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About 3,000 words

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By S.W. Loren

Deep into the woods of Dunberry, Vermont, I took a right into Mr. Ratsbury's driveway. A yellow light streetlight illuminated the forest that expanded around me. The gravel road crunched beneath the wheels of my old car as it crawled a mile off the road, eventually leading me to the true entrance to the Ratsbury Mansion -- a circle drive paved in flat, gray stone bejeweled in its center by a marble fountain.

“Still there, son?”

“Yeah, dad. But I’ve got to let you go, I’m at Mr. Ratsbury’s.”

“Mr. Ratsbury’s? What on Earth are you doing there?”

The pizza. I grabbed the pepperoni pizza I had brought along. Stopping just above the pizza, my hand hovered alongside an open spiral notebook whereon I had scribbled three or four nonsensical lines of prose just after being told I’d be going back to Mr. Ratsbury’s. The lines meant nothing to me and the story for which they served as an opening would never be finished. I’d only written them so that I wouldn’t be lying when I responded, “A little,” when Mr. Ratsbury inevitably said, “I assume you’ve been busy writing, Martin?”

“He ordered a pizza,” I said.

“Hm. Strange.”

“Not really, Dad. Anyway, I gotta go. This is my last delivery.”

“Alright, son. Just remember, I love you.”

“I love you too, Dad.”

I approached the massive wooden doors in the center of the expansive front face of Ratsbury Mansion. Alvin Ratsbury was among the most celebrated working mystery authors in the country. I’d won a contest during my senior year of high school to have a story of mine read by Mr. Ratsbury – back when writing was a hobby rather than an ankle weight I couldn’t detach. Since then, Mr. Ratsbury and I had maintained something of a correspondence, which really consisted of him asking incessantly when my next story would be finished. He’d even gotten my

old high school writing teacher, Orin Lovecraft (not his given name), in on it. Orin, though his intentions were pure, had his own eccentricities.

I went inside. There, things grew strange quite quickly. Previous knowledge of the home told me I was standing in a cavernous foyer and that an extra wide, red-carpeted staircase rose up before me. But I did not see that. I saw nothing.

“Hello? Mr. Ratsbury?”

I listened closely but heard no response for some time. Then, there were footsteps approaching slowly from the second level of the home. As I remembered it, the staircase rose to a second-floor balcony and split diagonally into two hallways. The footsteps came from the right of the two halls and brought the faint, quivering glow of candlelight.

Soon, the footsteps grew to their nearest point and stopped. I could not mistake the feeling of fear rising within me. The darkness was suddenly alleviated as the foyer lights flipped on to reveal the source of the footsteps – a masked figure. The figure stood atop the second story balcony clutching a candlestick. It was the figure of someone rather short and stocky, wide at the shoulder and wider at the gut, who wore a draping black cloak and a mask imitating a man’s wrinkled grimace.

My attention had been so drawn to the appearance of this figure, the strangeness of it, that I had failed to notice the much ghastlier presence in the foyer. When it finally occurred to me, I nearly dropped the pizza. At the base of the staircase, sitting in leather armchair, was Mr. Ratsbury. Only he possessed none of his typical grace; Mr. Ratsbury was dead. He was all fixed up in a three-piece suit with his gray hair groomed back over his head and his black cane cradled

in his hand. A knife ruined the look, protruding from his chest and producing a small trail of blood which ran across the marble floor toward me.

“Hello, Matthew.” The Masked Figure said.

“What is this? Who are—”

“I’m afraid there’s little time for talking. As you see, Mr. Ratsbury is dead, murdered.”

The figure spoke in a grandiose manner with broad physical gestures and something artificial about his accent. It continued.

“It was I who killed your beloved Mr. Ratsbury, not one hour ago. In that, I will spare you a mystery. You will have your work cut out for you, do not fret. You, Matthew, will be given until sunrise to solve the mystery of my identity. If you fail, I have made provisions to ensure that authorities will have no choice but to believe you responsible for the murder of Mr. Ratsbury, for which you will doubtless live out the rest of your days in prison. Now, without further ado, I leave you with your task,” The Masked Figure said.

The darkness returned. Someone cleared their throat. Just as quickly, the lights were turned back on and I saw the Masked Figure making his way back toward the banister of the second-floor balcony. Now, slightly more focused, I saw the figure to be moving with noticeable difficulty.

“My apologies. You will find three clues to aid in figuring out who I am. The first clue awaits you in the study. And with that, I bid you farewell,” the Masked Figure said with a flurry of his cloak.

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It had taken me a moment to put aside the strangeness and terror of the situation in which I found myself. In those moments, I had frantically tried to find an immediate way out of my situation. The mere presence of Mr. Ratsbury's corpse drove me, not to mention the terrible mystery presented by the Masked Figure, drove me to try and push my way out of the home. But the door had been locked. Of course, my next thought was to phone the authorities myself, much like the Masked Figure had threatened to do, but I was morbidly amused to find that my phone had died, doubtless a symptom of the lengthy phone call my Dad had subjected me to on my drive up. Eventually, though, I'd done it. At some point I had found a candle of my own alongside a lighter and made my way up the staircase, down the right of the two halls, and stopped at the door of the study. This had been where Mr. Ratsbury and I first met, where he had first read what I considered the best of all my stories. Now it meant something entirely different.

My attempts at remaining as quiet as possible were immediately discarded, as from within the study came the deep-bellied barks of an angry dog. *Agatha*. Mr. Ratsbury's pit bull, who was, now, anything but pleased to see me. Poor thing must have had her nerves fried already. She charged at the door from within the study, which I barely closed in time to save myself.

Agatha knew me well enough so that under normal circumstances she might not be so aggressive, but tonight was not one of normalcy and Agatha was rightfully angry. Anyway, I began to reason how I might get into the study to find the first clue without becoming a midnight snack. *Midnight*. Mere hours to dawn, must hurry.

I pattered down the hall. My candlelight eventually came upon the door of a dumbwaiter. I would not fit. However, I knew then that I'd found the solution to my problem. Where there was a dumbwaiter there was invariably a kitchen. Mr. Ratsbury kitchen staff would have gone home for the evening, likely leaving Mr. Ratsbury's notorious favorite dinner food marinating in the fridge. If I were so lucky, I could go into the kitchen and find a large ribeye steak. Agatha, being a dog, would be so taken by it that she might devour the gift instead of me.

Correct in my thinking, I quickly had the solution to Agatha's bloodthirst in hand. I was careful in my reascent to the study so as not to arouse the suspicion of the mask man. Soon, I was back at the study door, turning the knob, pushing the door slowly open until Agatha took notice of me.

The dog charged. I held the steak out in front of me and saw her eyes shift from a state of murderous rage to one of carnivorous intrigue. I ran down the hall, Agatha in tow, until I'd come to the dumbwaiter, which I had left open. I tossed the meat inside. Agatha barreled toward me, turning on a dime and leaping headlong into the dumbwaiter where she bit into the meat immediately. Closing the door behind her, I sent the dumbwaiter on a one-way trip to the kitchen, where I'd left a bevy of other deliciously distracting items strewn about and made my way into the study.

The scene was comparatively serene. A fire broiled gently at one side of the room behind a wide, mahogany desk where a typewriter and too many papers lay freshly disturbed. The desk was opposite a wall of bookshelves on the other side of the room. The shelves rose from the floor to the ceiling. They burst at the seams with stories, sagged with the burden of adventure, and creaked at the weight of the crafted word.

Overwhelmed, I made my way to the old typewriter on Mr. Ratsbury's desk where a page hung halfway out of the platen. I pulled the page free to see that only a single word had been written on it. *Boots!* I glared at the page and racked my brain. Had the man in the mask written this? Or had it been Mr. Ratsbury? Surely not. Surely this was the clue. But what sort of clue was one word? *Boots...*

Suddenly, I had it. Or, I had something close to it. The word *Boots* in a room filled with books must mean only one thing. And it came back to me like a whirlwind from yesteryear. I ran over to the bookcase, ever conscious of the door where the masked man might appear at any moment. My fingers scanned the rows upon rows of titles until eventually it landed on a book of poems. I took the old thing from the shelf, knocked away its accumulated dust, and laid it onto the table. Soon, I had it open to the page where was displayed the poem entitled *Boots* by Rudyard Kipling. It was a repetitive, beautiful piece. I knew it well, all too well. I pulled the book up to closer to myself, prompting a previously unseen key to slide off the crease of the pages and clang against the floor. I grabbed it up quickly, turning it over in my hand.

The key was attached to a tag that read: *steam room*. I left the study, but *Boots* stayed with me. I wondered if there was something else, I should be connecting. If so, it evaded me.

I had only been to the steam room once in my many visits to Mr. Ratsbury's mansion. Still, my mind called up its location almost immediately. I wound my way through the thin halls of the mansion, past many rooms which were never used and other rooms which were used sparingly, until I found myself standing before a wooden door that read: *steam room*.

The hall where I stood was dark and quiet. This meant that there was no mistaking what I heard coming from within the steam room. There was a low, consistent hum. Someone was

inside. Someone was waiting for me. Was it the masked man? I was hit suddenly with an image of him fully dressed in his cloak and mask, all drenched from the environment.

I opened the steam room door, stepping into a small dressing room where a glass wall held the steam at bay. Standing just inside the room, I could see that someone was indeed waiting on me. There was a man amongst the steam, sitting in the farthest corner of the glass encasement. He was obscured by the steam, save his feet, which patted against in the floor in rhythm as he hummed. Against my better judgement, I entered the glass enclosure.

“That’s far enough,” He said, his voice heavily distorted into something inhuman.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Your next clue. You did figure out the other one, right?” He asked.

“Boots. It was boots, right? The poem,” I asked.

“Ding ding ding.”

“Alright then, the next clue?”

“Yes, of course.”

The man moved suddenly, apparently fumbling in a bag. He leaned forward, momentarily exposing a hint of his flesh, which was refracted in the steam that separated us. Still, he was only a blur, the suggestion of a man rather than the real thing.

“I know I’ve got it hear somewhere,” He said.

“Time is of the essence,” I said.

“Clue, clue, clue,” He said.

“Come on, man. I’ve gotta get— “

“Ah ha! Right here it is. Ok,” He cleared his throat,” Your next clue does not come without a cost. Answer this riddle and your next clue will be revealed.”

“I do not have time for— “

“Alright, here it is. Time for the riddle. Ready?”

I sighed.

“What has four legs in the morning, two legs in the evening, and three legs at night?”

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A man has four legs in the morning, when he crawls, two legs in the evening when he is grown, and three legs when he needs a cane to get around. I had heard it a thousand times. Anyway, it had unlocked my third and final clue, which led me to what the man in the steam had called, The Great Hall. The Great Hall was just a wide, long hall near the rear of the home which boasted numerous rare and expensive paintings.

I was still no closer to putting everything together, still no closer to figuring out who the man in the mask really was. I knew that he had a limp and that for some reason he had led me to the Boots poem, which in turn brought me to the steam room. From there, I would here to the Great Hall, where my only instruction was to “beware the man in red.” Now, though, I stood in the center of the Great Hall, noticing nothing amiss but a strange smell, a smell of something burnt.

I stood there a great while. My last glance outside had told me that dawn was drawing nearer by the minute and would be here in only a few hours. But this was the last of three clues.

If only I could find the man in red. I ran up and down the hall, examining each painting with a stiff eye, hoping to see someone or something adorned in red. Nothing. But I followed the smell of something burnt until I was standing in front of a painting entitled “Love Boat”. There, a man and a woman stood on the deck of a small sailboat, embracing. Here, the smell was unmistakable and after some time examining it, I took notice of a small chip at the paintings bottom right corner. It had been moved—quite hastily.

I took the painting down with haste and had to look no further to find the culprit behind the smell of something burnt. A hole had been carved behind the painting; a hole only large enough to hold a large dinner plate. On that plate lay a large, ribeye steak, burnt to a crisp. I took stock of everything I knew so far and it all suddenly came together. I turned the plate to read a small white flag embedded into the meat. It read: meet me in the study.

I took off toward the study, moving as quickly as I could. Now I knew the identity of the man in the mask. But I should have known it the moment I had seen him struggling to walk. Soon, I rounded the corner and nearly crashed into the study. Inside, with one hand propping him onto Mr. Ratsbury’s desk, stood the man in the mask, his back facing me.

“Orin!”

He laughed and turned to face me; his mask removed. Orin was my old teacher and friend of Mr. Ratsbury, the one who walked with a severe limp and had changed his name to Lovecraft on a whim. The one who had forced me to read *Boots* aloud in class repetitively until I knew it by heart. And the one who had become so sure of my future as a writer that he’d come to my home for dinner so that he could speak to my parents about my potential. It was at that dinner that my father, never a proud cook, had burnt Orin’s steak so badly that we’d ended up ordering

pizza instead. He was a strange man, but no murderer. Orin laughed when he saw my face, which must have been a sight.

“Why, Orin? Why did you kill him?” I asked.

“Oh relax, no one’s been killed,” A voice said from behind me.

I turned to face the speaker, who stood in the doorway, and nearly fainted. Mr. Ratsbury himself, standing with a presumably fake knife protruding from his chest and a smile on his face. He held something in his hand.

“What in the hell is going on here?”

“A trick, Matthew. Can’t you see? I know you’re a science fiction guy, but even you should have seen this one coming,” Mr. Ratsbury said.

“A trick for who’s sake? I thought you were dead,”

“For you, Matty,” Another voice said.

Someone else appeared in the doorway. My father, dressed in swim trunks and sandals with a towel wrapped around his shoulders.

“Your father was kind enough to let me know that you have been in a bit of a slump as of late, so I got in touch with Orin, and we nailed down this little plan lickity split. I figured there was no better way to get you up here now days,” Mr. Ratsbury said, his smile constant.

“It was the steak, wasn’t it?” Orin asked.

“And the limp, and Boots, good god that poem,” I said.

“Ha!” They all laughed.

“Now, let’s go over that manuscript again,” Mr. Ratsbury said, closing the study door.