

C L A N B O O K

TRENIEMERE

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Brian "Lug" Glass, for his help dragging the humiliated-to-be onto the "stage."

Phil "Honorary Redneck" Boule, for learning what passes for entertainment down here in the States.

Fred "The Drama" Yelk, for trying to crush the compassion from his girlfriend's roommate.

YEESH

The bathroom on the day after the whole debacle.

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ENLIGHTENED BY THE DARKNESS

Sometimes I feel caught between two distinct worlds — the one that we all see and agree to acknowledge, and the one that some lizardlike primordial portion of our brains understands only subconsciously. We move about through the common world and accept it as normal because peeling back the layers underneath would be too much to bear.

I spent much of my life reinforcing the common world: stage magic, sleight-of-hand, debunking paranormal phenomena and the like. Rational explanations exist for everything, I used to say, and I'd go to great lengths to find them. Of course, such an explanation may not be plausible, but we're oh-so-sure of our ability to define our little world that we'll gladly throw out sensibility in the interests of turning the unexplained into something that we can rationalize as "scientific" and "logical." Occam's Razor doesn't support that notion, but people would rather believe anything far-fetched as long as it proves that they're not insane and that the world works in terms they understand.

Let me give an example: People don't believe in vampires. A huge body of literature surrounds them; stories, movies and television shows regale us with their exploits; tales of the undead go back as far as ancient Africa and Sumeria; and they have roots in the folktales of just about every culture in the world. But everybody knows that vampires aren't real. The notion of something that comes back from the dead and drinks blood to survive — ludicrous! The idea that a monstrous beast might live forever in a cursed existence devoid of sunlight or hope — absurd! The very thought that something out there might work in ways that humans don't understand, might defy the very order of existence that people take for granted, might prey upon humans, influence them, prowl among them, surpass them — no, humans are the pinnacle of creation. We certainly can't upset that notion. If humans are just cattle, if they can die meaninglessly just to satiate the perverse whims of malevolent monstrosities, well, that's enough to upset anyone's notion that we're in charge of our own destinies.

I'd done a show circuit and associated work for a couple of years. I'd tour through big towns and give performances of stage magic, illusion and prestidigitation. I also made it a policy to always debunk one trick per show. Other professionals hated that, but audiences enjoyed it, so it guaranteed that I could put asses in seats. On the side, I'd teach to curious kids, investigate odd stories, sometimes even show up on a television spot to debunk a claim of psychic powers or supernatural phenomena. I'd see a report about some freak occurrence, and immediately my mind would go into overdrive figuring out how it worked, how it happened, how it could be made to look real and how I could duplicate it. In some ways I loved the convolutions, but even more,

I think I enjoyed bending these phenomena to my understanding. I'd couch them in simple, easily explainable terms, show how they were all hoaxes, and leave with the satisfaction that the world still fit my perceptual box. Charlatans, liars and hucksters were the people I left behind. I suppose in a way I felt better than them — the world worked the way I said, and if they wanted to hang on ridiculous notions like “faith” and “parapsychology” and “magic,” then they obviously weren't as smart and educated as I was.

Anyway, my tour took me inevitably to New York, the third bastion of trashy show antics right after Vegas and Hollywood. Broadway's looking old these days, and when you're off-off-Broadway, in the slums and ghettos and crack-houses of late-night entertainment television, you know it. Everybody there has two gimmicks and an agent. My latest job: Run a quick show circuit, then hook up with a camera crew and debunk a “haunted” house for Hard Copy or A&E.

The show wasn't so much the important part. It went as I'd expected: levitate an assistant, create silk scarves from nowhere, walk through a brick wall and so on. The usual prestidigitation gave way to a tired old evening; I got my makeup squared again and headed out with the camera crew in a van to the “manor of ghosts.” Ooh, spooky. I felt like some ridiculous extra from The Sixth Sense, for Chrissakes.

The house itself was suburban, maybe '50s style, probably built in the economic boom after World War II. Had a bit of surrounding yard; stood by itself in the midst of an otherwise boarded-up, apartment- and package store-ridden neighborhood. It didn't look haunted, just tired. I quipped as much to the camera, witty me. The house's interior was much the same: dusty, creaky, deserted, with the occasional bit of odd rubble, a flapping sheet or a weird water stain. Nothing out of the ordinary, but certainly the sort of things that could be taken by superstitious or thrill-hungry neighborhood kids as “evidence” of haunting.

I spent two days going over that damn house. Not a single spook ever reared its head, either in person or on infrared camera. The camera crew mostly filmed a lot of my smarmy commentary about gullible people.

Matters got weird after the job. I'd packed up the last of my investigative gear — heat sensors, compasses, field detectors, all in compact, neat little gray metal cases without extraneous flashing lights or the like — when we received a visitor. The sun had already set; I'd hoped to go home earlier, but the camera crew had insisted on a couple of spooky night-time shoots. I was heading out the front door to put the remainder of my things in the van when a woman's voice startled me from behind.

“Excuse me.”

Simple words, but they scared the hell out of me. I'd just debunked a tired old house that didn't have a single bit of real strangeness about it, and some voice from behind me managed to chill my skin and make my neck hair stand on end. I turned rather too quickly and noted a tall woman in a severe business suit standing on the porch, right next to the wall, just where my eye would've missed her as I came out the front door. I managed to calm my nerves.

“Can I help you? We're just leaving,” I commented off-hand.

The woman took two steps toward me. For some reason, my stomach knotted up and my mouth dried. My skin still felt a little chilled, even under my casual “make the audience feel comfortable” sweater.

The woman adjusted her narrow glasses and gave me an even look before she continued, “I'd just like the chance to talk with you for a moment.”

I sighed. “If it's about the permits, the guy in the van's got them. The house is abandoned and the network squared everything. If it's about the magic show, you can talk to my agent. I'm afraid I'm really tired tonight. Sorry to be a jerk, but I just want to get home. Long day.”

The woman raised an eyebrow, and I adjusted my stance a little. I felt uncomfortable but I couldn't place why — like she was a cop or a tax auditor or someone who'd caught me in the middle of a mischievous act, and she was going to enjoy raking me over the coals. She took another step up and added in a slightly softer