

## The Spirits of Whiskey Row

The hiss and rattle of the old radiator accented the sound of the gale threatening to shatter the bedroom windows. The rain battered the shutters and wind whistled low through the gabling. Delores was off at her mother's in San Francisco and loneliness entombed the house.

Unable to sleep, I headed down the stairs to make some tea. They creaked and moaned painfully; an icy dampness oozed through the walls and infiltrated the easements beneath them. Everything smelled of must and mildew.

I set the tea pot on the front burner of the stove; the blue flames emitting a pungent smell as dust motes vaporized.

The moist steam gathered and swirled, mingling with clouds emanating from my mouth and nose. Surely the temperature in the house was not so frigid as to permit my breath from congealing? Suddenly, the burner went out, the boiling turbulence quickly subsiding. A deathly silence replaced the chattering of the radiator pipes.

Moving into the hallway between the stairs and kitchen, I listened at the cellar door. The boiler should have been shouting and clanging as it produced its meager heat, but no, the only sound was the rhythmic clicking of the firing nozzle. Opening the door, the dark gloom rose up to meet me from the abyss. A single bulb came to life as I pulled the chord at the head of the stairs, its stingy illumination casting menacing shadows on the earthen floor below. I hesitated. Unless the problem was a simple kink in the feed line, or a slight misalignment of the sparking mechanism, I'd have no hope of correcting it myself. It was late, however, and trying to find a repairman at this hour would surely fail.

Taking a deep breath, I cautiously climbed down the bare, wooden escarpment. A sharp, putrid odor attacked my nostrils, like the cold steel of bayonets. My good sense screamed for me to flee, to risk the storm outside rather than descend one step further.

Reaching the last step, I placed my bare foot on the naked ground, expecting it to be damp or chilly or both. To my surprise, it was neither; it felt like a warm carpet, without a hint of dew. Shadows lurked everywhere, but they were easily explained by the boxes and dusty furniture scattered about.

I quickly made my way to the furnace, disappointed to find no ready solution to its apparent malfunction; no kink in the oil line, no obvious dislocation of the nozzle, and no indication that the oil tank was empty.

Something flashed behind me. I sensed it more than saw it; the hair on the back of my neck stood instantly at attention. Turning slowly, I saw it; there, in the corner, facing me and seated squarely behind an ancient desk was a man in top hat and formal attire. His face was ashen in the pale light of the incandescent orb hanging between us. His lips were thin and colorless; stringy, white strands of hair escaped beneath his hat. His hook nose betrayed old age; wrinkles distorted his wretched forehead. His eyes, however, were the most startling of his features, *for he had none*. No iris or pupil inhabited the hollow sockets; instead, a reddish tinge of supernatural light escaped their empty confines, penetrating the gloom.

I stood transfixed, unable to run, unable to speak, unable to scream. The specter raised a bony hand and pointed at me, the long, emaciated fingers protruding from his sleeve. Its mouth opened, and out of that gaping orifice, devoid of teeth or tongue, came a deep, penetrating voice that reverberated throughout the basement, uttering a single word; "*DOOM!*"

Thousands of stinging insects crawled inside my skin and I felt light headed. I started breathing deeply, trying to stay conscious. Then, just as mysteriously as it arrived, the macabre image blinked out of existence. One second he was there, his finger pointing, his mouth still open, and the next there was nothing – only a ghastly, floating corneal image on my retinas. I tried blinking it away, but it remained. I couldn't move; I could barely think. Then, a cackle shattered the silence behind me, and I whirled around, falling to the ground, a scream at last rising from my lungs and racing through my throat like a desert wind. I fully expected to see the ghoul on the attack, brandishing some nightmarish weapon. Instead, the boiler had come to life, the smell of sulfur heavy in the air as the burners ignited with a familiar whoosh. I lay on the ground panting, my heart pounding. When the apparition did not reappear, I jumped to my feet only to find the floor suddenly cold and damp. Not wishing to stay one moment longer in this dungeon, I raced up the stairs, slamming the door behind me. Above the sounds of blood rushing through my ears, I could hear the rattling of pipes in the walls, confirming the furnace was once again pumping life-sustaining warmth into the radiators.

I leaned against the basement door as the house return to life. Hidden subtly within the familiar, metallic chords of the old copper coils, however, was something different, something new; a sound I'd never noticed before. It was synchronized with the rhythmic clanking, but seemed more like steel chains being shaken than hot water pipes expanding and groaning in their moorings.

It grew steadily louder, emanating from the living room. Still shaking, I had no desire to search for the source of this new sound. I backed into the kitchen, hands outstretched in front of me. I nearly made it to the doorway leading to the back porch when the steel cacophony ceased abruptly.

The unexpected silence caused me to look back at the kitchen's archway. Another apparition appeared, amorphous and ghostly.

This poltergeist was ethereal and shifting, with no discernable features. With no distinct shape, and I could see the stairs behind it through its translucent, silken folds.

It hovered there, and in a quivering voice I found the strength to speak;

“Who are you? What do you want of me?”

In response, it began to coalesce, churning and whirling, like cotton candy inside an astral blender. It drew itself into a circle, no longer transparent. Images formed at its center, and I found myself staring at downtown Prescott, as if through a lens. It was dusk. The town's clock tower clearly displayed the time; 5:30. People were hurrying along main street as the town's stores began closing.

As I watched, a huge fire ball erupted from the St. Michael's hotel across from the courthouse square. For a moment, I couldn't see anything but the roiling of orange and yellow flames. Then, as the main blast subsided, I saw the front of the hotel engulfed in fire; thick, black smoke rushed out its shattered windows. Dozens of people lay on the ground and cars were overturned and ablaze up and down the street. Rapidly, the neighboring buildings caught fire as well. Most were built near the turn of the century, and were little more than willing tinder. In the blink of an eye, the entire downtown was a roaring inferno.

The image blurred, then faded, replaced by a new scene. It was clearly the aftermath of the firestorm, as if the ghoul had pressed fast forward on some celestial remote.

Devastation was everywhere; complete and utter destruction of what once was a thriving community. All that remained were the cement foundations of the buildings. Skeletons of cars

and trucks still threw off wisps of smoke. The clock tower, by some miracle, had survived, standing guard defiantly, frozen at 5:31, unaware its usefulness had ended forever.

The cosmic lens clouded again, turning opaque. Then, like the smoky fog of melting dry ice, it floated to the ceiling, disappearing through the rafters.

I don't know how long I stood there, listening to my own labored breathing, but the pounding in my heart settled down as I became aware of the mundane knocking of the steam pipes within the walls. The storm outside must have dissipated, as neither wind nor rain pelted the windows.

The echoes of *doom* reverberated in my mind as I replayed the astral hologram over and over. Was it a curse? A Gemorah-like judgment assessed against the town? Was I being charged with preventing the catastrophe? If so, how was I supposed to know which day it was to occur? Tomorrow? Next week? A month from now? I could spread the alarm, but who would believe me? Mayor Jessup was unlikely to evacuate the town on my say-so, not without tangible proof. I could contact the local utility and insist they search for gas leaks, but without the slightest idea of what caused the explosion, what would I tell him to look for? I needed to take action, and I didn't have a clue where to begin.

I looked at the digital clock on the wall, the red numerals reminding me of my first encounter with a specter. Noting it was past midnight, I considered returning to bed, but there was no way that sleep would come to me now. Since the spirits had chosen to retire, at least temporarily, I hurried upstairs to dress, turning on every light I passed in the process.

I needed a plan.

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“A bomb, you say? At the St. Michael’s?” Tom Jessup said, in a western drawl that played well to the tourists, but belied his Yale education. Mayor for the last 6 years he was home grown and well respected. His family moved here sometime in the early 1890’s, just before the town was incorporated, and they still operated the Bar J ranch on the Southern edge of the Yavapai River.

“I said maybe a bomb. I don’t know for sure. It could be the gas lines are rigged to blow, or compromised somehow so they’ll rupture,” I responded, sticking to my hastily contrived script formed in the wee hours of the morning.

“And tell me again how you know this?”

“Like I told you,” I said, “I stopped for coffee at the St. Michael’s and I overheard two men talking. I couldn’t see them – we were separated by partition between the restaurant and lobby. They whispered, but I heard it plain as day, *‘it oughta blow at 5:30 – it’ll be a heck of an explosion, I figger.’* Then the other man said, *‘we’d best be far away by then. I don’t want no part of getting’ caught, and I sure don’t want to end up no crispy critter.’*”

“So you figured they meant that the hotel was going to blow up tonight at 5:30, right?”

“Wouldn’t you? I’m telling you exactly what I heard.”

“Why didn’t you tell Jake? I’m sure he would have investigated immediately.”

“I *did* tell him – he didn’t believe me – thought I was telling tales. He thinks I’m always joking around.”

“Are you joking around? Cause if you I order Jake to evacuate the hotel and nothing happens, you’re going to be in big trouble, Bill.”

“I’m not joking, and I’m not telling you what to do. I heard what I heard. If something happens and you did nothing and people got hurt, it’d be on your head, not mine.”

He thought about that a moment, scratching the stubble on his chin, then said, “It’s only 10:30. We have time to do some investigating on our own. I’ll call Sam down at the Sherriff’s, and have him meet us at the hotel. No use alarming anyone just yet. We’ll have time to evacuate if we find anything suspicious.”

“And what if we don’t find anything right off? What then?”

“Then it’ll just be your imagination gone wild, that’s all. You understand? I don’t want a panic, and I expect you to keep this between us till I say otherwise. Clear?”

“Clear,” I said, relieved for the moment.

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The St. Michael hotel dates back to 1901, build soon after the famous fire on Whiskey Row in 1900 which destroyed a good portion of the town. Through numerous renovations, the plumbing and gas-fed fireplaces were updated, the pipes running in a grid below the main floor. There was a new steel lock on the original oak door leading to the basement, a sturdy door intended to last another 100 years.

Tom, Sam and I followed the underbelly of the main floor, tracing the pipes and wires lining the beams above us. We picked our way through the graveyard of long forgotten chairs, tables, coat racks and spittoons. It reminded me of the catacombs of France, though less musty and without the requisite piles of ancient, decaying bones.

“What exactly should we be looking for?” I asked, breaking the silence of our little posse.

“Anything out of place,” Sheriff Sam Goldstein said. Sam would have been the perfect type for one of the ‘B’ westerns filmed here decades ago. He even looked a little like Tom Mix.

“Keep your eyes open for recently disturbed furniture or signs of fresh sawdust. Tom and I will trace the gas lines to see if they’ve been tampered with.”

“Shouldn’t we call the gas company?” I asked.

“Already called them – they’re sending a repair team, just in case. They should be here in an hour. Meantime, let me know if either of you see anything.”

“You know,” Tom said, “the town was nearly destroyed a couple of times by fire. The great one in 1900 was caused by a careless miner who left his mining candle burning near a wall in one of the saloons. You think some laid-off, disgruntled miner is trying to repeat it on purpose?”

Sam didn’t answer directly, but turned to me instead. “You have any idea who those two fellas were you overheard, Bill?”

“They didn’t sound familiar; besides, they were whispering, so it’s not likely I’d recognize them anyway.”

“And you didn’t get a look at them? Didn’t try to make it around the partition to get a peek?”

“I did, but they were gone by the time I had the sense to look.”

“And you don’t remember anything else that might be useful?”

“If I did, I’d tell you, wouldn’t I?”

He looked at me sideways then returned his attention to the ceiling. “Keep thinking – maybe something will come back to you.”

I considered retelling the story from the night before, describing the creatures and their explicit warning, but I didn’t relish being sent to some mental hospital in Phoenix.



The utility repair team showed up and joined in the search. Two hours later, having covered every square inch of ground and every length of pipe, Tom called the search off.

“Looks like you sent us on a wild goose chase, Bill,” as we stood outside the front door of the hotel.

“I’m telling you, I heard what I heard. Something bad’s gonna happen here tonight. I feel it in my bones.”

“Well, I can’t order an evacuation because you’ve got arthritis. Sorry, but unless you can tell me something more specific, this is over.”

“I don’t *have* anything more specific,” I shouted. I was about to yell, “*the damned ghosts wouldn’t lie*,” but stopped myself. Tom was an educated man – he’d never believe me, not without having seen it himself.

“Calm down,” Tom said. “Be glad I didn’t have Sam arrest you for wasting our time. Next time you get a wild hair up your behind because you thought you heard something, see an audiologist and leave me out of it. I have a council meeting to prep for.” With that, he turned and stomped away.

The clock tower chimed 1pm.

Back in the hotel, I searched for the bellhop who’d ushered us to the lower sanctum on Jake’s say so. “Sorry to bother you again,” I said, “seems I left my cell phone downstairs.”

He nodded, and unlocked the door leading back to the basement.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll find my own way out.” He nodded again and walked away as I climbed back down the rickety stairs.

I didn’t hear the door latch behind me.

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I renewed my search at the main furnace room, looking for obvious problems, as I did in my own basement the previous evening. Running my fingers along the feed pipes, I felt for kinks or punctures. A visible inspection of the nozzles and exposed wires showed no observable misalignments or fraying. There was no tell-tale odor of rotten eggs to indicate a gas leak.

Next, I once more meticulously traced the various gas lines that crisscrossed the basement. I followed each branch line carrying propane up into the hotel where it would connect with the kitchen's stoves and the plentiful fireplaces. Back and forth I walked, paying careful attention at each juncture where they disappeared through the floor above me.

My eyes grew bleary. Glancing at my watch, I realized nearly 2 hours had passed. I removed a dusty sheet from an old wicker chair and sat down to gather my thoughts. Stretching my neck, I noticed a wisp of smoke around the pipe just above me. It didn't dissipate however; instead, it hung suspended in space. Then a second wisp appeared, and then another. It looked like strands of cotton candy forming around the copper. The tingling sensation at the back of my neck warned me this was not a sweet surprise transforming before me. It condensed into a long, thin rope, wrapping itself around the pipe. It moved away from me, along the length of the pipe like a snake on a tree's branch. I was in no mood for another astral encounter, but I felt compelled to follow. I followed it, staying a good 20 feet back. Suddenly, it stopped and formed a small, white ball around an elbow joint I'd surveyed 10 minutes ago. The ball brightened, like a 75 watt light bulb suddenly thinking it was a 500 watt flood lamp. Then it blinked out entirely leaving me blinded for a moment. When my eyes readjusted, the smoke creature was gone, so I examined the joint. This time, I noted what I'd missed the first time; there was a bulge, just below the floorboards. Was it even there before? It really didn't matter; it was there now, in plain sight.

It was 4:15pm; just enough time get help and repair the damaged joint.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I nearly smashed my face into the heavy oak door when the knob turned but the door didn't open. It took a couple of seconds to realize it had locked behind me. I shouted for help and pounded on the wood, hoping someone could hear me.

4:20. Of course – check in time! Everyone is in the front of the hotel with the arriving guests. Jumping down the stairs I searched for another exit. Breathing deep to control the panic welling up inside, I started at one end of the basement and searched the entire perimeter of the underground walls. There were no unexpected doors, and no hidden windows. Crisscrossing from one side to the other, I scoured the floor above me a trap door or hidden, collapsible stairs.

I tried thinking of how to prevent the joint from bursting. I had no tools – and no pipe fitting experience. I considered wrapping the elbow in the clothes off my back, but that likely would do no good. I started hitting the ceiling with my fists in the unlikely event that someone above could hear me through the floorboards and thick carpeting.

In a desperate attempt to find something – anything – useful, I started overturning the furniture and boxes along the walls. I worked the north wall first then turned to the east. I stopped in mid step when a flash went off behind me. Turning, I spotted an old desk, similar to the one that materialized in my basement last night. As before, a figure sat there, this time with its back to me. I could make out a top hat with strings of scraggly, white hair hanging out. I realized it was the same specter from my cellar. It didn't turn to face me; instead it raised its hand and pointed toward the wall in front of it. Beams of red light shot from its hidden eyes, coalescing into a single, slender laser beam. It glinted off something just above the desk's surface, the beam splitting into a crimson spider web. It sparkled for a moment, and then it disappeared, along with my spectral friend.

Gathering my courage I walked towards the desk, figuring that death by haunting was preferable to death by fire. I found the spot on the wall where the red beams had converged; there was a rusted nut attached to a protruding bolt. I pushed the desk aside and found several more bolts holding a rusted steel plate in place. I estimated it to be four foot by four foot. I couldn't figure out what it could be or why it was here. Then it came to me – this hotel was built in 1900 There were no gas lines to supply fuel to it, but there was plenty of coal in the surrounding mountains. This, therefore, must be the coal chute, useless and sealed. If I could remove the cover, I would have a direct pathway to the street outside.

I was still handicapped without any tools. Scouring the immediate area, I nearly broke my foot when I tripped on a wooden box. Opening it I found several shovels and a pick axe, rusted but functional. Grabbing the axe I struck the flat blade against the first bolt as hard as I could. It snapped like a dry twig, the nut and severed bolt bouncing on the ground and careening to the side. I swung again, and again, and once again; the remaining nuts broke off easily with just one strike each.

I tried pulling the plate from the wall, but it wouldn't budge. Hoping it hadn't rusted solid against the metal shaft behind it, I wedged the pointed end of the axe between the top edge along the wall and put all my weight against the wooden handle. There was a loud, metal squeal and a small separation appeared. Placing the flat end into the opening now, I once again leaned heavily on the handle. It moved slowly at first, but in an instant it gave way with an ear-splitting metallic shriek.

A burst of sunlight framed the axe handle in my hands, and a rush of blood filled me with hope. I looked up the exposed shaft; there was a wooden hatch covering it, some 8 feet above me. Weathering had shrunk and splintered the boards so and dusty rays streamed through them.

The sides of the chute were slippery and after two attempts to climb up, I saw the futility of it. I reached up with the axe, using the entire 3 feet of its handle, and hooked one end between two of the planks in the hatch. I pulled myself up, and wedged against the sides, pushing with my legs to keep my back secure against the opposite wall. Twisting the axe carefully I broke apart the boards, one by one. Dropping the axe I grabbed the edge of the chute and pulled myself up through the opening. I was free!

The coal chute was located in the alley behind the hotel. I raced around the corner, and as I emerged on the street, I came face to face with the town's clock tower. 5:10pm. There wasn't time to find Tom or Sam. The gas company, I remembered, had an office on Sheldon Street, two blocks away.

My college sprinting days are long gone so by the time I rounded Gurley Street and saw the building on Sheldon, I was winded. *No time to worry about it.* I half walked half jogged to the front door and pushed on it.

When it didn't open, I cursed. *Damned banker's hours.* It was after 5pm – they were closed for the day. I peered in the side window. A man sat at a desks so I rapped on the window to get his attention. He looked up, shook his head, and pointed at this watch, mouthing '*we're closed.*' I stepped back towards the street and found a suitable rock. The window shattered with a loud bang as the glass shards erupted from the casement. In a second, the man appeared at the window, shouting, but I shouted right back, louder and with more enthusiasm;

“There's no time to spare – there's a gas leak at the St Michael's, and it's likely to blow any second – you have to shut off the gas any way you can. There are hundreds of people in that hotel, and they'll all be dead if you don't act RIGHT NOW!”

“What?” he said, and then my words sank in. He turned and rushed back to his desk, picked up the telephone and dialed a number. I couldn’t hear what he said, but by his arm gesticulations, it was obvious he was belching orders to someone on the other end of the line.

Exhausted, I stepped back towards the street. I was about to check my watch when I heard a loud bang, and cried out. I collapsed, distraught. *I was too late.*

Something touched my shoulder and I nearly jumped out of my skin. I jerked my head around to see a young boy staring down at me. “Don’t be scared, mister, it’s just my Dad’s car – it always backfires like that – he says it has to do with the carb’rator or somehin’.”

I stared at him in disbelief. Getting up, I rushed back to Gurley Street. I could see the hotel was unharmed; no fire or smoke spewing from its windows. In front, several utility vehicles were pulling up along with a police cruiser. The clock read 5:32 as it cast its shadow on the shopkeepers and tourists emerging from the adjacent saloons to see what all the commotion was about.

I turned and walked back to my car for the 8 mile ride home.

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The large, formal dining table at the Bar J Ranch dated back to 1889, when Tom’s great grandfather had acquired it. Delores and I were seated next to Sam and his lovely wife, Diane.

“You’re quick thinking saved a lot of lives, Bill,” I heard Tom say as we rehashed once more the events of the previous month, “But one thing still bothers me – that story about the bomb beneath the hotel...”

“I told you, I wasn’t certain it was a bomb – they never used the word ‘bomb’” I said, sticking to my original lie.

“Okay, okay – so these two guys were plotting to blow up the hotel. How’d they manage to cause a gas line rupture? The fire marshal said it was a case of an old pipe joint finally giving out – pure circumstance, and pure luck that you happened to find it.”

“How am I supposed to know how they did it? Maybe they injected some new chemical that attacked weakened joints? Or maybe one of them worked for the utility and knew the joint was ready to give.”

“But you said ‘5:30’. I remember you said it very specifically. No one could know to the minute when that joint might give. What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing. I’m telling you the tru....” My eyes caught a picture on the wall behind Bill’s head. It wasn’t there the last time we had dinner together. Bill caught my stare, and turned to see what had caught my attention.

“Oh – that old picture,” he said. “That’s my great granduncle, Eldon and his wife, Clarice. Doreen found it in an old trunk in the attic recently, and we decided to put it up.”

In the picture, Eldon looked serious and dapper sitting at an accountant’s desk. He was formally dressed in tuxedo and top hat, his graying hair protruding from beneath it. He had a slightly hooked nose and thin lips. His eyes, focused on the camera, appeared reddened from the flash. Clarice stood beside him, looking elegant and ethereal in her flowing, white gown, the lace accents forming white contrails around her.

“They look like they were a happy couple,” I said, unable to disengage my eyes.

“So I’ve been told,” Tom said. “I wouldn’t know firsthand – I never had a chance to meet them. They died in 1900, during the great fire.”