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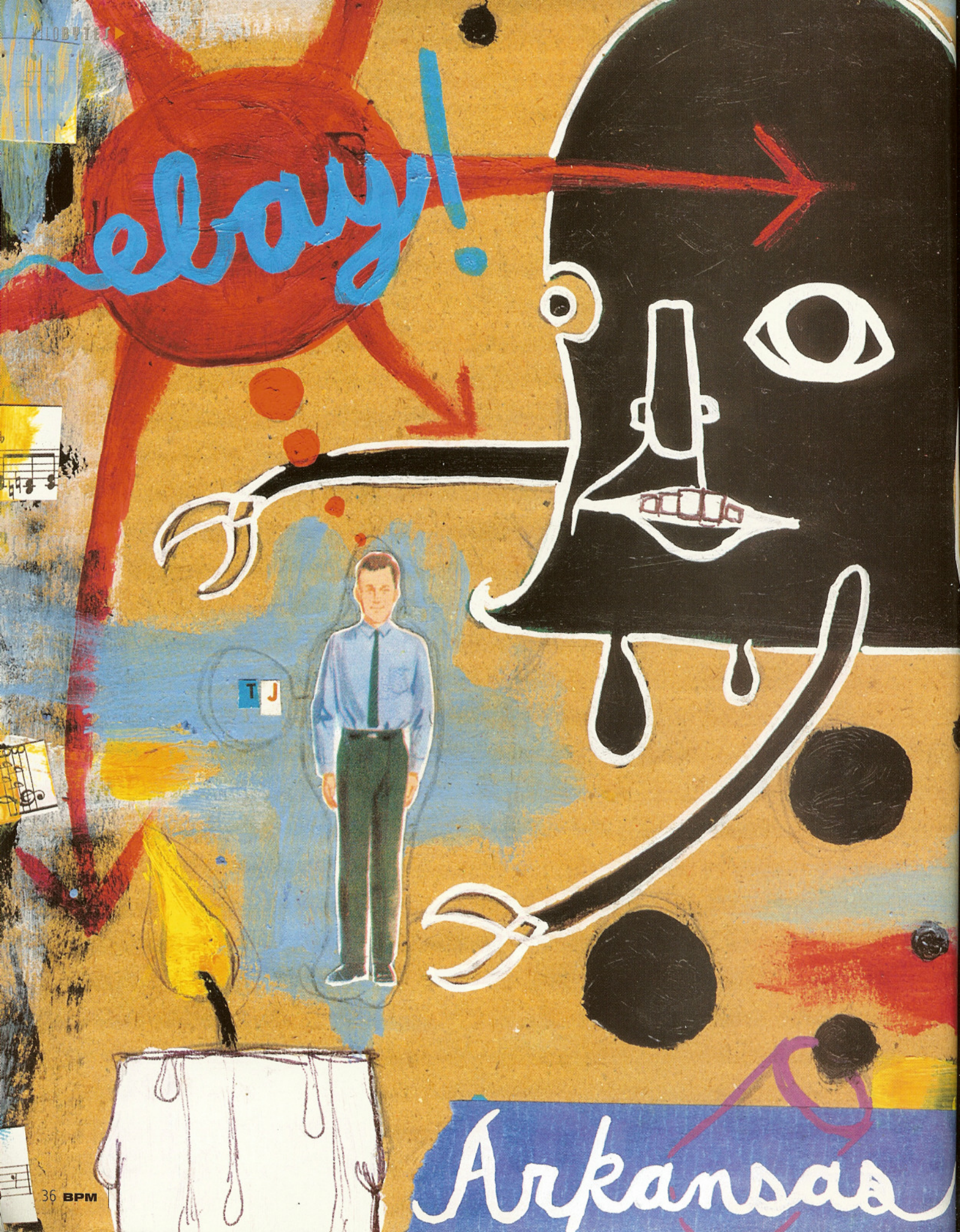
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GHOST IN A JAR?

It's "The Black Thing," a soulless thing, a bodiless thing, a scary thing. The cost? More than most are willing to pay. **BY MARK VON PFEIFFER AKA MR. MONEY**

[READER INSTRUCTION: Narration is to be read in the voice of "America's Most Wanted's" John Walsh. Described situations are to be visualized in the style of a "Dramatic Re-enactment.")

TWENTY YEARS AGO, Tommy Johnson, now 52, was an adrenaline junkie. Restless and pensive by nature "TJ," as his friends called him, was a daredevil fisherman who loved to hunt animals—rabbits, deer, and squirrels were his favorites. His lust for the outdoors was equaled only by his consuming passion for music, taking whatever he could get...wherever he could get it, "Religious music, some country and western, old timey rock and roll, even classical... Mozart sometimes." Making his home in the heart of Arkansas, he and his wife straddled the blistering line of high-speed living—where the rubber meets the road, and where the past and the future collide...often with devastating results.

Tommy worked the 3 to 11PM shift as an elementary school janitor, reserving the early morning hours for his "walks on the wild side"—until one day, his curiosity bought him more than he'd bargained for. His head thick with stories of buried treasures gleaned from his Metal Detector magazines, Tommy loaded his equipment into the car and drove 45 miles south from his house near Little Rock to an abandoned cemetery he'd been told about by a close friend...

TJ: I got a beep right off. It was an old lockbox with two jars and a crumbling journal in it. I thought I'd found a cache of gold coins, but when I pulled the first jar out it slipped, fell, and

broke...and a black mist come out of it. There was a little candle inside the other jar and symbols written on the outside. I dusted it off, put it in my backpack and went about metal detecting.

It was what happened that night that changed Tommy forever...

TJ: I was almost asleep when I heard something. I looked up and the black mist from earlier materialized in my doorway—"The Black Thing" is all I know what to call it. Well, it got on top of me, I was trying to struggle and holler for my wife. It pushed me through the bed, through the floor and then down into some type of pit. It felt like hell, is what it felt like. Then, for whatever reason I was back in my bed and I jumped up, hollering at my wife, "Why didn't you help me?" She didn't know what I was talking about.

The spirit had stowed away in TJ's car for a joyride...one that would last over two decades. The Johnsons were the only passengers on a runaway train...bound for Hell. After Tommy began "speaking in tongues" in his sleep, his wife—whose nerves had been jangled into a state of flaccid desperation, moved into the apartment they had added on to their garage. An utter meltdown seemed inevitable, until a dear friend took TJ on a pilgrimage to the Louisiana border for a visit to the mystic Tommy would refer to only as "The Voodoo Lady." It was her intimate knowledge of the dark arts that would eventually put TJ on the path to freedom...

TJ: The thing the old "Voodoo Lady"

told me I needed to do was a three-part deal. One, in order to pacify "The Black Thing" a large sum of money needed to change hands—for the ownership of the intact jar, and its trapped spirit. Two, there was something I was supposed to write down and give to the person who bought it from me. And finally, they were supposed to say it to me. But since it didn't sell I'm not going to tell what that is.

Tommy had gone to the online auction site eBay to secure the "large sum." But with a body of bidders made of equal parts zealous occultists and queering fuckarounds, the going price for TJ's "Ghost in a Jar" cranked maddeningly higher, until it reached upwards of a million dollars. Separating the real bids from the bogus proved a full time job—something that between his work at the school and stealing a few precious hours of sleep, Tommy just didn't have time for...

TJ: When Ebay finally took it down, over 875,000 people had visited the page. And the guy who supposedly bought it for \$50,000 was just "playing around." Gary the Gimp Horn was his screen name. He's been removed from eBay.

Recently, TJ has fallen even further into the terminal world of intrigue and mystery. Since the auction he's become the recipient of faceless midnight visitors who drive slowly down his dead end-street, only to turn away without a word...and the sinister phone calls with only a faint crackling of hypnotic static on the other end...

Following his failed auction and a crossfire hurricane of both support and ridicule, Tommy has begun a new

auction—a startlingly convincing fifteen-second film of the entity, shot per suggestion of "The Voodoo Lady" herself. TJ claims all of this activity has whipped "The Black Thing" into a pitched frenzy of activity...activity that has made the introspective Tommy cast about for any kind of answer.

TJ: A couple of days before the auction ended, I got up to go to the can on a dark, cloudy night. Right where the bedroom door should be stood "The Black Thing." It came toward me and in an instant I was in a different place; a dark, dank-smelling room, or cell. I came to where I thought the door would be and there was just a stone wall. I started feeling my way around it, just like making my way in a big circle. Finally I stumbled back into my own bedroom.

Is Tommy Johnson a maverick shyster justly thwarted by the rabid staghounds of a cynical eBay circuit, or a simple, honest man in the grips of a supernatural siege under which he is doomed to perdition? Is "The Black Thing" interested only in freeing its companion in the still intact jar? Or, through the brief, otherworldly journeys, is it offering Tommy and his kin keys—hints to the secrets of a larger puzzle? These are questions only he can answer...questions that continue to echo, grim and persistent into the vast, stretching stillness of the rural south. If one would judge by his mannerisms, Tommy Johnson seems a man who had at one time been completely frozen with terror...and has never completely thawed.