

THE HAUNTED CREATURE

A Short Story

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THE HAUNTED CREATURE

“I will be marketing synthetic beef in less than a year,” I told my brother, Kenneth Hunter Wolff. I expected my announcement to surprise him at least as much as had my sudden arrival. I was trembling with excitement. But Ken just nodded, inserting a mother-of-pearl fountain pen into the pocket of his red plaid flannel short-sleeve shirt. I think that is the moment I realized the depth of my hatred. “I’m here to give you fair warning,” I told him rigidly. Shouts of men, bleats of cattle, the clatter of hooves on concrete chutes, smells of alfalfa and vaccine and hot iron and seared cowhide brought back memories of childhood. I had my Leica with me, as always in those days. With it I snapped a picture of Bill Butts, foreman of The Broken Heart Ranch, as he directed the branding, vaccinating, and castrating of beef cattle. “Beef ranching is doomed,” I purred. “We’re working on synthetic pork, chicken, even vegetables and fruit. We create food from organic compounds without killing animals. Agriculture is doomed.” Ken adjusted his old-fashioned brown Stetson. In his left hand he carried a clipboard that featured a built-in calculator. He was 33 years old in 1991, not quite two years my senior. Of average height, he carried a bit of a belly. His most memorable features were a high brow, artistic hands, and direct hazel eyes. “Don’t you have anything to say?” I sputtered.

“I feel as if a trap door has opened under me?” Ken ventured evenly. He was sole owner of The Broken Heart Ranch, a property our grandfather had bought and enriched.

“You’re standing on sheer air.” I turned my head slightly, the better to study him with my good eye. “You don’t believe a word I’m saying.”

“It’s obvious that you believe what you’re saying.”

“You’re welcome to come up to the laboratory and look around. See for yourself if what I’m saying is true. I’ll give you a synthetic roast beef dinner.”

“You’re proud of yourself,” Ken asked, “aren’t you?” I counted to ten and admitted,

“I guess I am at that.”

“You want to put me out of business.” Ken's tone was more surprised than outraged.

“That's not my reason,” I protested. “I'm developing synthetic beef for my conscience.”
For the first time that day, Ken looked at me with something like understanding.

“Where is this laboratory of yours?”

“It's about two hours from here,” I replied. “I'll drive you up and back.” Ken declined my offer of a ride, saying he preferred to drive himself. “The place is kind of hard to find,” I warned.

“Just give me directions and a phone number.”

§

“My daddy's going blind as a bowling ball!” chirped the voice of Robert, a four-year-old. Just before Robert's outburst, Ken had been thoughtfully chewing synthetic beef. Upon Robert's information about my sympathetic ophthalmia, Ken's face went from pink to white to green. I still have the snapshot. The four of us, including my wife, Anita, were seated around the dining table in my remote central California house of three gables and whitewashed chimney. Our laboratory, in the guise of a barn, was visible through the window. Watching Ken as he chewed, I had been nervously awaiting his review. Then Robert had complicated the test with his eruption. Ken turned his nauseous gaze toward the wildlife photography adorning the walls: a fishing grizzly, a sunning rattlesnake, a drinking cougar, an attacking eagle. Swallowing with apparent difficulty, Ken blurted,

“Was it my fault?” I knew what he was talking about, though it had been twenty years since he had put out my eye. After I had banished Robert from the table, I assured Ken impatiently:

“It was my fault.” I did not want my glory tainted by vengeance. “I provoked you.”

“You've forgiven me?”

“Yes,” I lied, “yes.”

“I turned into a monster that day,” Ken continued after dinner, while I was giving him a tour of the “barn.” The memory of a toy swordfight lay between us like a black lagoon. I

pointed out our Perkin Elmer Cetus DNA Thermal Cycler, our surplus, cryogenically cooled, Cray Research Y-MP16 supercomputer.

“I invited you here,” I told Ken, “to show you the haunted creature.”

“I've never been able to forgive myself for . . .” Leaving the sentence unfinished, Ken surveyed the four long parallel lab benches bristling with expensive equipment, then nervously fingered the focus knob on a scanning microscope, squinting through the eyepiece. He had briefly attended Harvard Medical School, before discovering beer, women, and the “family tradition” of ranching. “I'm sorry...” Ken's mouth worked speechlessly, pathetically, until I rescued him, reminding him,

“I shot a cow for target practice. I wantonly, cruelly destroyed a living animal. You did right to snitch on me. The resulting swordfight was my idea.”

“Dinosaur steak,” Ken muttered when I showed him a two-foot, 500-pound cube of synthetic beef inside our walk-in freezer.

“I am the haunted creature,” I announced.

§

Two months later, after selling The Broken Heart Ranch to Bill Butts, Ken walked out of the galaxy.

Or so it seemed at the time. The tale of Ken's struggles at the National University of Mexico medical school, of his graduation from medical school at the ripe age of 42, of his further struggles to obtain research grants and the sanction of the scientific community, has since been thoroughly reported. (See for instance, *Let There Be Light*, by Frances Fanning, 280 pages with 18 pages of photographs, Macmillan, 2019.)

Meanwhile I became the miserably rich and famous director of synthetic food conglomerate, Donald Goods. A dream come true is a dream lost.

I needed a new dream. Instead a nightmare came true.

On the morning of August 15, 2000, I awakened in cave-like darkness, feeling the heat of the sun. Click, click, click: I kept turning the switch on a bedside lamp. I lurched out of bed,

groped to my study, found an armful of photographs, slides, and negatives, then staggered off toward the fireplace, bouncing on walls, knocking down furniture. I wept as I dumped my armful into the stone pit and felt for a match. I set fire to the pictures of my life.

§

“I’m going to give you back your eyes.” The man on the phone claimed to be my brother, calling from Minnesota. Twenty-one years had passed since I had spoken to Ken. The man spoke firmly, confidently of the original procedure he had developed to bypass ruined eyes and deliver vision signals directly to the brain.

“I would never let anyone implant doped silicon in my brains,” I told the speakerphone. Years before that phone call Anita had read me Ken’s published papers on visual prosthetics. In my San Francisco townhouse, as I relaxed in my La-Z-Boy, I listened to my so-called brother breathing.

“I thought you’d jump at this opportunity to make history,” he managed to say. “Have you gone soft, Donnie? Who’s playing the guitar? Is that you? I’d be indebted to you if you’d let me make you whole again. I’m a haunted creature, too.” Hearing the echo of half-forgotten words, I recognized Ken now.

“Experiment on somebody else,” I told him.

“I know this is sudden. You need time to make up your mind. Do you realize this means being able to see the faces of your loved ones, the majesty of nature, being independent again?”

“So, what else have you been doing the past two decades?” I asked devilishly.

“All those decades I believed you had forgiven me,” Ken lamented.

“Listen, dinnertime here,” I said. “Nice talking to you.” I hung up on him.

§

“You have a visitor,” Anita informed me one afternoon a week or so later. “Her name is Snow Black and she traveled all the way from Minnesota.” I was hunched on the living room

sofa, flat-picking Eric Clapton's riff from the hard-rock version of "Layla." Anita introduced me to Snow. Over a jingling I could not immediately place came one of the sweetest, most sensuous voices I had ever heard, greeting me by name.

"I want to see the world," trilled Snow Black, when I asked gruffly what she wanted. Trying to smother the spark the voice had struck, I switched over to "Bullet Train Blues." "I want to look at myself in the mirror," Snow continued. "And I want to know what 'color' means."

"You're blind as a worm," I guessed. "How did you find your way here?"

"I volunteered to be Ken's guinea pig," Snow informed me, disregarding my question. "He turned me down. To go forward, he needs your blessing."

"Did he come with you?" I asked.

"Ken doesn't even know I'm here."

"I'm glad that dog smell isn't you." I had deduced that dog tags were behind the jingling. "Do you sing?"

"When you brushed him off," Snow said, "something in him died. He abandoned the project he'd worked on for 21 years. You were his inspiration."

"What's your dog's name?" I asked. "Is that him panting, or you?"

"Why won't you support your brother?" Snow asked.

"I don't believe Ken has the secret to restoring vision."

"I do, and so do many other people."

"He shouldn't lack for guinea pigs, and yet he insists on me. How thoughtful of him. Are you in love with him?"

"You couldn't stand that," Snow accused, "could you?"

"You're very perceptive," I said. "I would let Ken drill holes in my head if I could make love to you." That shut Snow up a moment.

"All your wealth," she finally said, "hasn't bought you even the beginnings of wisdom."

"Why don't you come sit beside me?" I patted the couch.

“I’m not a whore,” Snow said huskily. I pushed a button and a clock announced, “1:32 PM.” I calculated that the time in Minnesota was 3:32 PM. I reached for the speakerphone, felt the keypad, entered Ken’s name.

“I want you to do the operation on Snow Black,” I told Ken. “She’s here with me, or do you know all about that?” I detected someone taking a seat on the other end of the couch. My heart raced to the aroma of roses. Ken replied that he could not do the operation on Snow.

“She’s been blind from birth,” he explained. “Her brain hasn’t developed the ability to process vision.” He sounded as if he were in the room with us instead of two thousand miles away.

“You said it might be possible for me to teach my brain to see,” Snow interjected. I could almost feel her gratitude at my effort. She was sitting just a few feet away, smelling like a garden, driving me mad.

“What does Snow look like?” I asked Ken.

“You should see her,” Ken gushed. “She’s a buxom redhead.”

“I’ll let Snow explain my price for undergoing your operation.”

“Snow?” Ken asked. “Are you there?” Snow told Ken about my proposition. There was silence on the line for ten or twenty seconds. “Let me put it this way,” Ken began.

“Don’t say it,” Snow interjected. “You know how I feel about you.” I broke into “Silly Love Song Number 43”:

“I wish I had your lips, to kisssss me . . .”

“I won’t hold it against you,” Ken said, “if you sleep with my brother.”

“I wish I had your arms, to hold me . . .”

“Why can’t you love me?” Snow wailed.

“Who, me?” I asked.

“I do love you,” Ken cried.

“I do, too,” I said, strumming a G major seventh chord. “I wish I had your dreams, to laze in . . .”

“Let me be your inspiration,” Snow urged.

“Whose,” I asked, “mine?”

“Ken,” Snow entreated, “let me be your inspiration instead of your goatish brother. Let me give you the strength and confidence you need to carry on.”

“I can't operate without my brother's forgiveness,” Ken told Snow apologetically. “I would like his faith, too. I realize I'm neurotic.”

“I wish I had your eyyyyyyyes, to gaaaaaaze in . . .”

“How is little Robert doing, Donnie?” Ken asked.

“I wish I had your ears, to sing in . . .”

“Do you have a son?” Snow asked me pointedly.

“I wish I had your heart, to liive my liife in!” Deliberately not responding to questions about “little Robert,” I asked Snow to join me in song. I hung up the phone. “Are you familiar with Rodgers and Hammerstein?” I inquired of Snow. She asked Anita to telephone for a taxi. “Do you know the words to 'You Are Beautiful'?” I asked. “‘Some Enchanted Evening’? ‘People Will Say We're In Love’?”

“Did you develop synthetic food to redeem your conscience or to spite your brother?” Snow asked me. Tuning my “D” string, I failed to think of a timely answer. “I don't believe you've ever been a man of conscience,” Snow told me on her way toward the front door.

“Please don't go,” I begged. The door closed on the angel voice. More than eight months would pass before I heard Snow's voice again.

§

On Wednesday July 18, 2012, at 3:59 PM, in the first floor corridor of a World War II vintage apartment building on Broad Avenue in the harbor district of Los Angeles, feeling overdressed in a rat-gray suit, my brother knocked four times on the door of Apartment 104. Mexican music accompanied the smell of spicy cooking that wafted through the corridor.

The door to 104 eventually cracked open and revealed a sleepy face in a trim brown beard. “I need help,” Ken said. He gave the bearded man his full name.

“You're my uncle,” the man realized, eyes awakening. Ken told the man— whose name was Robert Wolff, who was Ken's nephew and my wayward son— about their first meeting two

decades before, about how Robert had changed Ken's life by revealing, at the dinner table, my oncoming blindness. Robert had only the dimmest memory of that meeting. Ken went on to tell Robert about his work of the past 21 years, and of my unwillingness to undergo his "historic" vision-restoring procedure.

"Why not find another volunteer for the first operation?" By this time they were inside the apartment. Robert made his bed, folded it up, and invited Ken to sit on the resulting sofa.

"I'll bet Donnie would like to rest his proud gaze on you," Ken said instead of answering Robert's question. "You're a strapping, handsome young man." As Robert slipped out of the room, Ken raised his voice a notch: "I think your father has ambitions for you beyond cab-driving."

"Cab-driving is an education." Robert peeked out of the bathroom, applying shaving cream to selected spots around the edges of beard and moustache.

"Speaking of which, don't you have a degree?"

"Forever," Robert complained, "there was a shortage of computer science majors, until the day I graduated, when there was a glut." Looking around the plain studio apartment, the closest thing to a computer Ken noticed was a Dreambucket, the latest upgrade in virtual reality, which looked like a crash helmet with a tinted visor. Ken winced when Robert asked, "Why did you put out my old man's eye?"

"My dark side got the better of me." Ken removed a pair of trifocal eyeglasses from his face and polished them with a handkerchief. "What do you think of this scenario?" he proposed as Robert toweled his own face. "I help you get established as a computer scientist. Your dad is proud of you and grateful to me. He forgives me at last. He consents to have the operation."

"The best way to convince my dad to have the operation," Robert suggested, "is to restore the vision of some other blind person."

"I'm going to build or buy an eye-care clinic. I'm going to need help with the nonmedical details. The job is yours if you want it. You've heard of the Mayo Clinic?"

"You're connected with the Mayo Clinic?" Robert asked.

"Only geographically," Ken explained. "There's a certain synergy in being located next to the Mayo Clinic. We're both on the cutting edge of medicine. A clinic needs computers. Do

you want the job?" Robert pointed out that he had a job. "What would be your salary requirements," Ken persisted, "to set up and maintain a computer system for a cutting-edge eye clinic?" Robert expressed a lack of confidence in his ability to set up such a computer system. "You've got science in your blood." Ken put on his glasses and studied Robert. "Give the job a try. If the tryout doesn't work, I'll pay your way back to L.A." Unwilling to take "no" for an answer, Ken left Los Angeles with the hopeful understanding that Robert would move to Minnesota to try out his skills as an information systems designer.

"There's no excuse," a disappointed Ken lectured the following September, on another trip to Los Angeles, "for standing me up without a word of warning or explanation, without a call, or letter." When, on the agreed Saturday afternoon in August, Ken had driven to the Twin Cities Airport in Minnesota to meet the agreed flight from Los Angeles, Robert did not get off the airplane, could not, because Robert had never gotten on.

On the return trip to Los Angeles in September Ken discovered that Robert had moved. He hired an investigator who spent a day discovering Robert's new address.

At nine o'clock on the morning of September 11, Ken squeaked up the staircase to the second floor of The Harbor Hotel, a wooden structure that seemed to lean on an adjoining warehouse. Answering Ken's knock on the door of Room 215 of the hotel, wearing black pants, a white shirt with oil spots, a stringy necktie, loosened, Robert took a long swallow from a can of Brew 102 and belched. "Where did you learn to behave like a lout?" Ken snaked his way inside the room.

"You sound like my dad," Robert yawned. A grimy window in the cramped second-floor room overlooked a fire escape, an empty lot littered with mattresses, tires, and rusty oil drums, a battered taxicab resting on an unpaved street. Ken took note of grotesque stains on the room's ceiling and walls, of a cockroach meandering up a sunburned roller blind. As Robert, sitting heavily on a beanbag chair and untying his shoes, started to pull the Dreambucket over his ears, Ken grabbed it and held it, saying,

"I'm not finished talking to you."

"Look," Robert shouted, "I don't want to work for you, okay?" A tugboat whistle tooted in the distance.

“Why don't you want to work for me?”

“For one thing,” Robert said, “I hate computers.”

“Most addicts hate their drugs,” Ken said. Both looked at the Dreambucket. “I'm offering you a way out of this hole,” Ken said.

“Thanks for the offer.” Robert drained the beer can and tossed it into a corner. “Pull the door shut on your way out.”

“Now you're sounding like your dad.”

“I don't give a roach about my dad.” Robert flipped his shoes off.

“You obviously don't give a roach about yourself, either,” Ken said. Robert whipped off his tie, then unbuttoned his shirt, saying,

“The other thing is, you're a crank.” Blowing on his trifocals, Ken answered,

“I'm also a genius.”

“Look, I've been driving all night.”

“Help me light me up your father's night.”

“I can't help you,” Robert said, lying down on a creaky bed and stretching his long legs and arms.

“I say you can help,” Ken said. “Get some sleep. I'll be here when you wake up. I'll help you pack.” Robert turned his face to the wall. “You think you're stubborn,” Ken continued, “don't you? Your old man thinks he's stubborn, too. Neither of you know the meaning of the word.”

§

In January of the following year, on a Friday morning, Anita received a mysterious phone call. Immediately upon hanging up the telephone she started packing. “Get dressed,” she told me peremptorily. “Pack your guitar.”

“Where are we going?” I had been dozing in my La-Z-Boy, digesting breakfast, listening to The Doors on my headphones, and fantasizing about Snow. This was over eight months after Snow's visit. I felt feminine hands hook me under the arms and give an upward yank.

“You'll find out,” Anita answered. “You'll find out,” she repeated when I asked who telephoned.

“I'm not a child,” I sputtered.

“You need a change of scenery.”

“Answers,” I said, “are what I need.” Anita had never attempted anything like this, snatching me out of my comfort on some secret mission. “Now, where are we going and why?” Anita replied with two questions of her own:

“Have I ever failed to look out after your interests? Have I ever given you reason not to trust me?” Within three hours I was listening to the freeway with the wind in my hair, riding shotgun in Anita's Cadillac Whatever.

The radio was my compass. The wind was my speedometer. A Sacramento radio station fading in fixed our course as northeasterly. After another hour my popping ears, the chilly air, the twisty road, all told me we were climbing out of the valley and ascending the Sierra Nevada mountain range.

Classic Rock Radio, KTOY-AM, South Lake Tahoe, was coming in strong as Anita parked the Cadillac around 6 PM. She checked us into some bustling hotel.

Not until the next morning was my strange journey completed, and explained, after a short drive, then a short but snowy walk into what smelled like a nursery hothouse. My ears were assaulted by organ music that could have been Bach. Anita perched me on a flip-down theater seat, where before long I heard these utterly unexpected words: “Do you, Robert Wolff, take this woman, Snow Black, to be your lawful wedded wife?”

“I do,” answered a familiar voice.

“I pronounce you man and wife.” Hearing Anita leaving her seat, then joyfully congratulating somebody across the room, I felt like the butt of a joke.

“Kiss me, Daddy-In-Law.” Snow's ringing voice was unmistakable. Soft hands found my face, roses filled my nose, lips touched my cheek.

“Glad to see you, Pop,” said Robert. My son hugged me and told me he loved me.

An hour after the ceremony, when Mrs. Eva Black, Snow's mother, in a prima donna voice, thanked Robert “for being in the right place at the right time in the right way after the operation,” I put two and two together, and interjected,

“I take it that Ken performed a vision-restoring procedure on Snow which was not a complete success.” I listened to a long interval of Asian string music accompanied by the click of chopsticks. Ginger and garlic scented the air. Five of us were seated at a restaurant table celebrating the marriage: Anita, Robert, Snow, Snow’s mother, and myself.

“The operation worked,” Snow answered shakily, “but my brain doesn't.”

“I love your brain,” Robert cooed.

“Are you seeing anything now?” I asked. “Snow?”

“The glasses are in my purse,” she replied.

“The Wolff Transmitter Spectacles,” Robert explained. He was now Ken's employee. “When she wears them all she gets are flashes and headaches. Uncle Ken says that's about what he expected. She has to learn to process those flashes into vision.”

“Demons,” Snow sighed. “When I wear those things, my brain feels as if it is being taken over by demons.”

§

“Things have changed, Donnie,” Ken said dully. I struggled to sit up straight in a chair soft as quicksand. “I won't be doing the operation again, on you, or on anyone else.”

“What about your guilty conscience?” I asked. While Snow and Robert were still honeymooning on the shores of Lake Tahoe, Anita and I had flown to Minnesota to surprise Ken with my decision to let him operate on me.

“All the work I've done,” Ken told me, “all those years of struggle, all I have learned, has helped me to forgive myself for blinding you.” Ken apologized for declining to operate, explaining, “I've lost faith in the vision procedure, in the whole conception.” The smell of disinfectant soap was in the air. Our meeting was taking place in a modular, temporary building

where my brother had set up an eye-care clinic. The rat-tat-tat and whine of construction came from the permanent building going up next door.

“Wasn't the operation on Snow a success?” I heard the rustle of paper. I imagined Ken hunkering behind a cluttered desk. “Is she not getting images in her brain?”

“Those images scared her silly,” Ken said sadly, “and broke her heart. I couldn't help someone I loved. I couldn't make her see.”

“Have you given up on Snow learning to see?”

“People should think twice before they mess around with nature,” Ken said distantly. I pointed out that doctors were paid to mess around with nature. “I have no right to subject you to a procedure that probably won't work and might kill you.”

“I'm ready to die or see again,” I said.

“How would I live with myself if ...” A skirmish of hammering drowned Ken out.

“I know what you're really afraid of.” I attributed the squeaking in front of me to Ken's chair. “You're afraid of solving and letting go of this glorious problem of restoring eyesight, this distant misty dream that has sustained you and motivated you for twenty-two years.”

“I'm impressed with how well you've learned the guitar,” he replied. “You've really reminded me, and the world, that the blind can lead productive lives.”

“Crawl out of your shell,” I told him. “You're running away from greatness.” Carpentry had paused. “You're afraid of success,” I accused. The silence was profound. “Answer me, Ken! Are you still here, my brother?”

§

It was dry and mild in Minnesota that spring, I understand. I spent little time outdoors. I was in surgery, having the occipital region of my skull ventilated.

Surgically placing the dozens of electrodes into the vision centers of my brain took Ken 58 days. Some days I could feel a tremor in his hands. Summer had crept into the air by the time he took up the delicate job of adjusting and calibrating the Wolff Transmitter Spectacles. “I'm going to nominate you for the Nobel Prize,” I told him on the morning of Tuesday June 25.

With a sound like alien music, when that first flash after 13 years of blindness crossed my brain like lightning, my Martin classical guitar slipped from my hands and cracked on the floor. Ken's own hands were shaking wildly as he removed the heavy prototype from my face to adjust it one more time. I must have gaped comically when he finally slid the spectacles back over my ears. Across the pink freckled scalp of the thin, middle-aged stranger in a white lab coat, the strands of gray hair were marvelous. I think my head swiveled a full circle. The man in the lab coat raised my poor guitar up and laid it on an examination table like a patient. "I'm going to make you rich," I croaked. My neck ached and my head pounded as I took in the room: ocean-green cabinets, golden window drapes, a digital clock with orange numbers reading 10:20, blue linoleum, a journal open on a counter, an oscilloscope, and my own pictures on the walls: the eagle, the grizzly. The man in the lab coat stepped over to a sink, removing his own trifocals, washing his hands, splashing his face. Then he sank into what looked like a dentist's chair. He exhaled like a balloon.

He sobbed, a man who had lost a dream forever because it had come true.

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About The Author

Paul W. Silver was born in Los Angeles in 1948. He attended public schools in Long Beach and Los Angeles and the California Maritime Academy.

If you enjoyed "The Haunted Creature," you might also enjoy Silver's *The Dangerous Dream*, a novel, available in most online bookstores.

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