

THE SCRIMSHAW SKELETON

by

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PROLOGUE

Two things about my Grandpa Jim: he didn't have any legs and he wasn't really my grandfather.

Jim Shea was my great-grandmother's fourth husband. She'd buried the other three for various reasons, none of them sinister as far as anybody knew. Even so, you'd think Jim would have had sense enough to avoid a serious relationship with the woman. She may not have been a Black Widow killer, but any sane person could tell something was hinkey just by looking at her stats.

I don't think I ever knew exactly when they'd gotten married. Judging by the size of Jim's lapels in their wedding photos, it had to be sometime in the early 1950's. It was a City Hall ceremony. His cheap suit, her JC Penny dress, and their apparent lack of joy made Mr. and Mrs. Shea look more like downsized office workers than newlyweds; good thing grandma had the bouquet. I have no idea who took the picture.

Jim still had his legs at that point; he didn't start losing pieces until the late 1960's. By the time I was old enough to start making real sense of things, he was gone from the hips down and spent all his time in a hospital bed my dad and uncle had to dismantle just to get it into my grandparent's flat. That was 1977; Jim had been stewing in his own bitter juices for nearly a decade when I started talking to him.

He'd always been thin and by '77, he'd developed that worn-out look old people get when their bodies reach a certain point, made worse by my grandmother's bad cooking and an endless chain of roll-your-own cigarettes smoked in bed, but he didn't care. He figured he was already waist-deep in the grave; the rest couldn't follow fast enough.

To be honest, Jim Shea creeped the hell out of me. Not because he was a double-amputee; I got the feeling that something was wrong with him besides his health. Being twelve years old, I couldn't identify it. Later I understood this wrongness to be the complete failure of his life's one selfless act and his hopeless acceptance of the consequence.

My unease of being near him diminished as we talked, but the underlying feelings remained, hidden from him and my parents who thought it was nice I spent some time with the old man before he died.

I didn't want to talk to him at first. I wanted to watch the Cubs game.

Jim's room had the flat's only television, a large color portable my dad and uncle bought and shouldered onto the tall dresser opposite Jim's hospital bed. Unfortunately for me, the one place anybody could see the screen was from, or in a chair immediately next to, Jim's bed.

We'd driven into the city for our bi-weekly visit and Brown's Fried Chicken dinner with Grandma and Jim. The three ambulatory adults stayed in the kitchen near the coffee pot; I sat in the living room pretending to read comic books and straining to listen to the game, but voices from the other room cancelled out the announcers' call. At one point, a series of televised cheers and animated gibberish rose above the drone.

My desire to know what was going on eventually overrode my aversion. I convinced myself I would go to the kitchen and glance in his room, hopefully seeing the score along the way.

Jim caught me at the door. "eh, Franky. Don' just stand there, siddown."

"I was going to get a Coke."

"So get it and come back. I'll save you a seat."

Clearly the plan of an twelve-year old.

I loitered in the kitchen as long as feasible, dreading a return to the creepy old man's bedroom. When I got there, the place stank of cheap tobacco and old man farts reheated by the April sun greenhousing his room, but I was committed. I took the seat next to his bed.

Jim finished chaining another cigarette, pinched out the old one and flicked it at the TV. "Goddamn morons wait'll the seventh inning to blow a three-run lead. The Mets may suck but they're kicking our asses."

I kept my eyes glued to the set and willed myself not to gag on the air while the Cubs somehow retired the side. Commercials came on. I glanced everywhere around the room except at Jim and where his legs should have been, hoping to get my throat under control before he started a conversation.

“Looks like we won’t make it to Wrigley this year.”

I’d known this was coming; a feeble attempt at a joke by a bitter old man soliciting sympathy from one of the few people he hadn’t pissed-off yet. For years, he’d been saying that he was going to take me to a baseball game. I believe at one time he meant to, then he started losing toes, then half his foot. We still might have made it even after they took his first leg below the knee, but his refusal of prosthetic limbs was adamant. Fortunately, I didn’t take too long figuring out we would never go and was therefore never really disappointed.

I sat, waiting for his punch line, the mantra of Christians and Cubs fans everywhere. But like the Messiah or a northside Series title, the punch line never came.

“You thought I was going to say, ‘Wait ’til next year,’ didncha. Well,” he took a hard drag and let it out. “I don’t think there’ll be a next year, least not for me.”

This was new: an adult talking to me like an adult, not about school or sports or what I want for Christmas, but about death. And not just in some euphemistic abstract, but about his own death in real terms.

I looked Jim full in the face for the first time that day. This wasn’t a joke or some vague prediction.

“Your parents ever talk to you about death?”

I shook my head, no.

“What do you think it is? What happens when you die?”

I was twelve; there'd been no reason for me to give any serious thought to the meaning of life, let alone what happens when you die. I had no idea. The last time somebody died that our family knew, I was three. If my parents had told me then what death is, I didn't remember. I told him I didn't know.

“Well, think about it,” he said, “for next time,” and we went back to watching the game.

Two weeks later, we were back again. After the ritual hug and kiss for grandma, I went to Jim's room. This time it didn't smell so bad, the window was open, all his ashtrays were empty, his bed sheets and pajamas looked clean; ready for visitors. The Cubs didn't play until three, so Jim watched Moby Dick on “Family Classics.” During a commercial he said, “Well?”

I didn't know where to start. I'd had death-on-the-brain for two weeks: death, Death, dying, being dead, Jim dying and being dead, me, my parents, other people. I asked my parents about it and a couple of my friends and my Sunday School teacher; she told my parents so I got to talk to them about it twice. All of this gave me a good idea of what everybody else thought about death, but no ideas of my own.

I started telling Jim what other people told me. Talking it out helped. By the time I was done telling what they said, I'd decided that, “When you die, I think that's it. There's nothing else; you're just dead.”

Jim nodded. “What about Heaven?”

“My mom always says that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.”

“Where does that leave God? Never mind; we'll come back to that. So, when you die, do you know you're dead?”

“I don’t know.”

“Think there’s anything worse than being dead?”

I told him I didn’t know. Jim said I should think about that one a while and started watching the pre-game show.

He died before our next visit.

Grandma was the only one who wept; it’s hard to say if they were tears of grief or relief. Nobody else seemed particularly affected by it. Maybe it was because he’d been sick for so long that his friends and family had plenty of time to prepare themselves. Maybe it was because Jim had become such a miserable bastard that people were secretly glad he was gone so they didn’t have to keep feeling guilty for never visiting. Probably some of both.

I wasn’t sure how I felt about Jim’s death. All the thinking and talking I’d done over the previous weeks left me kind of cold to the whole thing. Jim was dead; sure it was sad that he had no more life, but there wasn’t anything to do about it and, to be honest, he was probably a lot happier in non-existence than he was propped-up in his bed waiting for it like a prisoner. I was neither happy nor sad. Because of my previous inquiries on death, my parents now kept asking me how I was feeling, did I want to talk about it, did I have any more questions. I know they worried about me, being under the mistaken impression that Jim and I had somehow formed a special bond in those last two visits. My dad was particularly insistent with his questions, like he thought I was holding back the things Jim and I really talked about, like he hoped Jim had told me a secret that my dad knew but didn’t want to have to tell me. It got to the point where I felt like telling

them to please just shut the fuck up. Instead, I assured them I was fine, even going so far as to appear cheerful despite the usual pre-teen angst ruling my life at the time.

Two months after we buried Jim, I got a call from his lawyer; could I come downtown to the office? It turned out to be the first of many trips there.

Zaan, Hogarth, Fleetwood & Pomerantz was your standard high-class practice decorated with serious paneling and business-sexy secretaries, one of who came out to escort me back to the senior partner's office. My mom got pissy that she had to wait in the reception area and barely settled down when informed Mr. Zaan would be with her shortly.

Even though his office was littered with golf crap, you could tell Enrico Zaan used to play basketball: tall and thin with huge hands and feet, but he never got in his own way, even when talking to somebody younger like me. He introduced himself and gave me a package that, according to Jim's instructions, were for my eyes only and should be examined privately. He showed me an inner office where I could read the contents undisturbed. Meanwhile, he'd meet with my mom and, if I had any questions, there was a phone in the room which rang to his secretary. Just let her know and she'd send him right in. Did I have any questions?

My first one should have been: Why would anybody who could afford this kind of representation spend the rest of his life on a hospital bed in a dumpy one-bedroom apartment? Jim obviously had some cash, why did he waste it on a lawyer? Being twelve, I instead asked for a Coke which was promptly delivered by yet another babe of the Bar.

The package was an old legal-sized accordion file overflowing with too much crap held in by wide rubber bands tic-tac-toed over the top and middle. Centered in the grid was an envelope with my name typed on it..

Frank,

I apologize for dying in the middle of our conversations. I would have liked to hear more of your thoughts on death before I went to find out about it first-hand, but I'm tired of living. I wanted to tell you some things in person, but you're a smart kid and will be able to figure out what this means. Your parents know all about it, so does Zaan; they'll help on anything you have trouble with.

As you get older, you'll hear people say, "There's never enough time." Bullshit. There's plenty of time. You've just got to not piss it away in front of the TV, or be drunk too often, or be propped up in a hospital bed with no fucking legs.

I had too much time. If I'd have been less of a coward and a little less Catholic, I would have killed myself in 1947. Instead I married Geraldine, your great-grandmother. So rather than a quick and painless death, I dragged it out over thirty years.

You said you think death is The End. The idea of a one-time existence places a heavy burden on the minds of those who believe it. As someone who devoutly believes in God and the eternal soul, I truly feel sorry for you and, for all our sakes, hope you are completely wrong.

The last time we talked, I asked if you thought there was anything worse than death. Many people would argue there's not. They are wrong. I'm 81 years old. I've fought in one war and reported on another and can tell you with perfect accuracy that

there are many things worse than death. However, very few of them come close to living under the curse of the Scrimshaw Skeleton.

I know that of which I write. Having spent years researching the Skeleton: it's legend and curse, and the people it's haunted for the last two hundred and twenty years, I became its foremost expert. A very narrow field of expertise, I'll admit, but there were reasons. There are always reasons; they become either excuses or epitaphs. Mine are now the latter.

The folder Zann will give you is only part of the collection, my favorite tales of the Scrimshaw Skeleton when I used to think they were just folklore and ghost stories.

There was a time when I believed, or wanted to believe, the curse could be broken; now I'm not so sure. Your great-grandmother and I tried it and failed to our lasting torment. Now, after all of this, I get to add our story to the others I uncovered and compiled over the years. I'd enjoy the irony if I wasn't too busy dying.

I promise my final thoughts will be a prayer, not for God to accept my tainted soul or for Him to keep Geraldine at peace, but that you, Frank, never have your story added to the folder because you found a way to redeem your family in the eyes of the Skeleton.

Sincerely,

James Thibideau Shea (1896 - 1977)