

The Little Men

Short Horror Tale No.10

By
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The Little Men

Everyone in the local area called the tiny town *Shitsville* rather than Shilsville. I was only there five minutes before I understood why.

Actually, the big, rusty sign on the outskirts of Shilsville gave me a pretty good indication on the way in. Someone had extended it with a piece of heavy duty plastic and edited it to offer a little social commentary:

Shitsville

Population: 520 poor doomed bastards.

No logging. No hunting.

No jobs. No money. No hope.

Plenty of poverty.

Lots of fucking beetles.

To be honest, I had never heard of the place before that morning. It had taken me a while to find it on a map – my Sat-Nav refused to believe the town existed – and three hours to drive there from the city. The reason for my journey? I'm the newest, least-experienced detective at the police station and so when a crappy job came up, it was passed straight to me.

Apparently, the solitary local cop in Shitsville – *sorry, Shilsville* – had contacted the nearest larger town around 2 AM asking for help. They had passed it on elsewhere, who in turn had passed it further, until it landed on my captain's desk and he threw it to me at seven o'clock. "Nice trip into the country, Dave. Get yourself some fresh air and help some old, clueless, hick cop."

Nice trip into the country, my ass, I had thought when I left. Yeah. Off to look at three dead bodies which scared the hell out of the local police. Without any further information. Practically a picnic.

Shilsville was thirty miles east from the nearest town, and the last twenty-five of those miles were of rutted dirt-road. The second half of the road took me through dense forest – arrays of fall colours flanked me, from dull brown to vivid scarlet, crisp yellows and deep purples. I think of myself as a tough guy, after eleven years on the force, but the sights and scents of the forest had me smiling like a little kid.

When I reached the outskirts of my destination, my smile ebbed away. This was a dead town. There might be five hundred people here, but the place itself was dead. Every building looked run-down. Two-thirds of the houses I passed were boarded-up and empty. Almost every business was closed. Litter and dry leaves flew across the cracked tarmac streets in the gusty wind. A few structures had collapsed-in upon themselves or showed signs of burning, and had been left to rot. There were even side-avenues sealed off due to road damage or sewer collapse.

What I didn't see were any people or animals. No lights in any windows to indicate habitation. The cars I passed were either dumped wrecks – some without tyres and having their windows smashed-in long ago – or were rusted junkers I wouldn't risk my life driving.

Signs pointed me towards the town centre, where I hoped to find the local police officer. I continued to travel through ghostly streets for another five minutes. Part of me wondered whether this was all some joke made up by the guys at my own station. *Send the newbie out to the ghost town, that'll give us all a laugh.*

Once I drew close to the centre of Shilsville, evidence of human life appeared. Some windows, despite being cracked, had been cleaned recently; washing hung on a line in a back garden; lawns had been mowed, rather than evolving into jungles; and figures behind windows glanced out at the strange car entering their territory.

There were a couple of shops, offering food and other goods. A library. And, finally, a battered official-looking building with a 1980's-styled police car sitting in front of it.

I came to a halt behind the car. As I got out, so did the driver from the other vehicle. We looked at each other, and I'm not sure either of us was pleased with what he saw.

The man was dressed in a rumpled police uniform that was without rank designation and was pulled taut around his ample waist. He looked old enough to be almost prehistoric. His weathered face reminded me of cracked ancient leather, and you couldn't have placed a fingertip in a space between the wrinkles and creases. Atop his head, his unruly mop of grey hair was streaked with pure white, and the heavy beard he wore could have got him a job playing Moses in a Ten Commandments movie. Small eyes peered out from amongst the wild hair and leathery skin – these were sharp, intelligent and a little belligerent. The town cop stood a few inches over six feet, but the

arthritic bow to his back made him seem a little shorter. He wore his badge on his breast pocket like a Wild West sheriff, and the revolver in his holster appeared big enough to take down a grizzly with one shot.

What he saw and glowered at was a much younger man of American Indian descent. I was thirty-three and had a gangly build despite being only average height. I prefer to think my face has finely-chiselled features; that, together with my dark skin, dark eyes and black hair makes my ancestry obvious to most people at a glance. On the other hand, I've always kept my hair cut short and since becoming a detective, I've worn hard-wearing suits, white shirts and plain ties. My badge is in a wallet and my own weapon is a standard-issue Glock.

A list of reasons why this old guy would hate me on sight ran through my mind. My age. My suit. My heritage. My car... *Hell, it could be my haircut!*

The man walked forward to meet me halfway. Each step was an awkward hobble – my guess about him having arthritis was now a certainty. To my surprise, he grinned broadly and extended a hand.

“Nick Guggenheim,” he offered. “You’re either the cop from the city or a very lost and disappointed tourist.”

I couldn’t help but laugh as I shook his hand. He had a steely grip.

“Dave Renfield. Here to help in any way I can.” I shrugged. “Though I must admit, all I know so far is ‘three bodies’. I tried phoning before I left and several times on the way—”

“Phone lines here went to shit years ago,” Nick explained, “and the cell towers were useless before that... Most of the time, we’re dead to incoming calls. To get a call out, you have to have our engineer coax the system – and then you don’t get much more than a minute.”

“Holy shit,” I exclaimed. “That’s pretty awful for a police department.”

He chuckled. “You mean me? I retired fifteen years ago. But I’m all Shilsville has when trouble rears its head, so I keep the old car in order and squeeze on the uniform if necessary.”

I couldn’t help but admire his dedication.

Nick shifted about and perched his ass on the trunk of his car.

“No one told you about Shilsville, did they?”

“No. All I know is what I’ve seen on the way in... The place has obviously seen better times.”

“Well, here’s the abridged version. Twenty years ago, we were a growing, prosperous town. Main business was forestry. There are huge forests around Shilsville and they were logged carefully. There was a mill for processing the wood; a paper plant for using the excess; and all kinds of businesses to support them. We even had a tourist centre...

“Then some asshole found a new strain of beetle. Just an average-looking bug, but one that interested the scientists. Seems it was a rare species. Suddenly, we have environmentalists crawling up our asses, all screaming about how we’re destroying the beetles’ natural habitat. Within a year, it’s been argued in court and all the logging is stopped. Gotta look after the goddamned beetles, you see. Screw the human beings. No foresting meant no pulp for paper, so the paper plant closed too. Left a town with nothing... People had sunk their whole lives into Shilsville and suddenly they couldn’t even sell up and move on – because who would buy their homes and move out here?

“We all got fucked-over so some freaking beetles could live in comfort.”

I tried to imagine the following years. Townsfolk leaving any way they could, abandoning their homes. Those who remained would be people who refused to leave and those who could find nowhere else to go. As the sign had said, *‘520 poor doomed bastards’*.

After a few moments of recollection, Nick concluded. “What exists now is a little surviving community. We help each other out. There are a few farmers, supplying enough to feed us. Some tech guys who try to keep things running. Couple of businesses. And people like me: too ornery to leave or die.”

He gave another grin. “Anyway, you’re not here for a history lesson. You’re here for the dead folks, ain’t you.”

Nick eased upright again and gestured for me to follow him on foot.

“Come take a look at this and tell me what you think. If you’ve seen this one before, I’ll be amazed.”

I didn’t say anything, but I was thinking that in the city, I’d seen pretty much everything.

I was wrong.

* * *

The three hundred yard journey turned Nick’s awkward gait into a heavy limp. We could have

driven the distance in just over a minute, but the old cop didn't want to give in to his discomfort – he was a fighter. On the way, he gave me a summary of the situation.

“Power in Shilsville is by several generators. To conserve fuel, we have one main refrigeration store in-town. It's where we keep all meat and other stuff, plus where everyone can get ice.”

“Who owns it?” I asked.

“No one. Or you could say, the Town owns it. Everyone comes in to take what they need and no more.”

“You're able to operate just on trust? That's pretty remarkable.”

“Folks here are good. We only survive by sticking together. Plus, I guess, if some damn fool did want to take extra frozen goods and stockpile them, they'd have nowhere to put them anyway.”

“Mmm.” I considered. “It's a lot different than back in the city. There, if you don't lock something up, it's gone in seconds.”

“Well, maybe Shilsville isn't so bad after all.”

He continued with his explanation after we turned a corner. “Martha came in late last night for some bacon to thaw for morning... and found the three stiff. It freaked her out and she was pounding on my door minutes later.”

We reached the back of a former butcher shop. It was an ugly, one-storey brick building. A rusty sign had been nailed beside the steel door: ‘FREEZER’.

“This butcher had the biggest meat locker. The front of the shop now houses a generator to keep the Freezer running.” Nick gestured to a standing pipe near the doorway. “That's clean drinking water. Anyone can get some and take it inside to make ice.”

I stepped forward and opened the door before Nick could. Well-oiled hinges compensated for the heavy weight of the door. A powerful draft of chilled air enveloped us, turning our breath to white vapour even before we crossed the threshold.

We stepped in and allowed the door to thud closed behind us. The chamber we entered measured about fifty feet wide by thirty deep, and it was well-lit from fluorescent strip-lighting in the ceiling. Cold air blasted in through overhead ducts. There were no hanging sides of meat; all the stock was cut into small pieces, wrapped, boxed and organised on rows of metal shelves. A second door in the far wall would let out into the original butcher shop. Everywhere was frosted. Smooth lumps of ice deformed the concrete floor here and there. Ice stalactites hung from above...

And in the open centre of the room, sat in a circle, were the three corpses.

They looked to be made more of ice than flesh. I wondered for a moment if they couldn't be elaborate sculptures. But no, they were human. Three people, all sat cross-legged and looking into their rough circle, covered in layers of ice which blurred and distorted their identities. Worse still, they were literally frozen to the floor – sitting in rounded masses of ice that made them immovable.

“Now,” Nick drawled, “I ain't no educated city-cop... But to me it looks like they each sat there, poured a bucket of water over their heads and waited to die.”

The three discarded buckets, now also frozen to the concrete, testified to his deduction.

I moved closer, too dumbfounded for words.

Nick added. “Now why can't people just go shoot themselves if they wanna quit this life? This... this is seriously screwed up.”

Slowly, I paced around the ice-encrusted trio. I almost slipped twice on the slick floor. My professionalism forced me to finally speak.

“Two men, one woman,” I observed. “They seem to be wearing the same type of clothing. Grey overalls and dark shoes. No watches or jewellery on any of them...” I eyed my companion: “Have you been able to identify them?”

“They ain't from Shilsville. I didn't recognise them, but I still checked in with everyone here.” He indicated a wind-up radio on his belt. “Took some time, but I'm certain.”

“I don't suppose they left a note..?”

“Nope. And I obviously couldn't look for ID's on them... without a chisel.”

I was looking at the frozen expressions of the dead now. Maybe they had thought freezing would be a quick, painless way to end their lives... It hadn't been. Their mouths were open in silent, endless screams. Even their eyes were wide open.

“Jesus, what a way to go,” I hissed.

“And why come here to do it?” Nick asked. “Heck, how did they even know to come here at all? We're not exactly in any holiday brochures.”

“It's gotta be...” I hesitated, wanting to be certain of my belief: “... some kind of cult thing. The circle, the dousing in water, this manner of death... It's ritualistic.”

“Maybe, but these folks had clearly never been to Shilsville before. So how did they plan this

‘ritual’ without knowing the town?”

My brow furrowed. “So it’s a suicide-method of convenience? They came into town at night, found access to your freezer-room and agreed to kill themselves this way?” I doubted that. “When was the last time someone was in here before Martha?”

“Just before nine o’clock... which puts these folks arriving and freezing themselves between nine and midnight.”

He was hugging himself in a vain effort to keep warm, and so, I realized, was I.

“Let’s get back outside,” I suggested.

I was happy to have the metal door clang shut and seal the frozen trio away from us.

“We need to get a doctor up here to formally pronounce,” I said. “And we need to examine the bodies. That means thawing them out.”

“Already in hand,” Nick replied. “Our local doctor – ‘Needles’ – should be here by now. And we have another freezer store being set up. This one’s already been raised from -40 to about -20... We’re due to start clearing the stuff out soon.”

“I take it you don’t have an ambulance in town...”

“Nor a morgue, nor anyone who could legally perform an autopsy.”

Nor could we phone for help from the next town.

“I’ll drive back to Thorstan and arrange everything. First, I’ll need to take photos of the scene. When I get back, I can take down formal statements from Martha, you and anyone else who has been involved.”

The radio on Nick’s belt chirped loudly. He snatched it loose, gave it a few winds to charge it further, and thumbed it on.

“Nick here,” he said simply.

Amid a hiss of static, a sharp male voice called back.

“It’s Mel. I’m down by the old bridge with Shaun. You’d better bring the city-cop with you, buddy. It’s a fucking bloodbath down here.”

The old cop eyed me.

“I hate your town,” I mumbled.

“We’re on our way,” Nick replied to Mel. “Radio the Doc, will you, and tell him to get himself over there too.”

End Of Sample

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