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Authorial Intrusion

by

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JAMES FIRST met Jackson Stroud at the Otherworlds Bookstore on East Thirteenth Street in Pomona, California. Stroud was sitting at a table at the center of the store, flanked by floor displays of his latest books, the gaudy cardboard-backed illustrations done in flashy colors. A line of people weaved its way back through the racks of paperback books to the front of the store. They were of every conceivable size and shape, from the grotesquely bloated to the near-skeletal, shambling slowly forward as the line advanced. James knew Stroud would be there. He had come prepared with a big plastic grocery sack stuffed to the brim with Stroud first editions. Autographed first editions would be the perfect touch to his Stroud collection. The line was long, but the wait would be worth it. James shuffled along. The small store, already crowded with books, was stuffed almost to impenetrability with people.

Shrill laughter echoed in the tight spaces between the books. Staring eyes watched down the line. A sharp, narrow elbow struck James in the back. He waited patiently. The line moved; he took another step forward.

Stroud finished signing a paperback. He looked up for the next person in line and saw James. "Hi, got something for me to sign?" James was watching him with an acquisitive unblinking emotion on his face that approximated lust. Never a placid man, Stroud endured the gaze only a moment. "Do you or don't you want a book signed?" he snapped.

"Of course, sir," James said deferentially. Still watching Stroud, James lifted the large shopping bag onto the table, trying for a dramatic flare. "I have a few——"

Stroud cut him off. "I'm not signing all those. Only three books to a customer."

Someone laughed, back in the line.

"Of course, Mr. Stroud." James withdrew three books. "All first editions, Mr. Stroud," he said as he removed the books from their clear plastic sleeves and laid them before the writer.

"All in mint condition." Before Stroud could ask about the dedication, James reached in the bag again and took out a large ring binder, the true pride of his collection: The Index. He spread it open on the desk before the man. "I follow your career with the greatest interest."

"You've encased my life in plastic!"

The skeletal woman next in line cackled at the comment.

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far, sir. I only have——"

"Do you have everything written by and about me?" Stroud flipped through some of the pages, looking at the entries of newspaper articles, reviews, and even the wrinkled old fanzines

which sat in storage boxes in James' closet, each lovingly wrapped in its own protective sleeve.

James turned to the back of the binder, behind the index. There was a list of items missing from the collection. It was less than a page long. "Most I've got, but there is an interview in a German fanzine you did while in Europe five years ago that I have had some trouble in acquiring."

"Sweet Jesus," Stroud said, more to himself, as he flipped back through the binder. "This is impressive. Even I don't have all this, and it's my career—but there are people behind you. What do you want the dedication to say?"

"How about: 'To my most ardent collector, James Garvey.'"

"How 'bout, 'To Jim'?"

"I would—"

Stroud was already writing. "There you go." He handed the books back to James.

"Could I—?"

"Please, Mr. Garvey. I'm sure I'd enjoy talking to you, but this is not the right time. There are people behind you waiting."

James could feel the impatient push of flesh behind him. The woman behind was nudging his back with her sharp elbow. "Of course, but could I—"

"We'll see you later, Mr. Garvey." The young crone was already up at the table. James slowly moved to the back of the line, pulled back by the alimentary action of the crowd. He decided not to go through again; however, he stayed in the store and watched Stroud from a distance, from behind a paperback rack. The people began to dwindle away. Still James stayed.

Stroud got up from the table and stretched. He walked over to the check-out counter, joining the owner, with whom James occasionally had business, and the young girl behind the

register. James watched Stroud's every move. The three at the counter spoke in quiet voices. The old man and his young employee glanced back at James after a comment by Stroud. Embarrassed by the attention he had drawn, James decided to leave. He ducked his head slightly to avoid looking at them as he slunk out the door.

TWO WEEKS after the autograph party, Jackson Stroud spoke at the Cal-State Fullerton auditorium to a packed house. There was more than a fair share of black-clad literary types in the audience. "Poor Robert E. Howard. All his notes, unfinished stories—maybe even ideas he had rejected—all taken over by others. It's flattering to an author's ego . . ." Stroud looked out at the audience. The house lights had been dimmed for the speech, the back of the auditorium was swathed in darkness to anyone on the stage. But down front Stroud could see the people. In the middle of the third row sat James, a tape recorder in his lap, with that same acquisitive look on his face. Stroud lost his place. ". . . an author's ego . . . to, ah, to think of people in the future chasing after even his scratch paper, but still, the writer loses control. Loss of the control over my work is something I do not relish. Another bad thing about dying." There were chuckles from the audience.

The rest of the speech went well. The crowd listened attentively as he spoke of a writer's responsibilities, the drain of creative work, and all the other silliness he usually said to college audiences. When the question and answer period came, hundreds of arms sprouted up. Stroud answered their questions for thirty minutes, all except one arm in the third row. He assiduously avoided calling on James.

Afterwards, like always, a crowd pushed onto the stage. They had books for Stroud to autograph and more silly questions to ask. James had both. Another line formed, this time snaking across the stage, down the side stairs, and out the aisle to the second row of seats. The people were slightly less deformed than those at the bookstore; still, there was a sprinkling of the fleshy and emaciated. They seemed to go together, as if one fed off the flesh of the other. James waited patiently at the back. He shuffled slowly along, sandwiched between college students, his briefcase clutched in hand. Stroud stopped smiling when he saw James. "Do you have something for me to sign?"

"I have something I'd like to show you, sir," James said, stepping up next to Stroud. "Mr. Stroud, look what I was able to acquire just yesterday." He pulled a worn manuscript from his briefcase. "Your original screenplay for 'Smiling Dragons.' The one that was produced by Serling."

Stroud stopped signing books. He stared straight at James, "Just where did you get that? I auctioned it off at a fund raiser during a worldcon seven years ago. The man who bought it was a big collector in Florida. Just where did you get that?" The last question came out as a shout.

James backed up a step. The people around him became quiet and drew back, almost as if they expected Stroud to throw a punch. James was taken aback by Stroud's intensity. "He died several months ago. His estate went up for sale and I bought part of it," James hurriedly explained.

Stroud glared at him before returning to the books and questions of the crowd. James waited in a tight little shell of embarrassment, not understanding what he had done wrong, a coil of invisible rope wound tight around his chest. He closed his eyes and took short, quick breaths.

The crowd thinned out. Stroud turned back to James. Whatever conspiracy scenarios had floated around in his head were gone. He seemed almost apologetic, which was a rare occurrence for Jackson Stroud. James was at his most contrite. "I'm sorry, sir, if I—" he begged.

"No," Stroud replied. "I overreacted. I'll sign your books. What's your name again?"

James felt the invisible rope loosen and fall away. He sighed. "James Garvey, Mr. Stroud." James handed him three first editions to sign. "May I ask a question?"

"Sure, Jim." Stroud was writing in one of the books.

"Well, I was wondering what the intent was behind the actions of Lin Tao at the betting parlor?"

There was a pause as Jackson Stroud searched his memory. "This is, ah, from *Black Crescent on Rigel*, right?"

"Yes, Mr. Stroud." James was surprised at Stroud's inability to place the scene.

"I suppose because Crystalia was there."

"But that doesn't explain why Lin Tao bet on the blue kick boxer."

"Mr. Garvey, I'd have to check my notes. I wrote that novel four years ago, and I've written quite a lot since then." He handed the books back to James. "Now, I've really—"

"Please, Mr. Stroud, are you going to do any more Cutpurse stories?"

"No, that's enough for now, Mr. Garvey. Good night."

James followed him to the stage door. Jackson Stroud's current girlfriend was waiting there, her face framed by curly brown hair. A shadow passed over her when she saw James. Stroud opened the door for her. James watched them leave.

JAMES HAD no need to follow Stroud, he knew where the writer lived. James was proud of his expertise in tracking the man down, though he never bragged out loud about it. People just wouldn't understand. He had sorted through Stroud's various TV, radio, and print comments about his home to narrow the search. From then on it was tedious work in the city directories at the public library. Stroud had made one mistake: the name of the holding company for his house was Crystalia Limited. A gimme to a fan like James.

So that night James parked his car down the block from Stroud's house in Pasadena. It was the first time. He sat there in a pool of darkness between streetlights and watched the house for lights in the windows, any sign of life at all, his breath shallow in his throat. He imagined himself as a faithful guardian, standing watch over Stroud as the man slept. He thought of all the notes, the manuscripts, the unfinished stories in the house, all of them annotated by Stroud's own hand. Such a treasure had to be protected. James couldn't last the night. He left when sleep began to overcome him. But he came back the next night, and the night after.

EVERY YEAR the fans in San Diego put on a science fiction convention, and Jackson Stroud made a special point of attending whenever he could. It had been two months since Stroud's speech at Fullerton, and James was now sitting outside Stroud's house three times a week. His dreams were of vast caverns of file cabinets, all stuffed to the brim with Stroud's unpublished work. He would skip playfully down the long echoing tunnels, pulling open drawers and heaving pages into the air. Joy made his feet dance. James made a special point of attending this convention. Stroud would be there.

James did not care for most of the scheduled events, but Stroud was listed as being a participant in the Author's Forum. The conference room was packed; James had to put up with a seat toward the back. He taped the entire event, hanging on Stroud's every comment. A couple whisperers bothered him, but a few glares over his shoulder shut them up. The panel discussion over, questions were solicited from the crowd; James kept raising his hand. He had many competitors, it was several minutes before he was selected.

"Yes, the gentleman in the back has been rather insistent," the moderator said as she pointed in the general direction of James.

James beat another man to his feet. "This is addressed to Mr. Stroud."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Garvey," Stroud said into the microphone.

"Thank you, Mr. Stroud. What are your rough drafts like—do you take extensive notes—do you own a computer—a Macintosh or a PC?"

"For one question, that's pretty long, Mr. Garvey." There was laughter from the audience. The mouths of the crowd gaped in wide black holes.

Stroud continued. "I don't know, but maybe once a week I'm asked if I now use a computer. Yes, I use the technology. I've got a Mac and a laptop. However, I have not given up on the older tech—I still use my old Selectric and even, I don't want to shock anybody, a pen! I'm attached to my old method of longhand drafts. I do take extensive notes. To answer what you're really curious about, Mr. Garvey, I have extensive notes on all my projects, past and present, and I intend on keeping them all."

"Next?" the moderator said.

That night, James wandered the bland hallways of the hotel, from room party to room party, keeping an eye out for Jackson Stroud. At the San Diego convention Stroud usually dropped in on some of the fan parties. For over three hours James walked up and down the hallways, peered into rooms whose doors were open, listened outside closed doors, and rode the elevators. He tried to ignore the more unusual sounds and smells. He even walked around the hotel, hoping that if Stroud had gone out, he could catch the writer on the way back. Every twenty minutes James would stick his head into the convention suite to see if Stroud had made an appearance.

A little after midnight he found the writer in the middle of a tight cluster of fans, right outside the convention suite. They were all laughing, their mouths flapped open. James pushed his way into the little group.

"Ah, Mr. Garvey." Stroud was very affable for a change. "What can I do for you?"

James opened his briefcase.

"Only one book this time, Mr. Garvey." For some reason the little crowd of misshapened bodies thought that funny. Their mouths gaped open again in laughter. They snorted and honked as they huddled close to the writer.

As Stroud signed the book, James asked the question that had been at the back of his mind all evening: "What are you going to do with your files and notes and . . . are you going to give them to a museum or what?"

"I haven't decided yet, Mr. Garvey. I've thought about giving them to a library, or even selling them off. I don't know." Stroud handed back the book. "See you later, people," he announced to the crowd before he walked away.

The cluster of fans disintegrated. A few went into a room down the hall. Smoke billowed out of the open door. James was

tempted to follow Stroud, but knew he would be spotted and rebuked for it.

Not feeling like sleeping just yet, James went back to the convention suite. He took a pop can from among all the other cans of beer and soft drinks in the ice-filled bathtub; he located an empty easy chair in a corner of the main room. He sipped his drink, opened his briefcase, and started his examination. He had been carrying some of the merchandise he had purchased from dealers earlier in the day. The convention had turned the fourth-floor ballroom into a dealer's room. Everything from the latest electronic toy to musty fifty-year-old paperback books could be found there. Thin hands had sorted among the goods. James glanced at the book Stroud had just autographed. "To my most ardent collector," it read. James glowed with pride.

First he read several old fanzine editorials Stroud had written as a teenager. The paper was old, yellowed with age; James had to handle them with care. They could crumble at a misplaced touch. He went on to read a small chapbook of literary criticism concerning Stroud's *Timestalker* trilogy. James was so focused on his reading, he didn't notice the people as they began to head back to their rooms. One by one, they drifted away. A kid, too cheap to pay for a room, curled up in a nearby chair. An emaciated girl with stringy brown hair was asleep on the couch. Only their presence at the convention cut them apart from street bums.

James stopped reading. It was after four in the morning. He started to pack the material back in his briefcase. Jackson Stroud came into the suite. He seemed not at all surprised to see James.

James froze, only half the items packed away, like a deer in headlights. Stroud's hair was mussed and his shirt only

partly buttoned. He ducked into the bathroom for a moment, coming out again with a pop can. The writer walked over to James.

"Well, most of the ice was melted, but this can is still cold," he said casually. "Couldn't get back to sleep. I was thirsty." He popped the tab on the soft drink can. It fizzed ever so faintly. "What do you do besides follow me around?"

"I read. I buy and sell books and other stuff."

"There money in that?" Stroud looked at the soda can.

"Some," James replied.

"Can't keep you afloat in Southern California."

"No, I have some money from the insurance I got when my mom and dad died." James went to the heart of the matter without a pause. He focused his entire personality on the next few sentences. "Sir, I'd take care of your files. They'd be safe with me forever. I'd care for all your notes and manuscripts and—you couldn't find a more devoted caretaker. I'd keep them from the greedy ones—"

The sudden proposal caught Stroud's attention. "What?"

"Yes sir. There couldn't be anybody more devoted than I am." James put as much earnestness into his voice as it could hold. He tried to push his sincerity out of his mouth and into Stroud's ear.

"You'd have to wait till I'm dead. I plan on living a long time."

"I'd wait forever, just to be of service to you."

Stroud could see a pleading in James' eyes, an expression that both touched and disturbed the writer. Stroud looked away for a moment, then shifted his eyes back to the soda can.

"That's nice. I'm flattered by your devotion. But it will be a long wait."

"Don't take chances, sir. I know all about accidents. Take action now. I could be your insurance, just in case. And I'd care for them forever."

"That's nice," Stroud repeated, still looking away. "You've made a very kind and generous offer. I appreciate it. I haven't decided what I'll do." He finally took a sip out of the can. "I don't think I want this." He set the can down on the end table next to the chair.

James went to his room after Stroud left. He slept till noon. In a dream he modeled a replica of the writer, shaping it out of a sticky clay made from the shredded remains of the man's own books. After he had finished the head, it began to speak. It gave him advice on the proper techniques to use in completing the rest of the body. When done, the replica was better than the original. The dream then shifted to nightmare: the replica replaced Stroud and conspired to imprison James. He thrashed about in a tiny wet cell, the rusty confining iron grates pressed in his face. James awoke with a shout.

For the rest of the convention he did not see Jackson Stroud. He caught only one glimpse of the man at the closing ceremonies, far away in the crowd. He drove home alone, as he had come.

HIS PARENTS had loved the house. It was a white stucco split-level with a two-car garage and a tiny little back yard, hardly larger than the mower his dad had used. His mother had grown flowers there. After putting the packages and luggage in the living room, meaning to put them away later, he went upstairs. The master bedroom, his parents' room, was to the left. James had preserved it the way it was the day they died. He started to clean the room. It was a place for living people

any more, it was now a shrine. He cleaned it as worship, as homage, to his parents. Every three days he did it, cleaning the room with immaculate care. No dust was ever allowed to rest there. The mess that cluttered the rest of the house was never allowed into this room. He would vacuum and dust and polish the room with a singularly tight, focused intensity, a maniacal cleansing. His father had laid one of his suits out on the bed, perhaps to send to the cleaners after they returned from shopping. James always laid it back the same way.

"Mommy? Daddy?" he whispered. "You're going to be proud of me. I'll have the best Stroud collection in the world."

Yes, they seemed to say, yes, that's very good, son. We're very proud of you.

Later he unpacked. Up in his room, opposite his parents' bedroom, he kept a bookcase just for autographed books and other special treasures. He slid his latest signed acquisitions in among the others. James' bed was surrounded by bookcases. On the wall behind the bed was a giant poster of Jackson Stroud. James had sent a photocopy of a dust jacket photo to a poster company. When it came, he stuck it up above the headboard. The face leered down at him as he slept.

James made several thousand dollars over the next week. Book dealers at the convention had given him leads on the wants and wishes of various collectors. He kept very busy by making them happy. Even so, thoughts of Stroud's collection were at the back of his mind. He came to expect the man to call at any moment; he even bought an answering machine just in case he was out when the call came.

JAMES SAT cross-legged on his bed, the volume on his stereo turned up. The tuner was set and the cassette deck was ready to

record. James had the remote ready in his hand. Jackson Stroud was chummy with the host of the local public radio station's science fiction show, the Barsoom Review. James knew this, and called the station regularly to check for Stroud's upcoming appearances. James hit the button as the intro music began.

Stroud and the host started out the hour with their usual banter. James straightened out his legs and leaned back against the headboard. The show went on and on. Stroud made the announcement at the end of the show, almost as an afterthought. "The next Cutpurse novel will be out in December. Get 'em while they're hot, folks! They won't go on forever. My lawyer got the orders today. When I'm a-lying moldering in my grave, everything unpublished—notes, story outlines, unfinished manuscripts—they all go on the bonfire. A writer's version of a Viking funeral."

"You're not serious?" the host replied.

"Yep! Very serious!" Stroud's voice boomed out from the speakers. "Despite a very sincere and flattering offer by one of my readers to be my curator after I die. And despite the fact that my old alma mater K-State is more than willing—even drooling at the mouth—to keep my story files, I've decided to have them destroyed. It's in my will, I just put it in today."

The host could not believe it. "In emulation of Kafka? I can't believe you're serious." James was frozen in place, captive to the voices. The room tightened around him. The bookcases crowded in.

"Kafka had the right idea, but the wrong target. I'm glad, happy, overjoyed his work wasn't destroyed. Any of my finished works will be preserved, published, and republished until the heat death of the universe. Only unfinished works, old notes, and story ideas, only those will be consumed. I won't have the hounds chasing after my scrap paper like they did to poor Robert

E. Howard. I can't stand to lose control of my work, and I won't permit it after I die."

The last words snapped James back to movement. He leaped out of bed and kicked the stereo over. The plug came out of the wall socket with a snap. Silence. In a panic he reconnected the stereo and rewound the cassette. He was not mistaken, it was not some crazed wide-awake nightmare, Stroud's recorded voice confirmed what he had just heard. Even a college in Kansas would be better than the sight of those precious files going up in smoke. He could talk Stroud out of it, he knew he could. He would convince Stroud of his loyalty and devotion. He had to.

HE PARKED where he usually did and waited for the man to come home. Eventually a car arrived. It contained the writer and a woman. They went inside the house. James waited. He had to speak to Stroud alone to change the man's mind. His arguments might not have their full effect if others were present to oppose him. James had a long wait in the car. He sat in the darkness, clutching the steering wheel so hard his fingers began to ache. The woman stayed for two hours. She was the one with Stroud at Cal-State Fullerton. After she drove out of sight, James got out and walked up to the house.

Stroud was prompt in answering the door. "Mr. Garvey. I expected to hear from you tomorrow. Are you sure this is the right hour for a visit?"

"I've got to talk to you, Mr. Stroud."

Stroud could see James' agitated condition. "All right, for a few minutes." Stroud closed the door and led James into the living room. Couches and chairs were arranged around a brick fireplace. On the mantle were arrayed Stroud's trophies,

the writing awards he had won over the years. "Sit down, Mr. Garvey."

James didn't sit. Neither did Stroud. "You've got to change your mind, Mr. Stroud." They moved further into the room, stopping by the fireplace.

"About the clause in my will? No."

"You simply have to. The importance, the worth of your story files is so immense—they cannot be destroyed!"

Stroud shook his head. "You're exaggerating. What matters is the finished work."

"You're deceiving yourself, sir," James asserted.

"Now look, Garvey, I won't lose control of unfinished work. I won't allow it."

"They're important! Important! You can't destroy them!"

Stroud suddenly had an insight into James' personality. He stepped closer to James. "They're important to you, aren't they, Jimmy?" He tried to put a hand on James' shoulder.

James pulled back from Stroud.

"I'm right, aren't I?" Stroud continued: "They're important to you. Jimmy——"

"Don't do this. I'll sign papers saying I'll never let anyone look at the files, and I'll never try to complete even one of your stories." James pushed and pushed at his sincerity, until he thought blood would gush from his mouth.

"I believe you, Jimmy, but that isn't the problem. Your focus is too narrow. I know I'm all you've got, but you must understand, I can't leave anything unfinished. It's not in my nature. I can't lose control, I can't let it lie there forever lacking completion. The files will be destroyed someday, Jimmy. I'm honored by your devotion to me, and I am pleased that you care this much about my work. But that doesn't change my mind.

I don't like the idea of destroying my files any more than you do. It just has to be done."

The little speech only wound James tighter. "I won't let you," he said. His fists were clenched at his sides.

"James——"

James moved closer to Stroud. "I'll go to court. I'll stop you!"

Stroud lost his temper. "They'll be destroyed. Live with it! Now get out! I'm not talking about it any more!"

"You are going to listen to me!" James snatched an award off the mantle and smashed Stroud in the head with it. It impacted with a brisk crack. Stroud went down without a sound. James continued to beat on the prostrate body. "You're not going to do this!" he screamed. "I won't let you! I won't let you! Do you hear me? I won't let you!" Bright red blood splattered the walls, the ceiling. The rage passed.

James did not at first realize he had killed Stroud. He dropped the broken award and shook the body. Tears were in his eyes. He rushed through the house hunting for bandages, something, anything to help. He found a first aid kit under the sink in the spare bathroom and ran back with it. He cried as he bandaged the body, the tears falling to mix with the blood.

Finally he saw Stroud was dead. James sat by the body until he quit sobbing. The clause in the will would now be in effect. He had killed his idol; he would not let them destroy the writer's files. After cleaning up in the bathroom, he went out and moved his car into the driveway.

Hesitantly, he entered Stroud's office. He had found a box of garbage bags in a search of the kitchen. He brought those in with him. James started at the desk. Everything went into the bags. There were two large file cabinets. Most of the night was gone, so he took the file drawers with their contents,

rather than waste time emptying them. The car was loaded at last: the back seats piled up, and he even used the front passenger side. James went through the house wiping fingerprints off anything he had touched. After a second's hesitation, he even wiped the broken award free of prints. It had been in the shape of a rocket, it was the Hugo award Stroud had won the year before. James checked the office one last time. He remembered to take the diskettes for the computer. Stroud had been good at backing up his files, there were a lot of them. James was almost out the door when he remembered, and went back to the office. He turned the computer on and quickly checked the hard drive for any story files. He downloaded two onto diskettes before turning the machine off. He wiped his fingerprints off the keyboard. The empty file cabinets gaped like toothless mouths. He even took some of Stroud's library. He found the laptop in the bedroom. It went into the car as well. When James left he locked the door.

James hid the car in the garage. Inside the house, he went to his parents' room. "Mommy, Daddy, I did a terrible thing." They did not reply.

He didn't go near the car for a day. He tried to ignore the contents, hoping it was all a dream, hoping that, in reality, he had not murdered a writer whom he respected and admired. James had to accept it in the end. The proof was sitting in his garage. He unloaded the car, sorted the files, and stored them in boxes in the closet of what had been the guest bedroom. The computer disks, the books, and the laptop went in with the files. He hid the empty file drawers in the basement.

The body was eventually found. At first he thought every car that passed in the street was a police car. The days went by, and then the weeks; his life returned to its old patterns.

The closet in the guest bedroom was never opened. James managed to push the memory of the murder back into a half-forgotten state.

HE WAS sitting at the desk in what had been his father's office, next to the family room. Two months had passed since the murder. The police had not called, and the incident had faded from the news, to be replaced by some other sensational crime. There was always another one ready to go. James had not thought about the events of that night in weeks. It was as if, to him, they had never happened. It was night. James sat at his father's desk, reading just a chapter before bed. At first, too slight to gather his attention, sounds came from above him. Footsteps going about the room upstairs. He was brought back by the sliding door on the closet banging as it was slammed open. The guest bedroom was directly above him. He ran upstairs, expecting a burglar. No one was there. A box was pulled out, some of Stroud's papers were strewn on the floor. He put them back, checked the windows and doors, and went to bed, worry beginning to creep into him.

More noise during the night woke him. Papers were again strewn about the floor. He put them away and again checked the windows and doors.

James came back the next afternoon from an errand to find Stroud's papers spread over the entire house, every room. The computer diskettes had been piled up into a little tower in the middle of the living room. The laptop was open, sitting on his bed, the screen aglow. He patiently gathered everything up. Nothing was missing.

That night James sat in the little office with the radio blaring. He tried to read, and if noises came in the dark, he

would ignore them. Through the hours his eyes read the words and did not comprehend them, his ears heard the music and did not understand. He sat, waiting for sounds he did not want to hear. There was someone behind him. By minute increments he turned his head, the air unmoving in his lungs. Only a curtained window and a bookshelf. The door to his left remained closed. James doubted if he would ever open that door again. He turned back to his book. Once more he knew someone was behind him. Not wanting to turn around, he waited. The feeling would not go away. James pushed back the chair and stood. No one was there. He sat down at the desk, turning up the radio even more. The open book sat on the desk before him, and he waited. Time passed. The music began to die. He turned the volume all the way up, still it died. James banged on the top of the radio with his hand. The music continued to fade. He tried another station. The sound was gone. Silence dominated the room; he could hear his own breathing, loud, harsh. A Presence was behind him. James would not turn. He stayed frozen at the desk. Again, and unwillingly, he stood up. Invisible hands clutched his shoulders. He could feel the unseen fingers grasping at him. His body began to turn. He did not wish to look. He tried to close his eyes, but he couldn't even do that. His breath came short. The Ghost was there.

I've spoken to your parents, Jim. They were not pleased with what you did to me.

James couldn't breathe. His heart was a hot stone, locked in place by the searing pain in his chest. He could not focus his eyes, he began to lose consciousness.

The Ghost reached into his mind. It touched his cringing spirit and stroked the centers of autonomic function. *I didn't come back just so you'd die of fright.* James began to breathe again. *Good, take another breath. Good.* The stone dissolved,

James took in great gusts of air; he fell back against the desk.

Very good. The Ghost withdrew.

"I killed you."

Yes, you did.

"But you've been buried!"

Part of me was. Would you like to see it? A brief flash of decayed flesh, just barely a peek into the grave. Mold rotted the suit, maggots feasted in empty eye sockets, shriveled lips pulled back from the skull's teeth. The image went away as fast as it came. Only the Presence remained.

"No! Go away! I'm sorry I killed you, but go away!"

It's not that easy. You cut me short and now you'll have to be part of the solution. This time the Ghost folded itself into his head, filling his mind—every memory, every thought—with its own essence, its own purpose. Time to get busy, we've got stories to write.

"No," said James, but only once.

END

AFTERWARD

August 2000

I was exposed to the works of Harlan Ellison and reruns of *The Twilight Zone* at the same time, when I was an undergraduate at college. That I'd try to combine elements of both in one story was inevitable. Part of me wanted, still wants, to write these sorts of fantastic little stories. There is a certain innocence to them, the atmosphere of a simpler reality. Unfortunately, the time for these stories is long past. That didn't stop me from writing a few of them, and even publishing a few of them in small magazines. Just like a character in a *Twilight Zone* episode, these magazines appeared and disappeared as if they existed in an alternate universe. They were there one day, gone without a trace the next. What we'd now call an *X-Files* moment.

A reader would assume that I hate science fiction fans. No, I don't. The germ of the idea for this story was given to me by a hard-core science fiction fan. Chock it up to self-loathing. Most fans are polite types, but there are a few with that same acquisitive look in their eyes as James had. It's spooky when they turn that look in your direction. What goes on behind the eyes? Whatever it is, it drives people to extremes that can be witnessed every day on ebay. Fortunately, they only throw money around on ebay. They can throw money at me anytime.

R. P. Bird

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