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AP Language

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Foreclosure

The old car sputtered and shook as it pulled up to the curb. *About time I replaced this thing*, Frank thought to himself. He stepped out of the car and adjusted his navy blue inspector hat. A pallid house sat across from him, signs of disrepair visible in the cracked foundation and overgrown grass surrounding it. It was a dreary day. Heavy gray clouds loomed above, their presence made known by the distant rumble of thunder. Frank lit a cigarette as he looked towards the overcast sky.

“Crappy weather today, huh?” Charlie said as he stepped out from the car, slamming the door behind him. Frank turned to face his colleague.

“I suppose that’s what we get for living in Chicago,” he replied.

Charlie frowned. “Smoking’s a dirty habit, Frank.”

“Tell me something I don’t already know.”

Charlie shook his head. Frank liked Charlie. Sure, Charlie was often times incompetent and absent-minded, but he made for good company, and good company was something you needed when you inspect run-down homes for a living.

Frank nodded towards the house and gave his habitual rundown of the situation:

“The usual. Foreclosure.”

Charlie nodded.

Frank continued, “Neighbors said the owners were real kind. Old couple, they would always sit on their front porch and wave at everyone who passed by. After his wife died, though, the old man became more reclusive.”

“Must’ve been hard being that lonely,” Charlie added.

Frank nodded solemnly. “It was. Neighbors didn’t see much of him after that. He up and disappeared one night, no one ever saw him again. Everyone assumed he passed, house went into foreclosure, and now we’re here.”

“Well, that’s pretty depressing,” Charlie commented.

“It is what it is, I guess,” said Frank, “Anyway, let’s get to work.”

They walked to the house, its poor state becoming more apparent as they approached. Three creaky steps led to a wooden porch, on which two rocking chairs of swayed gently in the wind. Charlie knocked three times on the door. “No one’s home I guess,” Charlie said with a sly grin. Frank shook his head and reached for the door handle, and as he grasped it he noticed an unnatural chill in the metal. Frank tried turning it, but it resisted.

“Must be locked,” he stated. “Here, let me try,” Charlie said as he pushed Frank aside. The door moaned in protest before yielding. Charlie shot a smug look at Frank. “And you say I’m not useful.” Frank ignored his partner and stepped into the house. As he peered into the dim home, he saw a hunched shape dart across the floor into open door leading to the basement. Frank thought nothing of it; it was common for pests to occupy foreclosures. Both men flicked on their flashlights and began their sweep of the house.

Frank and Charlie approached the living room. A couch and lounge chair sat facing a television set. To the left was a red brick fireplace with framed pictures atop the mantle. “There’s some definite damage here,” Frank said, pointing to a crack in the adjacent wall. Charlie scribbled something down in his notepad. They made a loop of the main floor, Frank leading as Charlie followed.

As they made their way towards the basement, Charlie stopped and pointed his flashlight towards the fireplace. He motioned for Frank to follow. Charlie shined his light on the mantle of the fireplace. “Look here,” he urged. Frank looked at the dusty photos, though nothing seemed amiss; however, a second look revealed what Charlie was referring to. In each of the photos of the old couple, the wife’s face was scratched out.

“I don’t like this,” Charlie fretted. Frank turned.

“Whatever. It isn’t our job to get caught up in their personal lives,” he replied, taking a long drag from his cigarette. “Come on. We still have to inspect the basement.” The two men walked towards the basement door.

Darkness seemed to seep out of the basement door; all that could be seen was the dark silhouette of the doorframe, otherwise there was little else but darkness. Frank entered through the dark passage, Charlie hesitantly following. As Frank passed the threshold into the basement, his cigarette dimmed and went out. Frank grumbled and dug a lighter out of his pocket. He flicked the lighter one, two, three times, but it refused to ignite. He tossed the cigarette aside and continued down the staircase.

As they descended the staircase, both men noticed the air around them growing heavier and harder to breath. By the time they reached the bottom of the staircase, they found themselves short of breath. The basement was a small, damp room with bare concrete walls. The room was cold, but not in a normal sense. It was not only cold but also devoid of heat, as if the room had never been exposed to any warmth. Frank and Charlie felt the chill throughout their bodies, from their feet up. The men shined their flashlights and inspected the room.

“Despite some occasional pipe leakage, the basement seems to be in good shape,” Frank observed.

“Good. Now we can leave”

“I suppose so,” Frank said as he turned towards the staircase. He paused. “Wait a second, look here.” Underneath the staircase lay a small wooden hatch, its low form mostly obscured by boxes littered around it.

“I’m not going down there,” Charlie said, trepidation filling his voice.

“It’s our job. Come on.”

“No thanks. I’ll meet you by the car.”

Charlie turned around and went up the staircase. Frank sighed and shook his head. He opened the hatch and shined his flashlight in. Inexplicably, the flashlight revealed nothing of what lay inside. Frank was about to give up and leave, but he felt a sudden urge to enter the dark hole in the floor of the basement. He jumped down and landed on a dirt floor.

Frank noticed that his flashlight had gotten dimmer. He looked around and realized he was inside a dirt passage. What little light his flashlight produced was quickly swallowed by the dark ahead of him. Distant rumblings could be heard in the earth, and the faint sound of dripping water echoed through the tunnel. Suddenly, a muffled scream pierced through the air. Frank bolted back to the hatch, only to find it locked. Frank panicked and shook the hatch violently. In this fit of terror, he fumbled and dropped the flashlight, and it flickered off. He picked it back up and found that it was broken.

The darkness now was absolute. It imposed itself upon Frank, filling his sight and mind with sheer nothingness. Slowly, however, a searing urge arose in him, an urge to delve into the depths of the passage. Every rational thought was forcefully pushed from his mind; Frank, now driven by something beyond his control, walked forward into the passage.

Frank plodded onwards, his thoughts clouding in his head. All he knew what to do was to put one foot in front of the other, to plod onward in a slow, rhythmic shuffle. What seemed like hours passed, and Frank still continued. He lost all track of time. His feet blistered. Every step became agony, yet he persisted.

Eventually the path opened up into a small room, and Frank’s thoughts returned to him. He gasped sharply as a great weight suddenly lifted off of him. He became aware of the room in front of him. His eyes, now accustomed to the dark, discerned a blurry shape ahead of him. As he approached, the figure became clearer, and he could make out a silhouette of a sitting man. He slowed his pace, but he could not recognize the person from the back. When he finally looked at the man’s face, realization and then horror enveloped him.

Charlie sat in the chair, looking ahead. Hooks dug into the sides of his mouth, pulling his mouth into a clownish grin. His skin was now a cold, pale white, contrasted by the deep crimson seeping from his neck. His arms lay limp by his side.

Frank stared at his dead friend with his mouth agape. He turned aside and vomited on the ground, unable to stomach the macabre figure sitting in front of him. Hysteria bubbled to the surface, seizing his body in an awful shiver. All cohesive thought was evicted from his brain. “This can’t be happening, this can’t be happening,” he mumbled frantically as he clutched his legs in his arms and rocked back and forth. “Who did this?!” he shouted.

A fervent cackle erupted from the corner of the room. Terror filling his veins, he began to violently shake. His heart rate accelerated to a constant pounding that filled his ears. Frank’s eyes shot to the source of the noise.

Out of the darkness emerged a tall figure, its movement stiff and poorly coordinated. It slowly shuffled towards him. Frank backed up as fast as he could, yet it still gained on him. He froze. Frank’s eyes widened as he realized what it was.

The old man, or what remained, approached Frank, its emaciated figure stumbling ahead. Long since decomposed, the old man’s limbs barely more than bone, his skin rotted and riddled with open wounds. Cold blue eyes stared into Frank, their unnatural glow piercing through the darkness. Its face, much like Charlie’s, was pulled into a comical grin as if it were mocking death.

Suddenly, the once dead creature ceased its march towards Frank, spread its arms wide, and tilted its head back. A deafening wail escaped from the monster’s cracked lips. Immediately, in response to the call, Charlie’s corpse snapped back to life. His joints creaked in protest as he rose from the chair, and he turned towards Frank. Cold blue eyes accosted him. Charlie cocked his head to the side; however, no recognition flashed in Charlie’s eyes. He let out a pained groan and began his laborious hobble towards Frank.

“Charlie! It’s me, Frank! Your friend, don’t you remember?” Frank pleaded to his friend; yet, Charlie remained impassive and continued approaching. Tears were streaming down Frank’s face. He couldn’t bear to see his friend like this. Frank glanced around hastily, looking for an exit, but he found that he was at a dead end; the only way out was the way he came. Charlie was nearly upon him when Frank realized he had been standing still.

Frank sidestepped, turned, and ran into the corridor he came from. The old man’s frantic laughter echoed behind him. Frank sprinted away as fast as his legs could carry him. He glanced behind him and saw two pairs of icy blue eyes staring through the darkness. He continued his dead sprint, not relenting to the screaming pain in his chest. Eventually a crack of light spilling from the hatch became visible. Frank reached the hatch and found it unlocked. He swung it open and pulled himself out, and, without stopping to rest, ran up the stairs.

Now on the main floor, Frank turned and ran towards the door, but his progress was halted by another creature with the same characteristic icy eyes and evil grin of the others. It was the old woman, her skin riddled with sores and her blouse stained by the dried blood that emanated from her open throat. Frank’s heart was pounding, his breath escaping from his lungs in heaving gasps. The old woman began approaching Frank. He turned around and, not looking, ran right into a towering figure.

Charlie’s lifeless form loomed over Frank, staring into him with cold, accusing eyes. Frank was paralyzed in terror, trapped in between two monstrosities. Charlie lifted his hand and closed it around Frank’s throat. He lifted Frank up to eye level. Charlie’s devilish grin mocked Frank, his eyes staring into Frank’s. There was no escape.

The darkness around Frank filled his vision as he gasped for air. The cackle returned as the old man arose from the stairwell. Charlie’s grip tightened, fingers digging into Frank’s neck. The cackling intensified and filled his ears. Frank could see nothing but the cold eyes perpetually stabbing through the darkness that remained in his vision. His friend squeezed violently until Frank’s neck snapped. His kicking ceased.

Outside, a foreclosed sign sways gently in the wind.