

Old Tin Cans

Jonathan was no skeptic. He believed in the paranormal. The supernatural, even. Jonathan believed that there were places in the world where secrets could be found—archives of miracle, proof of the unbelievable, places where the indescribable was made tangible.

Jonathan also believed that the Minneridge Museum of Mystery was not one of these places. It had appeared when Jonathan was just eleven years old, and in those sixteen years that it had occupied its spot in the outskirts of Minneridge, Ohio (population 600), the objects inside of the Museum had done nothing but collect dust. It wasn't necessarily true that the place was uninteresting, its shelves lined fully with all manner of curious trinkets, and its displays advertising artifacts like "AUTHENTIC HAUNTED DOLL" and "CURSED BLADE" and "JACKALOPE SKULL" from end to end. Rather, Jonathan felt that the objects inside of the Museum simply belonged somewhere else. A yard sale, for example. eBay.

The truth was that the Museum of Mystery was a tourist trap that, on a good day, attracted very few tourists. It was for this reason that Jonathan, along with the entire Minneridge Village Council, had decided that the Museum needed to go. So why did he feel so sad? He shifted his right foot around in the grass as he watched two of the removal men pull a coffin-sized crate out the door.

"Jonny! Good ta see ya."

"Hey, Ted."

Ted, the owner of the Museum of Mystery, was a cheery man with a great big bushy grey beard. He was short, and wore a coat that threatened to swallow him if he got any shorter. He approached Jonathan with a big grin on his face.

“Come ta see me off one last time, eh?” he said.

“I’m really sorry about this, Ted,” said Jonathan.

“Don’t even think it, Jon! City’s been tryin’ ta get rid of me for *years*, ya know—way I see it, it was just a matter of someone havin’ the balls to finally do it. And here ya are!” Ted punched Jonathan in the shoulder.

Jonathan smiled the sort of smile that you could only make at someone you were evicting from a business they had owned for a decade and a half. Ted did not stop grinning.

“Hey, you busy? Why don’tcha come in for a quick cup of coffee?” he said.

Jonathan hesitated for a moment. And then said,

“Sure, Ted. I’d love to.”

The two of them walked diagonally across the lawn until they reached the paved walkway that led to the entrance of the Museum. Ted ducked as he went inside, as if the door frame, which was twice his height, might hit him otherwise. Jonathan followed.

As he entered the Museum, Jonathan could barely picture what the shop had looked like one week ago. The shelves were empty now, the floor marked by neat dustless squares where there had once been glass displays and cabinets. By the door was a black rack of postcards—prints of Nessie and photographs of Bigfoot—that would soon be taken care of by the removal men. He followed Ted to the back room of the shop.

“Welcome to the office,” said Ted, flipping a light switch next to the door.

'Office,' Jonathan felt, was a generous word to use, though there certainly was a desk. The room was about fifteen feet long, with a worn green carpet resting in the middle. On the right wall was a refrigerator and a table, upon which sat a Keurig pod coffee maker and a stack of

paper cups. The desk was at the back of the room, and it made the walls look smaller than they were. Behind it was a wooden dining chair.

Ted gestured for Jonathan to sit in a metal folding chair that sat by the desk as he pulled a distilled water jug from the fridge, poured it into the Keurig, put a paper cup beneath its spout, and turned it on. Jonathan watched Ted as he tapped his left foot, staring at the coffee maker as it bubbled and hissed and the slow black stream of coffee flowed into the cup. He repeated this process, picked up both cups, and set both of them down as he sat in the wooden chair. He pushed one cup across the desk to Jonathan.

“Thank you,” he said.

Ted nodded, and neither of them reached for their coffee. Instead, they gave each other a blank stare for a few seconds.

“How did you get into this, Ted?” said Jonathan.

“What d’you mean?”

“The... business, I mean. The Museum of Mystery. Why did you open it?”

Ted smiled.

“Started off as a buncha junk. I was sort of a collector, yanno, of just weird little things. I would pick up old stuff—a painting here, an antique dagger there. Dolls. Haunted dolls—well, old dolls people say’re haunted. Dolls’re my favorite. Can’t get enough’a the creepy fuckers.” Ted chuckled, and then took a sip of coffee. “Anyway. When I came to Minneridge... I figured, why not share all of it with some folks? Just a few folks. Maybe make a few bucks. No harm, I figure.”

At the mention of his arrival in Minneridge, Jonathan came to the realization that he knew nothing else about Ted. His eyebrows knitted together as this thought passed across his face, and then he smiled to clear it. Ted didn't seem to notice. Jonathan opened his mouth to speak, took a breath, then a sip of coffee, and then said,

“Ted, where are you from?”

Ted shook his head.

“Don't matter. Believe me, everything before the last seventeen years... it ain't such an interesting tale. Folks I knew—well, most of 'em wouldn't remember me. My life really started when I showed up here in Minneridge. Trust me.” He sipped his coffee.

Jonathan nodded. He placed his right hand over his coffee cup, running his index finger around and around its rim.

“Do you believe in any of it?” Jonathan said.

“Any'a what?”

“Your shop, the—supernatural angle. Do you believe it?”

The left corner of his lip twisted upwards.

“Naw, naw. Like I said, it's all junk here,” Ted said. “Closest I've come ta seein' somethin' supernatural was... ah, the Shadow Man, maybe.”

The Shadow Man was a furry humanoid figure that was sighted in the woods outside of Minneridge several times in the year 2006, creating quite a buzz in the local media. It was later found that the figure was, in fact, a bear walking on its hind legs due to having injured its front paws.

Jonathan smiled. He brought his coffee cup to his lips, and kept it there, not taking a drink.

“What about you?” said Ted.

“Me?” said Jonathan from behind his cup, proceeding to take a sip.

“What do you believe?”

Jonathan set his coffee down and contemplated for a moment. Then he shrugged.

“I’m not sure. I mean, I... I think there’s something.”

There was a pause.

“I used to hear voices,” said Jonathan.

“No shit?” said Ted.

Jonathan nodded.

“Just one voice, really,” he said. “Uh, when we moved here—I was maybe, ten, so, uh, seventeen years ago—there was this... thing. You know those—those tin cans and strings that kids use to talk to one another?”

Ted grunted.

“Well, there was one of those,” said Jonathan. “Just, in my room. Coming out of the wall. When I would pull it, it would... get stuck, you know? It stayed in the wall. There was something on the other side. And then it started... talking to me. There was this voice.”

“What did it say?” said Ted.

Jonathan pressed his lips to his cup to take another sip of coffee, but found that there was none left.

“It would just... ask me about my day. How I was feeling. Stuff like that. It was so... weird.” Jonathan stopped. “I don’t know how I didn’t think it was weird. I must have talked to it... fuck, every other day for a year or so? I don’t know. I was a pretty lonely kid.”

Ted remained relaxed in his chair. He finished his coffee and set it down.

“What happened after that?”

Jonathan frowned.

“It just... stopped? I remember, coming home one day, like normal, and, y’know... trying to talk to them. It. I don’t know. There was no response. No warning, no nothing, just. No more voice.”

“No more voice,” repeated Ted.

“A couple days later, I tried to—to tug on the string. Just to see what would happen.”

Jonathan drew a shaky breath.

“It came right out of the wall. Nothing on the other end. A tin can on a string.”

Jonathan looked down as he recalled this. He hadn’t thought about it in so long.

“I told my mom. She thought I dreamed it up.”

“D’you think you did?” asked Ted.

“No,” said Jonathan. “I don’t think I could have.”

Ted let a sharp breath out of his nose as he smiled at Jonathan. Without another word, Ted stood and made Jonathan another cup of coffee, placing it in front of him. He sat back down.

Jonathan stared at the cup.

“I know it sounds crazy.”

Ted shook his head.

“Naw, naw. There’s some shit out there. I believe ya.”

Jonathan sighed.

“Thanks, Ted.”

Ted’s expression sobered.

“Sometimes it’s better to just forget about that kinda stuff,” he said.

The two of them sat in silence as Jonathan nursed his coffee. Taking one final slurp and a letting out a deep exhale, he set the cup back down on the table. He nodded.

“Well, I’d, uh, better be going then,” he said.

“Sure, sure,” said Ted.

They stood up together and walked out of the office. The museum was empty now, sunlight flooding in through its barren windows. Their footsteps echoed as they walked through the cenotaph of Ted’s collection. Outside, a cloud passed in front of the midday sun.

Ted watched in the doorway as Jonathan started his way back to his car. He turned back to Ted.

“We’re gonna miss this place, Ted,” he said.

Ted grinned.

“No ya won’t,” he said.

Jonathan smiled, and didn’t look back as he walked away from the Museum of Mystery.

Ted was right. No one missed the Museum of Mystery after its closing, and no one missed Ted after he left Minneridge. It wasn’t that they forgot about him, or the Museum—not completely—but that they simply didn’t notice that either one was no longer present. It was rare

for the Museum to even cross anyone's mind. Perhaps someone would occasionally recall Ted and his bizarre collection over a shaky breath and a cup of coffee, but it would be left behind just as quickly, and no one would look back. There was nothing strange about the fact that one month after the building's closure, it simply disappeared, overnight, just as quickly as when it had appeared. Nothing weird about it at all.

Jonathan did think it was strange when, on one Tuesday morning, he received an unmarked brown package in the mail. He found it weird that, inside, was a tin can attached to a string with a knot. All he wanted to do was forget that it happened. He didn't have to try very hard.