



THE EMPTY ROOM

An Unlocked Room Mystery

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The Empty Room

Water from a passing car splashed on the windshield. The rain was coming down in buckets. Even high on the wipers weren't helping much. But history teacher Ronald Reuel was only half paying attention to the road. He could see two headlights in the mirror. Ron always hated the immutable fact that no matter how you angled the mirror, the light always got in your eyes. It had been a long, lonely drive.

"I'd slow down if I were you. You could do some serious hydroplaning on a road like this."

Ron turned toward the empty passenger seat, only it wasn't empty. There was a man wrapped in bandages sitting in the seat. Well, he was almost sitting. Meaning his butt appeared to be in the seat, but Ron could still see the opposite door... right through him. What Ron could see made the apparition look like a mummy.

Ron screamed. He pushed his foot down on the brake, only he missed. Instead, the car lurched forward as the full weight of his leg came down on the accelerator. Technically, he should have been steering, but he was far too terrified to manage such activity. His eyes were still glued to the passenger seat, so he didn't even see the approaching guardrail. The metal barrier barely slowed the car down as it sped over the edge of the bridge. The engine roared as it flew into the night air. It was a long fall which lasted several seconds.

A second car approached the hole in the railing. But this one managed to stop. Both doors opened. In the driving rain, all anyone could see were two indistinct figures exiting the second vehicle.

Ervin Robert Howard sounded disappointed. "Well, I don't think we'll be able to get him to talk now."

The second figure only shrugged.

Howard turned to his partner, Phillip Howard Lovecraft. "You always drive slow or did you take lessons at an old lady school?"

"I took lessons." Lovecraft glanced over the railing. There was nothing to see. Even the bottom of the drop was obscured by the rain's mist. Somewhere below they could hear the rushing of the Merrimack River. "You think he could have told us what was going to happen at Edward Plunkett Middle School?"

"Why don't you climb down there and ask him."



There was a chill in the air. The scene was one of quiet panic. Uniformed policemen darted from between patrol cars and fire engines. The SWAT team was behind their large panel van, checking their weapons and tightening their bullet-proof vests. The deep cloud cover gave the sky a blanket of solid gray, which not a drop of direct sunlight could penetrate. Not a shadow could be seen on the sidewalk. Edward Plunkett Middle School sat like a stacked collection of bricks, brooding over the half-light scene. But there was no noise, no activity inside the school. The only sound came from a crying woman, sitting on the step of one of the Haverhill Massachusetts' fire trucks.

Two men silently approached. The first appeared to be dressed as a classic gumshoe detective, trench coat and everything. The back of his collar was even folded up. The only thing which was missing was the lit cigarette hanging over his five o'clock shadow. The man's gaunt face matched his thin, wiry frame. His fedora was wrapped with a black band. Its color marched the cloud-filled sky. He wore a grim, but deterministic face.

Walking by his side was a heavy-set man with a set of cheeks that looked like he'd swallowed a balloon. The double chin gave him a rather frog-like appearance. He was wearing a professional, if conservative looking, suit. He had a clean, pressed, white shirt and sported a dark crimson tie. He had two dark black eyebrows so thick they looked more like nesting caterpillars than eyebrows. They grew close to a rather impressive nose. But what seemed off was the bright white hat. It gave him the appearance of a 1930's gangster rather than a detective.

A uniformed policeman walked up to stand in their way. "You'll need to wait over there. The area is not secured."

"That's all right, officer. We're on the clock."

Officer Lewis looked intense. "Please stand over there, if you would." He pointed to a copse of trees sprouting up by one of the side streets.

The man in the gumshoe attire adjusted his hat. "It's OK. I'm Lovecraft, this is Howard, were with the FBI."

"How did you get here so fast?" Officer Lewis appeared troubled, "I didn't think the FBI had a local office."

"We don't," Lovecraft announced, "we were just in the neighborhood. Looking up a witness in Ward Hill."

"Let me take you over to Captain Cabell. He's the Haverhill PD chief. I'm sure he'd be happy to get any assistance you can offer." the officer directed them over to a balding man in a gold-braided service uniform. He looked up as they approached. "Sir, these two men are Lovecraft and Howard. They're with the FBI."

The older man shook their hands, shifting his cap anxiously from his right to his left hand. "Gentlemen. Branch James Cabell, I run things around here. What brings you out to our little town?"

"Lots of flashing lights," Howard replied with a West Texas drawl.

Lovecraft shot his partner a look. "Can you tell us what's going on."

The crying Edith Carter Harrison never gave the Police Chief a moment to respond. "I came to get my Johnny for a dentist appointment," she wailed, "but they are gone. They're all gone." She returned to a state on uncontrolled emotion, sobbing in grief.

"We think the perpetrators are holding them all captive in one of the classrooms," Cabell suggested.

Howard slapped Lovecraft across the chest. He wasn't too happy about it. Then Howard nodded towards the building. Without another word, the two walked casually toward the front door.

“Wait a minute,” Branch protested, “you can’t go in there. We’re not ready yet. State police are sending a backup unit. We’re waiting until they arrive.”

The two never even turned around. “Not a problem,” Howard responded, “We’re not with the state.”

Cabell called after them, peering his head around the side of a firetruck. “You’re going in unarmed?” he asked.

Howard gave his body a twist and slapped his hand against his breast pocket, smacking something hard. He was indicating he was packing.

“Irv, I wish you wouldn’t do that,” Lovecraft whispered so no one else could hear. “They’ll think you’re carrying a gun.”

“What?” Howard complained, “it’s my smartphone.” The two reached the door without any incident... other than the entire police force staring at them. Lovecraft opened the door and indicated that Howard should enter.

“I’ll let you go first,” Lovecraft announced, “since you’re packing the cellphone.”

“Thanks.”

The two entered like it was a Sunday picnic as the police continued to watch apprehensively. They stopped as the door closed behind them. “Quiet, isn’t it?” Lovecraft remarked.

“Yea, well I went to a Catholic school,” Howard explained, “The sisters didn’t like it if we talked and made a racket.”

“So, your school was this quiet?”

“Hell no,” Howard grinned, “You could always hear the crack of a ruler on some kids knuckles. It made me the man I am today.”

Lovecraft gave him a wry smile. “I believe it.”

“But if your asking me if this is spooky,” Howard retorted, “yea, it’s giving me the creeps.”

Lovecraft pointed over at an open door. It appeared to be the main office. The room seemed empty. The two approached cautiously, glancing around quickly. Howard pointed to a full coffee cup on the secretaries’ desk. Lovecraft reached over and put both his hands around the cup.

“Still warm?”

“Yea.”

Howard’s gruff voice now showed some signs of tension. “Ok, that definitely gives me the creeps. Something is undeniably wrong here.”

Lovecraft looked confused. “Why? There are no signs of a struggle.”

“You ever know an office secretary to leave a perfectly good cup of coffee on her desk?”

Now it was Lovecraft’s turn to look concerned. “Point taken.”

Howard sniffed the air. "You smell that?"

Lovecraft drew in a few deep drags with his nose. "Yea, brimstone. You think someone left a Bunsen Burner on in the bio lab?"

"Not unless the frogs were undead." Howard declared. "But we'd better check it out."

Returning to the main hall, the two hugged opposite sides like they were exposed ducks in a shooting gallery. They slowly crept down the hall. Lovecraft threw open the first door and jumped in. It was empty. All the seats were neatly arranged, and nothing was out of place. There was not a sign of disturbance. "That's just wrong."

Howard seemed bemused. "What?"

"This is a public school." Lovecraft sighed. "never seen one before this neat and tidy."

"Okay, now your starting to bother me." Howard reached down to his ankle and drew a small .38 caliber pistol from a concealed holster.

"I thought I told you not to bring that." Lovecraft sounded annoyed. "You said you left the hardware in the office."

"I lied."

The two gradually went back out into the hall. Lovecraft hugging one side, Howard with his back against the lockers on the other side, pistol aimed at the ceiling. They crept along, ducking into one classroom after another. They all appeared to be the same. Neat, tidy and undisturbed. It was scaring the hell out of Lovecraft.

At last, they came to an intersection. Lovecraft looked down the left side. Nothing unusual. Posters, lockers and closed doors.

"Pistttt," Howard muttered. He indicated an open door about halfway down the hall. Using hand signs, he motioned Lovecraft down the opposite side of the hall. Howard pointed at himself and then at Lovecraft. He held two fingers together and aimed them down the silent hallway.

Lovecraft shrugged.

With an angry look on his face, Howard repeated the two-fingered sign. When Lovecraft didn't respond, he simply waved him forward and started inching down the locker-filled hallway. The tension mounted as they silently crept toward the open door. From the far side, Lovecraft had the first view inside. He leaned his head forward, lifting one foot off the ground to get a better gander at the interior. He gave Howard a thumbs-up sign.

None the less, Howard jumped into the room, waving his sidearm threateningly. He scanned the room rapidly from side to side, making the pistol follow his gaze. Then he relaxed. The room was empty. "Hey Phil," he yelled at Lovecraft, "Take a look at this."

Lovecraft followed him into the room and saw the dark red stains on the floor. "What is that?"

Howard kneeled and put his fingers into the red goo. Bringing it back up to his lips, he licked the goeey fluid with his tongue.

“Irv, you’re disgusting,” Lovecraft protested, “Is that blood?”

Howard holstered his gun. “No, it’s red and blue tempera water-colors. Probably taken from the art room.”

Lovecraft sounded bewildered. “This isn’t the art room?”

“No,” Howard declared, scanning the walls. They were filled with images of ancient Egypt. Pyramids, temples, the Sphinx, all the usual stuff. “Looks like a history room to me.”

Lovecraft sucked in half a gallon of air. “Howard, look down.”

“What?” he sounded annoyed, “it’s just some middle-schoolers’ bad artwork.”

“No,” Lovecraft held his breath, “It’s a perfect rendering of the glyph for Anubis.”

“The Egyptian god of the dead?”

“The very same.”

There was a staleness in the air, the kind of musty smell found in an ossuary. You could almost hear an Egyptian flute in the distance. “Okay,” Howard grumbled, “now things are starting to get interesting.” In the corner, the eyes of a jackal-headed ebony statue of the god Anubis started to glow red. Lovecraft could even swear its head turned in their direction.

Their evaluation was cut short by the pounding of about sixty boots on the waxed tile floor. The two men practically jumped out of their skin. Ervin Howard had forgotten how loud a school floor could be. They ought to pass a bond issue to carpet the floor in places like this. The noise was thunderous after the dead silence which had filled the building up to this point.

The SWAT team was the first to charge into the room. Their rifles were pointed in an uncomfortable direction. Branch Cabell pushed his way passed the heavily armed team and approached the two detectives. “I talked to the Field office in Boston. The FBI had never heard of you two.”

“No, they wouldn’t have.”

Cabell crossed his arms. “You said you were with the FBI.”

“We are,” Lovecraft insisted, handing the chief a card.

The police chief glanced at the card, back up at Lovecraft, and then back at the card. “this says Phillip Howard Lovecraft, Fantastic Behavior Investigators... what the hell is that?”

Lovecraft gave him a droll glance. “Were paranormal investigators. See... Fantastic Behavior Investigators... FBI.”

Cabell’s face turned all shades of angry. He flustered and growled.

Howard stepped up. "Look around you. The place is lousy with Egyptian mystic symbols, strange archaic glyphs and all the kids are missing. Are you telling me you *don't* need a paranormal investigator?"

Another man came crashing into the room. In seconds the police had grabbed him. "Do you know where my kids are, Branch?"

"No, I don't" Branch Cabell's voice sounded about as frustrated as he was. He looked at the two officers holding the angry parent. "How did he get in here? Get him out of here."

He reached out and grabbed the doorway as the two policemen were attempting to remove him bodily. They didn't have their hearts, or their brawn, into it. They had no desire to cause further injury to an already grieving parent. "Don't throw out anyone who wants to help... unless you know where my kids are!" A policeman gave him a good yank and he lost his grip with his left hand. His right hand didn't last long after the left lost its grasp. "Find my kids, Branch." His voice trailed out into the hall.

Cabell pointed ominously at Lovecraft and Howard. "These two are next."

Howard pointed at the floor. "Don't mess up the artwork while you're dragging us out."

One of the policemen pointed at the red marks on the floor. "Is that blood?"

Howard snorted. "Relax, it's only a watercolor."

"How do you know?"

Cabell's voice still seemed strained. "How do you know it's paint? Did you tamper with evidence?"

Howard pointed at a table in the back of the room. A brush hanging out of an open jar, filled with the same color which graced the floor. Cabell did not seem amused. Two brawny looking SWAT guys picked up Howard by the elbows to carry him over the glyph. "Hold on guys. Before you go, what can you tell about these marks on the floor?"

Lovecraft took a step forward. "It the sign of the Egyptian god Anubis, the protector of graves."

"You two are sick." He turned to the SWAT team, "Get them out of here." His eyes narrowed. He took another glance at the floor. "Hold on. Why does it look like a bird spitting at a feather?"

Lovecraft gave the police chief an arrogant look. "Those are hieroglyphs. It's the way the Egyptian's wrote things down."

"I know what hieroglyphs are... it that really Anubis?"

"It's the Early Dynastic period glyph. They changed it later in the Old Kingdom."

"What's it doing on the floor?"

Lovecraft crossed his arms and stared back at the balding police chief. Cabell's eyes swung over the Howard, who hurriedly crossed his arms as well. He was starting to think they might be useful after all. "All right," Cabell sounded exasperated, "put him down."

“Look around the room,” Lovecraft pointed at the artwork hanging on the walls. In the end, his finger indicated the large dark jackal-headed statue in the corner. “well, off the top of my head, I’d say your history teacher has a fetish for Egyptian funeral rites.”

“The jackal’s head always freaks me out.” Cabell snapped the statue’s nose with his fingers.

Howard pushed the front brim of his hat up with a single finger. “In Predynastic Egypt, the dead were buried in shallow graves. Jackals, because they are scavengers, ate the flesh of uncovered human bodies.”

“You people *are* sick.”

Howard was nonplused. “It goes with the territory.”

Now it was Cabell’s turn to fold his arms over his chest. He guffawed. “So, you want to turn this into some spiritual, pop-parapsychology incident you can sell your mumbo-jumbo to some grieving parents. A real cash cow, huh?”

Howard shifted his weight from one foot to another. “Spiritualism is a crock and I don’t believe in ghosts.”

Lovecraft snickered and whispered, “Don’t ask him about the undead...”

“What?”

“Nothing,” Lovecraft recovered, “it’s not important.”

While Lovecraft and the Police Chief were arguing, Howard took the opportunity to slip behind the teacher’s desk. Sitting to one side was a computer monitor attached to a desktop PC on the floor next to the desk. Howard was staring at the screen.

“Hey, don’t touch that,” Cabell yelled, “that could be evidence.”

Howard straightened up and put his hands in his pockets. “You might want to look at it then.”

Lovecraft and Cabell joined Howard behind the teacher’s desk. There was a screensaver up. The screensaver was odd... not at all what anyone might expect. It was a poker hand. Only the back of one card could be seen, but the other four were the black aces and eights, spades and clubs.

“So?” Cabell had a confused grimace, “I don’t get the significance.”

“Aces and eights,” Howard explained, “of both black suits. The dead man’s hand. It’s what “Wild Bill” Hickok was holding when they shot him.”

Lovecraft grinned. “I’d say the instructor had a real fascination with death.” He instantly started scanning around the room, looking for something. His eyes crisscrossed the displays on the walls looking for anything else which didn’t fit the Egyptian theme.

Howard put his hands in his pockets. “Aren’t there only four letters in the Egyptian Glyph for Anubis?”

A look of recognition came over Lovecraft’s face. “You right. You think it might be the password?” They both glared at each other and shrugged their shoulders. “Come ahead, try it.”

“Don’t touch that keyboard,” Branch Cabell shouted, “It’s evidence.”

Fortunately, for both of them, the screen started to change before Howard’s finger even got to the keys. Up jumped a series of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Black letter-like symbols on a white background.

“Can you read it?” Cabell asked staring at the symbolic letters on the screen.

“Oh, yea,” Howard responded sarcastically, “Every West Texas high school teaches ancient Egyptian as a second language.”

As they looked at each other with more than a little anger, Lovecraft maneuvered behind them and started gazing at the screen. “It’s an address. 1138 Burroughs Avenue.”

A sign of recognition came over the police chief’s face. “The old Zelazny Dry Cleaners, corner of Burroughs and Vance.”

Lovecraft was already halfway to the door before anyone else had moved. On his way out, he turned to his partner. “I’ll get the car. you drive.”

Cabell was on the radio directing people to the address as Howard sprinted for the door.



Zelazny Dry Cleaners looked the part of an abandoned business, complete with real estate “for lease” signs on all the windows. It seemed as if it hadn’t been used or even visited for some time. Two of the SWAT team members held back Lovecraft and Howard. as two over members took station on either side of the door. Slowly, they reached down for the handle. It wasn’t locked. The two charged into the interior as if they were bulls in the streets of Pamplona. Two more agents followed.

Lovecraft, Howard, and Cabell waited impatiently. Finally, one of the SWAT team members exited the building, only to vomit on the sidewalk. Lovecraft and Howard pushed him out of the way and forced their way into the building. The floor was littered with twenty bodies all neatly arrayed in lines. About eighty “Ball” Mason jars were strewn about the room. Someone had been practicing surgery, and they hadn’t been particularly neat about it. Chief Cabell had to put a handkerchief over his face to block the smell. “What is this?”

“Egyptian funeral rites,” Lovecraft explained. “Someone’s been stuffing stomachs, intestines, lungs, and livers into containers, just not canopic jars.”

They could barely hear the chief’s next question from behind the handkerchief. “Why?”

Lovecraft filled him in. “Ever hear the term Master of Secrets and Remover of Organs? It’s just some of Anubis’ other names.”

The sounds of retching could still be heard from outside. “How many adult staff at Edward Plunkett Middle School?” Howard asked.

“Twenty-one,” Cabell replied.

“You see the history teacher?”

The police chief scanned the bodies, counting each one with his fingers. “No.”

Howard’s face didn’t change one jot. “I thought as much.”

“Hey,” one of the SWAT team pointed at a space on the floor, “What does this mean?”

Lovecraft took a small flashlight out of his pocket and lit up that section of the floor. This time the paint job had not been done in watercolors. Flies were already at work trying to rewrite the inscriptions. Cabell joined him. “What does it say.”

Peering closer, Lovecraft studied the symbols. “It looks like. No, no, wait a minute. That’s a spelling error.”

“Can we have the ‘CliftNotes’ version please?” Howard asked impatiently.

Lovecraft gave him a knowing glance. “It another address, 1948 Pratchett Street. Leave the cars. Meet me at 4 PM if you want to get the kids back.”

Cabell looked at his watch. “Damn, that’s in 12 minutes.”

“How far away is that?” Howard inquired.

“Eight blocks.”

Lovecraft and Howard made a beeline for the door and were soon jogging down the street. The SWAT team slowly fell behind. Heavy equipment bullet-proof vests did have a tendency to show one down after a few blocks. By the last block, even Lovecraft and Howard were short of breath. They arrived with a minute to spare. The address was a park. Nothing exciting only a patch of grass and a few old streetlights. Lovecraft bent over and put his hands on his knees. “Don’t you think it’s odd?”

“What?”

“No ransom demands.”

The wind picked up, sending a chill through the air. Cabell had finally caught up to them. He was attempting to catch his breath. They turned, hearing a crash behind them. On the sidewalk, apparently dropped from a second-floor window on a side street, was a canopic jar. In the remains sat a scroll.

Two additional policemen arrived and Cabell directed them into the building to check out the second floor. Lovecraft and Howard were already examining the glyphs on the scroll. “I wish I had my dictionaries with me.”

“You’re not the only one.”

“I told you you should have learned ancient Egyptian.”

“Yea, well, I’ll put that on my list for my spare time.”

“It’s another rendezvous. Someplace called the McCaffrey Cafe.”

Cabell could barely speak, he was so out of breath. “It six blocks away, on Rowling Boulevard.” he pointed down the street.

“Damn,” Lovecraft spat.

Howard’s face seemed let down “What now?”

“The note says we have four minutes.”

The two took off at a run. Wheezing and breathing hard the entire way. By this time, Cabell had falling out of the pursuit and was on the radio calling for a car. Lovecraft’s face was turning red. His lips were almost blue. McCaffrey Cafe had a large sinuous dragon wrapped around its sign. The lettering was Old English. The rest of the storefront was a standard plate-glass structure. Through the windows, Lovecraft could see tables and chairs.

They rushed through the doors. Several of the partons gave them odd glances. The rest of the occupants continued to sip their coffee, oblivious to the entry of the two detectives. Howard noticed the ceiling was covered in sheets, to make the dining area appear to be inside a large tent. It was also hiding a set of speakers. They were blaring a quiet Egyptian melody which somehow matched the establishment’s ambiance. “What do you think,” Howard puffed.

“I don’t know. Maybe we missed it.”

What had once been instrumental music, changed with the addition of a baritone chorus. They were singing in Egyptian! Lovecraft grabbed a napkin and pulling a pen from his coat started jotting down notes. “It says... it says... two blocks south. We have two minutes.”

“Right”

The two rushed off to the street and headed south. At least they hoped it was south, with the clouds obscuring the sun it was hard to tell. The area ahead was a T-intersection ending in a strip mall on the far side. Before the cross street, a gas station was on one side and bar to the right. They ran down the street. Fortunately, there was little traffic at this time of day. A light snow began to fall. Both Lovecraft and Howard could see their breath. The road smelled like oil and old asphalt. Even in the cold, you could still smell the odor of the last road resurfacing.

They got to the corner and looked around. Nothing. The only sound was the wind whistling through the telephone lines overhead. Two blocks down a bus turned the corner. It headed for the strip mall. It stopped right at the corner Lovecraft and Howard had only moments before had been running down. Howard slapped Lovecraft on the shoulder and pointed at the bus. There on the side was an advertisement placard for the movie “The Mummy.” The top of the ad was covered in hieroglyphs. They read, “get on this bus.”

The two jumped through the doorway as it opened. They scanned the interior of the bus. It was the standard New England passenger array. Two old ladies, a guy reading a newspaper and another woman armed with way too many shopping bags.

“Now what?” Howard asked. The door closed with a hiss and the gears ground as the bus lurched back into motion. Lovecraft and Howard danced between two feet to stay upright as the bus began a jerky acceleration.

“Beats me,” Lovecraft replied.



A group of mischievous children stood looking at a large glass ball. It was taller than they were. Although it looked clear, inside both Lovecraft and Howard could clearly be seen on the bus. Street and business signs were sailing past the windows. Snow was falling, so the entire scene seemed as if it was a snowglobe. The room as filled with Egyptian artifacts... although rather than being old and in a delicate condition, they seemed brand new. “How long do you think they can keep this up?” asked a rather tall boy.

A girl with long, straight blond hair looked bemused. “I don’t know, but it’s fun isn’t it?”

A third boy with sparkling eyes gave them both a wry smile. “What shall we do next?”