

Ignition Source

Short Horror Tale No.4

By
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Ignition Source

My head hurt.

I rolled over onto my stomach and cursed softly under my breath. My senses seemed to be swimming in confusion. My hearing absorbed a distant chaos of roaring, crashing and even what could have been screaming. I could taste blood in my mouth and something else too – oily crap from the shallow pool I had been lying in. A combination of darkness and flashes of light were captured by my eyesight; a vague recognition suggested that I was peering towards a large building some hundred yards away. My body took in the cold, wet of the concrete ground; the strange, slightly warm breeze; and, of course, that pounding ache in the back of my skull. Lastly, when I inhaled after swearing, I smelled a faint trace of smoke.

I used my left arm to lever my torso up a little and looked around some more. *Where was I?* The confused part of my brain thought I had fallen out of bed, but since my apartment is carpeted, that couldn't be true. I was at work. Which meant it was night – or had been when I hit the ground.

Recent memories trickled back as I withdrew fully from unconsciousness. It was Wednesday. As was usual for each weekday, I had reported in to work at the warehouse for 9 PM. Gideon's Warehouse was a massive building not far from the docks. By day, it was a bustling hive of activity – thousands of crates and boxes going in or out of storage every hour. Other than hazardous chemicals, the warehouse accommodated anything – from foodstuffs to auto-parts. The warehouse was split into three primary sections, running left-to-right: the left-hand 'Section 1' held perishable and time-sensitive goods; the middle 'Section 2' held the largest crates; the right-hand 'Section 3' held everything else, including the forklift truck storage area; and, yes, crates got mixed up and lost all the time. At night, the warehouse shut down – unless there was an urgent delivery or collection – and Bill McCaffery and myself arrived to watch over the place.

Bill and I were night watchmen of the lowest order. Worst possible pay. Hand-me-down uniforms. Armed with only a portable radio and a torch each. Our instructions in case of break-in were to call the police and attempt to intervene. Our personal agreed plan in such an event was to get the hell out and call the cops. Neither of us intended to die for the damned Gideon Warehouse. We'd already got one medal each and didn't want to try for any more.

At Five To Nine, I had checked-in with the warehouse foreman before he left. Jones, a fifty-year-old grizzly bear of a man, had insisted on taking me into Section 2. There, at the centre of the stacks, had been an immense square crate – over thirty feet across, reinforced by steel bands, marked 'SENSITIVE CONTENTS'. The labelling had made me frown even before Jones spoke. What exactly did that mean? If the contents were Fragile, you'd label the container 'Fragile'. If they were Hazardous in some way, you'd label according to the hazard (and they shouldn't be at Gideon's anyway).

"This box is very important," Jones had begun, in that gruff, superior tone of his. "Worth more than everything else in the warehouse put together. You understand?"

I had said "Sure", but had thought: *So what? It's crated and secure, in the warehouse, just like everything else. What could possibly happen to it?*

Maybe I shouldn't have thought that last question. Maybe that's when everything started to go wrong... And a one-of-a-kind apocalypse set course for Gideon's Warehouse.

* * *

My returning memories after watching Jones leave were vague. Not because of my head injury, but because my shift as night watchman was as mundane and routine as always. Fifteen minutes sitting on crates chatting to Bill – we didn't have an office and the foreman always locked his – then a slow meander to the front gates, which we locked up. Another fifteen minutes drinking coffee from our vacuum flasks, talking more shit about the good weather, football scores and how politicians should all be shot. The usual stuff.

Don't think that Bill and I are just lazy assholes. Well, okay, we're not the most hard-working of souls – but there's a certain logic to our behaviour. The perimeter of Gideon's warehouse is almost two miles in length. It isn't alarmed. There aren't any CCTV cameras anywhere. It's impossible for a pair of lowly paid watchmen to make the place secure. If we went round-and-round on constant patrol, intruders could still easily slip past us. Gideon's Warehouse Co. Ltd doesn't care about that – it employs us because the insurance says it has to as a bare minimum. So we, in turn, do the bare minimum too. We don't steal from the warehouse, though we easily could – like Jones does regularly

– and we do carry out our assigned duties. We're just not over-enthusiastic.

There are other reasons we don't over-do it. We're both war veterans: used by the system and then spat out when we were no longer capable of doing our duty. Bill lost a leg and part of his stomach to an IED four years ago. On cold nights, he can barely walk due to the arthritis in his hips and remaining leg. On his best night, a three year old kid could outrun him. He's twenty-nine, physically and mentally traumatised, and stuck in a minimum-wage job that he knows he's lucky to have. Sometimes he tells me that he wishes the IED had killed him, like it killed his friends. When life deals you those kind of cards, it's hard to get motivated in the middle of the night. And my own situation isn't far behind his.

As I stirred on the cold, wet ground, my last recollection was of going 'out back' of the warehouse. It had been after midnight and this was one of the routines we did. Bill would have been checking the interior perimeter of the building, I checked the uncovered enclosure behind the warehouse. That area was a dumping ground for old pallets, defunct forklift trucks and other assorted junk – scattered, stacked and in mounds – surrounded by a fifteen-foot high wire fence. Twice a night, one of us would roam 'out back' and examine the fence by torch for signs of damage. I hadn't found any evidence of a break-in – instead the evidence had found me.

I vary the route for my fence-checks to alleviate the boredom. This time, I had decided to walk right away from the warehouse to the back fence, then search left or right according to a coin-toss. I had only paced a hundred yards, almost halfway to the fence, when—

I'd heard a rustle of motion behind me and felt a crashing blow across the back of my head. Then I knew only blackness. Did the thug who hit me think you could knock out someone harmlessly that way, like in an old private eye story? Or did he just leave me to die on that concrete-paved dumping ground? *Son-of-a-bitch.*

When I finally managed to manoeuvre myself into a kneeling position, I found out just how much trouble I was in.

* * *

The hundred-foot-high warehouse was on fire.

Huge tentacles of flame bled upwards from halfway along the ridge of the roof and spilled down its rear-facing tiled slope in brilliant torrents. These rushing, writhing masses stood out glaringly against the blackness of the night, and made the warehouse look like a man-made volcano beginning to erupt. Below the roof-line was a row of large windows. The centremost windows had exploded outwards and were bleeding great tears of fire down the rear face of the warehouse. Since the walls of the warehouse were wood over a steel framework, fire was spreading outwards from the broken windows and flame-tears. At ground level, the door I had left through was open, and beyond this I could see a seething mass of fire. Smoke was oozing out of the door and drifting down from the burning walls – the slight breeze I had noticed was billowing the smoke towards me.

My ears took in the sounds as my eyes absorbed the visual details. The fire was roaring like some ravenous giant beast, and crackling, hissing and snapping intermittently. Random crunches of collapsing *things* added percussion to this horrible melody – no doubt a combination of walls, crates and other structures being destroyed. For a moment I also thought I heard some kind of bellowed shriek: this couldn't have been human, so what could it have been? *Most likely my imagination or my rattled brains mistaking some normal sound.* There were vague alarm-sounds too – the warble of the warehouse's automatic fire alarm and – unless I imagined it – emergency vehicle sirens.

Whether fire-trucks were here already or not, I feared it still wouldn't be long before the entire building was an inferno. There was so much fuel for a fire just from the thousands of crates and boxes, let alone their contents. If the fire was already huge enough to reach the roof high above Section 2, it was probably spreading sideways rapidly into Sections 1 and 3. In fact, I couldn't understand how a fire could have reached the roof, but not be showing in any of the windows in Sections 1 and 3. Then again, I was no fire expert. All I knew was that my being knocked out by an intruder and this fire were not coincidences. Surely what I saw was a case of arson.

I turned my mind to the major problem I now faced...

The fence which surrounded the 'out back' dumping ground was fixed to the sides of the building. There was no gate and, thanks to our minor diligence, no gaps in the fence which I knew of... And I, like my buddy Bill, was a purple-heart war veteran. Two years ago, my right arm had been torn up by machine-gun fire. There hadn't been enough of it left to save and I'd had most of the limb amputated. In exchange I had eventually received a dummy prosthetic, capable of... well, just hanging there and looking arm-like. I could lock the elbow into a bent position if necessary using my left

hand, and that was all. The stump I had below my shoulder wasn't capable of controlling a mechanical limb... So there was no way on Planet Earth that I was going to be able to climb the fifteen-foot fence, let alone get past the barb wire on top of it.

Could I count on a rescue – on a firefighter checking behind the building and cutting through the fence? Maybe not, since they would be fighting the blaze and looking for survivors inside the building. However, I could count on smoke seeping from the building and blanketing the dumping ground where I was. That gentle breeze was blowing it my way. Already a low, undulating carpet of poisonous vapour was spreading out from the middle of the back wall. If the smoke got thick enough out here, I could get killed by the fire without hardly getting warm... Alternatively, airborne embers might set fire to the flammable crap out here...

So either I was stuck out here hoping for a rescue that might not come, or I had to risk going through the warehouse.

I made it to my feet. On the way, I spotted my torch, broken on the pavement. I hoped my radio had fared better. I withdrew it and tried the button.

"Piece of junk." Not even a hiss came out of the thing as I tried a second and third time. I opened the battery compartment and jiggled the batteries – no luck. Even smacking the radio against the pavement failed to work. Further adjustments were above my technical skill level.

My eyesight roamed the fire-swathed structure of my workplace again. Part of me said *get in there before it gets worse*, another part wanted to procrastinate and avoid such a decision.

Yet there was Bill to think of. *Had whoever had knocked me out done the same to him? Was he lying helpless, waiting to get eaten-up by the fire?* I tried not to think that he could already be dead.

I was moving unsteadily even as the plan formed in my mind. I'd get in through the door on the right side of the rear wall, into Section 1. I wouldn't try to search for Bill – the place was just too damn big for me on my own. I'd get out, alert the fire crew and get them to find him.

"And what about the arsonist?" I asked aloud as I reached the door.

Long gone, I replied to myself. *For surely the bastard who had hit me, had set the fire and fled quickly. He wouldn't want to be caught or burnt alive...*

That sounded right. A case of arson fitted all the evidence I had.

If only things had been that simple.

End Of Sample

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