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# SHARDS

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A Short Horror Story by Giuseppe Gillespie



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## 1: Shards

"So Detective Inspector Manford, would you care to give me your account of the first incident?"

Exhaling a torpid cloud of cigarette smoke, the detective inspector tapped his ash into a half-empty coffee cup provided as a courtesy for the preparation of the interview. With a slight charismatic tone he replied, "Sure thing Ms. Leibinz, as a reporter you're probably concerned with just the cold hard facts of the matter (of which we still don't have very much of I admit), although I'm afraid you will have to put up with my somewhat eccentric description of events. I feel it would be remiss if I treated this most unusual case as a garden variety series of arsonry and theft -" he paused for a moment, looking at his watch, "-I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not Detective Inspector, whenever you're ready," she replied, reaching over the table and starting the tape recorder.

"At once," came his smirking reply.

### ***A SOMEWHAT ECCENTRIC ACCOUNT OF DETECTIVE INSPECTOR MANFORD – BADGE NUMBER: 32768***

Shards. Shards fell flying from the remains of the shattered window as the looming cloaked figure stood motionlessly in front, arms steadily outstretched, unflinching from raining glass. He had smashed the front display of a traditional tailor store; I had been on my way home when the noise of the glass alerted me.

On this particular night, the streetlamps were in full hue as they threw heavy shades of amber heaving onto the street down below. Everything had that dazzling sheen as the languid light bounced and reflected off the cold concrete, glass, and steel. The cold wind of winter had permeated the air creating a stifling, almost inert ambience to it all.

Without so much as a shuffle the cloaked figure suddenly dashed into the darkness of the violated storefront and amidst the sounds of banging and crashing could be heard a horrible hollow clacking, as if a baton were repeatedly striking a wood block. I had been a couple of blocks down radioing it in before approaching, protocol you see, I grabbed my gun and cautiously made my way up the street, keeping my eyes trained on the area surrounding the building the figure had entered. I crept up the side of the building slowly, weapon drawn, stopping at a corner that provided cover should the vandal be armed and unfriendly.

I couldn't have been more than thirty feet away; the street was empty - a favourable condition when there is a chance of a shootout. It's the strangest thing, as he emerged (for I assumed it was a man due to stature although I couldn't make out distinct features during this time) he stopped for a moment, shoulders and neck slumped in posture, as if waiting for something. His skin had an unnatural hue similar to *ochre* and was covered in what appeared to be *wood grains*. One could imagine that after rummaging about, a

certain amount of exertion would be spent, but from what I could see either the figure was in exceptional physical condition requiring no noticeable respite, or he didn't breathe at all. I felt a horrible sensation as he stood there, the temperature seemed to drop and a certain chill ran down my spine.

I'd been around long enough to know what happens next; I'd shout "Police! On the ground now!" or something to that extent and there would be a moment of uncertainty as panic and adrenaline circulated between thoughts of quick getaways and going out with a bang in the mind of the fugitive. With my sidearm drawn on him I barked out these orders and he failed to comply, never a good sign. The figure remained motionless as I took a few steps forward, before I could finish my second reprimand he quickly darted away from me to the side, autonomously snatching a piece of glass jutting out of the shattered window, snapping it off with his momentum as he fled down a side alley.

I quickly gave chase after him. By the time I reached the alley entrance he gained several feet on me running with long-reaching arms outstretched either side, scraping the jagged makeshift shank against the brick-tile wall adjoining the side of the building. I can still hear the evil hiss it made as the ablated shard began to look more blade-like in appearance. The figure's top-half remained locked in place as he ran, his legs (at least what I could see under the cloak) were in reverse - double-jointed like the hind legs of a goat and gave off a horrible uneasy squeal like the screeching sting of a worn-out door hinge.

Now, I'm by no means the most athletic person on the force but I do keep in good cardiovascular condition for just such moments as this. I managed to keep him at a short distance ever more brief as I gained footing during the chase. At the end of the alley stood a towering gate, seeing that the cowed vandal showed no signs of stopping I deduced that he intended to scale it. I was a second or two behind him as he clutched to the gate, crudely jointed fingers interlocked with chain-links, making an awful racket as at once the gate took on all of his momentum.

Before he could make any attempt to climb I managed to grab his hood, tearing away a chunk of fabric revealing three dense unkempt clumps of mahogany-coloured hair adorned in a trident-like fashion on the top and sides (in place of the ears) of his head. With both hands I tried to wrench him from the gate but he remained unmovable. His rigid body appeared to lock into place, not budging an inch as I tried to subdue him.

His head turned to me and for a moment I was caught off guard. His neck had careened to an impossible angle - think of Linda Blair's famous pirouette from *The Exorcist*. Instantly I was met with the gaze of cold soulless eyeholes mottled with scratches that bore right through me; the corners of his mouth were marked by two vertical slits as you would see in a marionette doll, accompanied by deep corrugated cracks all across the face. His lips slid apart as if he (or rather I should say *it* at this point, that thing wasn't human, it couldn't be) wanted to scream, but no sound escaped the toothless gape that now separated each half of carved jaw.

During my surprise it whipped up an arm and plunged the sharpened glass into my right shoulder blade. Instantly I felt a sudden sharp bite as my shirt went from white to red; I stumbled a few steps back as the doll-like thing regained a stiff climbing posture. Falling down into a sitting position I took my gun in my left hand (I'm ambidextrous you see) and fired three shots at it, obliged to incline the shooting angle a little higher each time as it spider-crawled up the gate at a quick rate, limbs star-spread and still staring through me slack-jawed with a twisted face etched into its backwards-facing head. I could have sworn at least the first two shots hit it (this was later confirmed by ballistics as two bullets are unaccounted for and the third was found lodged in an adjacent wall) but they had no perceivable effect on the thing. The only thing I can remember before greying out is that the thing had made a heavy landing on the other side of the tall gate and had unnervingly contorted itself back into somewhat normal shape before darting out of view.

## 2: Embers

Tick tock. Manford stretched in place, exhaling out a broad sigh before lighting another cigarette.

"I suppose this is about the time the backup arrived and you were sent to the emergency room?"

"Must have been, I see you have read the *official* report?" A hint of contempt had coloured his voice at this point.

"It was provided to me by one of your colleagues Detective Inspector. They never did catch this doll-like figure you describe," she remarked while scribbling something in a notepad.

"Most of them don't believe it, I can't blame them though; proclivity for superstition is frowned upon in this specific vocation you see. It's easier to imagine (and print) that a disgruntled vandal with a penchant for costumes and makeup committed this act."

"That or maybe they don't appreciate your rather... *debonaire* method of," she hesitated here for a moment, "... description."

"Ha!" bellowed Manford slapping his knee, "That is one way of putting it."

"Mildly," she smirked, "but I guess after what's in the rest of the report they take it more seriously?"

"Indeed, nothing like some good old-fashioned arsonry to spur on an investigation, that will always grab the brass's attention."

"Then please continue with your recount of these events."

"But of course," came his smirking reply.

**A SUPPLEMENT TO THE 'OFFICIAL' REPORT FROM DETECTIVE INSPECTOR MANFORD**  
**- BADGE NUMBER: 32768**

Some weeks after the previous incident went by (for my shoulder had healed by then, got a nasty scar for my trouble) there had been no new development as to exactly what that thing was or why it vandalised the tailor's. No identifying evidence had been found at the scene and the only items unaccounted for from the store according to the owner were some cases of rather expensive black shoeshine - the brand with the horses on it, I forget the name.

I had kept my eyes and ears open for any incidents involving anything that resembled the human doll-thing I encountered that night. There was no sign of its reoccurrence, it felt like I had combed through a small forests' worth of paper sifting through various incident reports in the area. The case was about to turn cold when something caught my eye. We had been receiving noise complaints from residents living nearby the old construction yard just outside of town, it had been abandoned for a few years ever since the owner disappeared or was murdered by his wife - I can never remember the story. Up to this point the complaints had been mostly ignored, the site had become something of an urban legend and every so often we would get a call stating that apparitions could be seen floating about coupled with strange lights in the night. Now *unfortunately* my duties do not include *ghostbusting* so I never paid much attention to these, I figured it was most likely a bunch of adolescents unsatisfied with the *local* hangout spots, however, on this evening one particular report gave me cause to head down there myself. The complaint stated as follows:

*"I'd like to report some strange goings on around the old assembly lot just off the south circular road outside of town. I pass by that place on my walk home from work every evenin' and lately I've been hearin' some awful racket comin' from in there, sounds like someone is crankin' a knackered owl winch out of it. It's a horrible racket, like someone scraping knives an' forks against a bunch of dinner plates. So one night I decide I've had enough and I venture to go in and find out what's making all the noise, I figure it must've been a group of youngfellas acting the maggot with shite they found or sumthin'. Soon as I walk through the gate all goes quiet and I'm thinking to meself, 'right, someone's after seeing me, they'll probably all leg it now.' I took a few steps inside and I couldn't see anyone, that's when I started hearing these mad clicking sounds, like someone rattlin' a load of wooden wind chimes or sumthin'. First it was in one place then it would zip around to another. All of a sudden the sound got closer and I could spy something crawling towards me from the shadows. It looked like it was wearing some sort of rag and its arms and legs were stretched near their limit, it was like a giant spider or sumthin'. I decided to get the hell outta dodge and kept on running till I got home."*

After reading this complaint I immediately set out to investigate the construction yard myself. Speeding down the road I vividly remember *Top of the Pops* playing that upbeat *Waterloo* song by some Swedish group I had never heard of - a somewhat striking contrast to the darkness that was awaiting me at my destination.

Parking the car off of the languid backroad that led to the construction yard's entrance I grabbed a flashlight (for the place was pitch-black and the streetlights were few and far

between) and a wooden hatchet I had purchased sometime after the first encounter, I'd figured if bullets wouldn't work on the doll-like man, hacking it to splinters was the next best thing.

Pensively I made my way through the dark, L-shaped flashlight tucked into my overcoat pocket, gun and hatchet in hand. When I passed the entrance gate I was on high alert. I quickly scanned the area revealing it to be littered with rusted metal and debris; every so often something among the shadows rattled with the wind creating the sound of metal on metal. The entire place looked like it had been paid a visit by an uncoordinated wrecking crew hell-bent on pulverising it from existence. Towards the center of the barbed fence perimeter that surrounded the yard stood the main workshop long since in disarray, its concrete walls cracked and weathered by the venerable elements. On my approach I could make out a short smokestack protruding from the roof against the black night sky – most likely for releasing the fumes of a central furnace, as well as a room-scale arched window like one would see in a cathedral adorning a 2<sup>nd</sup> floor workshop. I tried the double front door and to my surprise discovered it was unlocked.

Stepping inside I was immediately assailed by a cloud of thick dust and the palpable stench of dead oil that had seemed to seep into every surface, I managed to keep from vomiting until my olfactory sense got used to it. Somewhere off in the distance a low rumble could be heard, instinctively I headed towards it. Navigating with my narrow cone of light vision I could see that I was in a sort of staging room. Illuminating only a painfully small amount of the room at any given time what I could see scattered about were broken down trollies, mildewed lumber slabs, and unrecognisable hand tools caked with a rust that would never escape, all blanketed in an ancient filth. As I waded through the dark I noticed the floor was buried in cables and oil stains, I almost broke my neck once or twice in my dim stroll to the end of the long room. I saw stairs, I proceeded to climb, the low rumbling getting louder now, I had reached the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor workshop I noticed from outside.

Inside, the arched window extended from floor to ceiling. It was wide enough to fit a marching band through and combined with the intruding moonlight it gave off a unique morose ambience. The rumbling was almost at a roar now making it hard to pinpoint its exact position within the room. Frantically I searched for its source among the workbenches and pneumatic machines and whatnot when all of a sudden something came crashing through the concrete wall behind me showering me with rubble and pebble sending me to the floor. Sparks flew from the blade of my hatchet as it came into contact with hardened cement. I turned around on my back - gun drawn - and after the dust settled my eyes met with a figure similar to the doll-like thing I encountered before but with some significant changes. This one was much larger in width but smaller in height compared to the somewhat tall, slender other one. It had the same darkly grained skin texture and had an eternal hunch in its stiff-jointed posture but there were coverings over its body, coverings of some metal-like plating. The bottom-half of its jaw was entirely made of this plating and its pot-bellied stomach had been smeared black with a sort of residue (thinking back on this now it must have been the stolen shoeshine). Its head was mangled much like the other, with a wild tuft of auburn hair and misshaped eyeholes – one was dainty and cracked around the edges, the other was wide and crudely cut.

Without waiting for an exchange of pleasantries I shot at the thing's head, the bullet ricocheted off of its metal chin and grazed the left side of my cheek, a vivid warning not to try that again, hatchet it would have to be. It stood there for a second, looking almost puzzled by the impact of the bullet before tilting its mangled head at me, its hollow eyes reminded me of a carved-out jack-o'-lantern as the inside of its skull appeared to have a dim wading glow emanating from deep within. I had been dragging myself away from the mannequin when with a loud click it snapped its jaws wide open; I could just make out some sort of protruding rod or tube coming from its throat when it started making a quiet suction noise. Within a few short seconds the noise had grown to the same magnitude as that roaring rumble I heard before and then stopped. In that moment everything seemed to come to a standstill and some primal instinct beckoned me to quickly manoeuvre away from whatever was about to come. I had gotten myself up into a crouching position when I heard a loud hiss – like the sound of a burst gas pipe – I managed to clumsily dive to the side just as the monstrosity belched out a plethora of white-hot blue flames at me - all *hell-broth boil and bubble*.

Instantly a pair of workbenches that were behind me went up in a blaze, it was spreading fast. I landed on my side (dropping my pistol in the process) and noticed that my coattail had been swathed in flames. Swiftly getting to my feet I nervously tore off my rather expensive overcoat and ungraciously flung it at my assailant before ducking behind the remains of the wall it had emerged from. I resolved to devise a plan for the situation I was in when the doll's bulky arm came smashing through the wall, clutching me by my shirt collar and hoisting my entire body-weight with ease over the remains of the crumbling concrete so that I was now face-to-face with horror.

The majority portion of the room was on fire at this point, smoke was rapidly filling the air and fragile support beams were crashing all around, the mannequin in its attempt to scorch me was willing to bring the entire building down. It held me above its head, contorting its throat towards me as its metal jaw snapped open. That dreadful hiss re-emerged and roared at me as I saw a flash of fire deep within the mannequin's throat tube. Clenching my hatchet in hand I brought it up high above my head – like some sort of madman in a *Hitchcock shower scene* – and brought it down hard into the damned thing's chest, black splinters assaulted me as I was dropped to the floor, missing a face-full of flame by a fraction of a second.

As soon as I hit the floor I started to roll, to create some distance between myself and that infernal thing. I saw it reach for the hatchet - it had lodged deep across the doll's shoulder to the base of its neck – and try to wrench it free, snapping off the handle in the process. I stumbled to my pistol when the doll-creature dislodged the splintered hatchet head from its neck and flung it toward me, missing by an inch and cracking the arched window behind me before bouncing off of the ground. It was getting hard to breathe and my vision was starting to blur from the acrid smoke fumes blackening the room, I had realised I was in quite a predicament and my thoughts had turned to quickly finding an escape route when the mannequin snapped its jaws at me again.

Wasting no time I spun around and started running towards the window, emptying the remainder of my bullets into it, fracturing the glass in a focal point before diving out



covering my head with my arms, a carpet of embers chasing after me. It wasn't a huge drop - couldn't have been more than a couple of meters - but it still hurt like hell as I landed on my side aching and bruised all over. I stumbled up and limped a few paces away clutching at my ribs. When I turned around I saw the entire building up in a smouldering blaze, the roof was caving in little by little and the entire yard seemed to stand out as a magnificent pyre against the backdrop of nightfall.

It was the early hours of the morning before they finally put out the fire, there was no trace of my mannequin attacker, no trace of anything but damp ashes and soot.

### 3: Ashes

Clicking the tape recorder off, Ms. Leibinz turned to Detective Inspector Manford and thanked him for his time, "That's quite the series of unfortu- sorry, regrettable events Detective Inspector."

"Not at all Ms. Leibinz, on the contrary I quite enjoy being nearly stabbed and burned to death by supernatural doll-people, adds some much-needed excitement to my life," came his smirking reply.

"Well at least it hasn't affected your sense of sarcasm," she rolled her eyes playfully, "Has there been any further developments as to what exactly these doll-like people are or what they want?"

"Not to my knowledge. It has been a week since the fire and there hasn't been any new sightings or similar events to that of the previous incidents. I am still having a hard time putting it all together myself -" he rose from his chair with the intent to leave, "- the only thing that really connect the two events is the construction yard incident report and the shoeshine, although whether the two mannequins are being controlled by someone, or-" here he hesitated for a moment, "-are *sentient* within themselves I couldn't say for certain."

"You really think these doll-beings could be... *sentient*?"

"I don't know what I think. But I do know that if the report that provoked me to investigate the construction yard were to be believed, it would mean that the first doll – the one that stabbed me – was present at the yard at a time and it had the black shoeshine. Couple that with the fire-breathing one's appearance and it's not too hard to imagine that one was helping the other, hell, for all I know one could have built the other right there in that yard – there was more than enough tools for it to do so."

He was halfway out the door when Leibinz pensively said, "Hmm, sentient grotesque dolls imitating the living, one creating another... Both trying to kill you."

Briefly turning back Manford replied, "Yeah, who knows, maybe they'll think of me as their *Geppetto* and affix a sort of twisted vengeance against me, although I doubt they'll have any intentions of rescuing me in the end. Goodnight Ms. Leibinz."

Manford left the interview room and headed down the station hall to his office, upon the frosted glass embedded within the top-half of the beige-coloured door 'DETECTIVE INSPECTOR' was etched in bold. The hour was late and apart from the soft scurrying of those officers who were begrudgingly working overtime the station was quiet. Inside his office he sat for a moment collecting his thoughts, then grabbing keys, coat, and hat, he switched off his desk lamp and made for the door. Before leaving he quickly scanned the office, noted that a few picture frames were crooked and that his case files and such documents were arranged in an unorderly fashion. Letting out a short sigh he thought to himself *I'll fix them tomorrow*.

Outside in the station carpark he ran into Sergeant Morley, an older gentleman with a weathered complexion and shrewd eyes who motioned to him saying, "Jaysus Manford, you've been in with yer one a right while now, no doubt dancin' around facts with yer *narration*," he smiled, emphasising the last word with air quotes.

"Ha-ha Morley me oul pal, ye know me so well," came Manford's smirking reply.

"Yeah well we can't all be wrapped up in exciting shenanigans such as you get up to. But who knows, maybe they'll make a movie about ye one day, be sure to give me a shout if they do," he nudged Manford with his elbow.

"I never pegged ye for much of an actor Morley, ye wouldn't have the cheekbones for it in anyways!" He jokingly said.

"Hehe go on ye bollix," Morley waved to Manford, "g'night."

Returning the Sergeant's goodbye Manford climbed inside his car and headed home, right into *the belly of the shark* as he would soon find out.

Tearing along the motorway on the way home, *Gilbert O'Sullivan's Alone Again (Naturally)* blasting from the radio, Manford hummed along, lit cigarette in hand. He lived in a modest house, two bathrooms, a master bedroom and a guestroom (not that he ever received any guests), a spacious kitchen, washroom, dining room, and a couple of storage rooms for various odds and ends. Manford had always found it to be adequate in terms of spacing especially considering he had no wife, no kids, no pets, and no houseplants, he never had the time for such luxuries and the job came before everything else.

Pulling into his driveway Manford switched off the car. He got out and ascended the steps leading to the front porch. The night air was still and the only sound that could be heard was the sound of his key unlocking the front door. Inside he hung up his coat and hat and wiped his feet on a striped door mat. The interior layout of the ground floor consisted of the stairway directly opposite the front door with a little alcove off the side leading to the downstairs bathroom. To the right of the stairway was the living room and a quaint storage closet, to the left was the dining room which further led into the kitchen.

He had repurposed the dining room into a work-from-home office, an unorganised mess of folders and documents littered the heavy oak table that stood in the center of the room but he knew exactly where everything was. Corkboard frames decorated the walls pinned with notes and papers relating to current cases, the largest of which contained various jottings and sketches on the mannequin beings he encountered. He glanced briefly at this while passing on his way into the kitchen.

Throwing his keys on the central marble-top island he walked to his coffee machine and flipped a switch. It was a relatively new automatic drip coffeemaker. He had seen the advertisement on TV starring Monroe's former baseball star husband, '*the fastest coffeemaker you can buy*' the ad stated, a useful tool for a workaholic such as Manford. As the coffee brewed he heard a sort of rattling coming from the room, thinking it was emanating from the coffeemaker he leaned in slightly turning his head to hear more clearly when a reflection in the window startled him.

Something had darted across the room behind him, a swift hand came down hard upon the coffeemaker shattering the glass coffee jug and dousing the side of Manford's face in boiling liquid. He screamed as he stumbled back, instinctively wiping at his face with one hand and reaching out to the countertop with the other, clutching some object in his grip. He forced his eyelids open and saw that he had grabbed a heavy ceramic coffee mug, when he turned to face his assailant he saw the same tall slender mannequin being he had encountered before leering back at him completely motionless as if locked in place. Its limbs were vilely contorted above its head in a mid-clawing motion when it suddenly dove forward, its backward-jointed legs screeching with friction.

Manford wildly swung the mug in the direction of the grotesque doll, it shattered against the front side of the thing's right temple, forging a massive fracture across its face and sending it sprawling to the tile floor. Manford clumsily receded past the dining room and made for the storage closet. Inside he tore a long bag from the top shelf and unzipped it to reveal a lever-action shotgun, an old Winchester 1901. He grasped for the shells, grabbing two before accidentally knocking the box to the ground, spreading the remaining shells across the floor. In the kitchen the living doll was now slithering over the central marble-topped island, Manford flinched as he heard his keys drop onto the tiled kitchen floor. He loaded the two shells into the gun before frantically reaching down for three more, loading them with a deft hand before approaching the interloper who was now halfway across the oak dining room table.

Manford took aim and prepared to shoot when with a roaring crash the fire-breathing brute he previously battled busted through the front door, sending shards of glass and fragments of wood pouring into the room, he shielded his eyes with his forearm and spun around to face it – the scar from the previous hatchet impact vividly visible across its neck and chest. The brawny doll prepared to unleash its belt of flame when Manford shot it point blank in its blackened stomach sending it fumbling backward, a gust of fumes gushed from the shotshell holes as it desperately tried clutching at the broken remains of the door which gave way as it went spiralling down the porch steps. Several of the shotgun pellets ricocheted off of the doll, grazing Manford and becoming lodged into the walls.

Manford twisted to face the encroaching slender doll when it skittered out in front of him, shoving him with an unnatural force, knocking the shotgun to the ground. It snapped its head toward him, spinning to an oblique angle before wrenching its jaws apart – an action Manford associated with it preparing to attack. Without hesitation he plunged his hand into its widened mouth getting a good tight grip of its lower jaw; the wretched thing clamped down on him, crushing one of his knuckles, and he let out a painful grunt as he managed to force it to its back. Placing his foot on what would equate to its upper chest and his other hand to its forehead he pushed down hard while wrenching in the opposite direction with the still jaw-clasped hand. At first spreading only minutely, the lower jaw began to buckle (if the mannequin had been human the veins in its neck would have blown out considerably at this point) and then snapped off, making a satisfying pop as it did. The maimed mannequin twisted in place, quickly grabbed Manford by the shirt collar and viciously flung him to the side smashing him against the stairway banister.

Rising up, the mannequin awkwardly clasped its jointed fingers around its wrist and savagely tore away its forearm, revealing a sharp scythe-like blade hidden beneath. Manford had just gotten to his feet before the mannequin dove at him bringing down the arm-blade with grace. Manford shrieked as the cold steel blade slashed through his flesh, sending a searing pain pulsing from the top of his shoulder down across his chest. He turned around involuntarily when again the cruel blade edge ripped through his flesh, this time slicing down the length of his back. Hot painful blood spurted from Manford's wounds as he collapsed forward, he felt pressure against his chest as he hit the floor, he had landed on the shotgun. Feebly taking hold of the Winchester he managed to roll onto his back, wincing in pain as the shifting disturbed his aching lacerations. He crudely took aim and fired at the fast-approaching mannequin in mid-lunge, the shotgun spread hitting it in the remaining half of its face propelling it backwards to the floor. Manford steadily got to his feet and shuffled to the twitching doll, he fired two more shots into its head, shattering to pieces its body slumped into a lifeless lump, limbs spread and palms facing upwards.

A loud thud came from the left; the burly mannequin had reappeared in the house and struck Manford a heavy blow into his side with a hardened fist, causing him to drop the shotgun and knocking him into the dining room. Manford painfully scrambled to the kitchen as his remorseless attacker spewed out a mouthful of flame setting the dining room in a blaze, the Detective Inspector's documents and furniture acting as adequate kindling in the process. Panicking as the flames spread rapidly, Manford looked around for anything he could use when something caught his eye. He clambered to the wall-mounted fire blanket, smearing it with blood as he quickly wrapped it around his head and shoulders. Lumbering towards him the mannequin effortlessly flipped the burning dining room table and opened its jaws preparing to cook Manford alive. He dashed towards the fire-spewing doll clutching the fire blanket around him, swerving as a belt of flames stuck to his left side blistering his arm and leg with scorching burns. As soon as he sprinted past he threw off the blanket and dived to the floor furiously patting at his burning flesh with a wheezing cough as smoke filled his lungs.

Manford writhed in place as the doll approached him. He clasped his hand on something wooden and cold as the mannequin bumbled close and quickly seized him still enflamed. Grabbing him by the neck the imposing being hoisted him up in front of its face and the sinister hissing begun as its throat tube fired up. Its dimly glowing jack o' lantern eyes seemed to gleam with excitement as they met with Manford's. Struggling for breath and hurting all over, Manford, with the last ounce of strength he had in him shoved the barrel of the Winchester down the thing's throat, chambered in the last shell and clenched his bloodied hand around the trigger. The shotshell pellets collided with the wretched doll's internal stomach fuel causing a localised explosion that left it a smouldering pile of plating and splinters and sent Manford soaring to the porch steps laden with shrapnel.

With great difficulty he slowly crawled away from the house – using only his arms as he no longer had any feeling in his legs. He was far enough away for the raging fire to be of no danger to him when he stopped moving.

Sometime later a police car was passing along the road adjacent to Manford's house, the calming blaze being a cause for concern it turned and came down the path. It was Sergeant Morley. He got out of the car and rushed over to where Manford lay and knelt down beside him saying, "Jaysus Manford! What the hell happened to ya? You're cut up and burnt all over," he carefully rolled Manford to his side, his shrewd eyes widening upon seeing the extent of injury suffered.

Manford's charred body bled heavily, his life draining from him, with one final effort he managed to spit out something unintelligible through the blood and saliva, this of course was in the form of his smirking reply.

Morley sat there cradling Manford's corpse, helpless as his friend's former house was reduced to ashes. Off in the distance a faint unnerving rattling could be heard...