," Karloff said. "I been to a bunch of funerals, working on why people go to all that bother. I just plain don't understand the big fuss. Everbody dies and gets et, and that's that."

We sat in silence for a while. When it became clear he wasn't going to volunteer any more information, I said, "Gets et?"

"Everbody. Happens to everbody. Happened to my pa. With him it was dogs that et him. Found him myself, or what was left, which weren't much. He kept them dogs in that warehouse where he worked, fed them himself, and they never got to run outside, which makes sense on account of him being in Chicago where they would grab any strays and gas them. Heart attack got my pa, or a stroke or something, right at his desk, and I guess the dogs musta hung around for days, waiting for him to feed them, same as he always did. Only with him dead as codfish, they got nothing, so after a while they decided to take a taste of him, probably figuring he was of no use anyhow. By the time I got in there, the dogs had tasted him most all up and scattered him around. Not much left but bones. Cops came and shot the dogs, which was a waste, in my books. But they was offended and said the dogs deserved to die. I tried to tell them that the dogs just did the natural thing, but they didn't believe me. Nobody believes me much about nothing. But it's true. Everbody dies and everbody gets et, and that's that. Don't nobody normally get mad about it. They cry and carry on and say fancy words and stick them in the ground."

"Your father was eaten by dogs? That is terrible." I was starting to get nervous again. But mostly I felt sorry for poor old Karloff having to find his father that way.

"Everbody says how terrible, how terrible. But it weren't so bad, cept for them dogs. They up and got shot for it, and then throwed away like so much garbage. Getting et is nothing. Everbody gets et."

"By dogs?"

"Same as. You carry little bugs around in your guts all the time, and them just waiting for you to stop breathing so they can get on with their business in life, which is eating you up. Can't see them, on account of them being inside you and on account of them being so little. But they wait and wait and always get you, when it's all over. Even while they're starting to eat, folks give you a funeral and say the sad words and stick you in the ground. Worms get you there, but nobody says how terrible that is because you're covered up and nobody sees it like the cops done when the dogs et my pa, and so nobody gets mad and shoots the worms or the bugs, even if they was big enough to shoot. People is crazy, carrying on when the animals that eats the dead is big animals. But nobody cares that little ones does the eating. And it's all the same."

All the time he was talking, I was thinking that I was nailed up in the house with this fellow, that I didn't know him from Adam's off ox, but it was clear that he was crazy. I considered going to another part of the house, but that didn't seem like good judgment on account of the dark. Here at least there was a faint glow of light, and I could keep something of a watch on him. One thing was for sure, I wouldn't sleep with that crazy old man in the house with me. And it would be better if I got him off the subject of death. He was for sure crazy in that department.

I dug into my paper bag and pulled out the two Snickers. "Scotty gave me a couple of candy bars," I said. "I'll share with you. Here, I'll toss one to you." I threw one of the Snickers in the general direction of the dark shape I took to be Karloff. It seemed like a good thing to do. The candy might get him in a better mood and maybe make him think good of me just in case he decided to do something funny to me later in the night. I didn't let myself think in specific terms of what he might do because I was nervous enough at that point. Not scared. Nervous.

The Snicker landed with a loud thump, but he didn't make a move to get it. And he didn't say anything for a long time. The silence caused me to think I made some sort of mistake, insulted him, maybe. I edged a little closer to the door.

"Can't take it," he said, his voice startling me. "Don't like nobody giving me nothing cause they seem to want something in return, and that always seems to be something I ain't willing to give. Charity, some calls it, but it ain't charity when they want something out of me. Can't take it."

We sat in silence again. I was scared anything I said would insult him even worse. Then I saw the dark figure across the room rise. I jumped to my feet, ready to bolt through the door.

"But I can trade you for the candy," he said. "Even-steven. And if you ask me, you're getting the better end of the deal, even if I ain't got no salt to go with it. This will take just a minute or so."

That little speech reassured me. Karloff was crazy as a cartoon, but he had his pride. I figured he would offer me some stale French fries from the Dairy Queen in exchange for the Snickers bar. I could understand the pride that might drive him to do that. And I could accept those fries, even pretend to eat them.

Karloff made plenty of noise, banging around with whatever it was that he felt he needed to do. I heard a series of bangs and wet-sounding thumps and then some scraping. "That done it," he said. "I'll toss the best parts over to you." Something hit the floor in front of me with a wet thud, then something else landed beside it. And there was a smell I didn't like. Time for real light, I decided, and reached for the candle.

I was starting to get scared, really scared, for the first time that night. It took me a while to get the candle lit on account of my fingers shaking, but I did, and I was amazed by how much light it gave off.

The first thing I saw were the gifts from Karloff on the floor in front of me: the hind leg and hip of a dog, bloody and hot. Beside it was the dog's tongue.

I held the candle up and looked across the room. Karloff stood rock still, watching me. In one hand he held the entrails of a dog, in the other a butcher knife that was red and dripping.