Bobby in Uniform

Vasileios Kalampakas

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Written hastily, without a plan, in less than three weeks.

This is a work of fiction, parody, humor and satire: I meant the good people of Memphis no ill.

Contents

Ever since I was about five years old, about the time when most kids show each other their God-given implement of peeing, their gender awareness a new and exciting thing to share with the world at large, I saw things. Strange, mysterious, butt-ugly and downright scary things that mostly lacked a body in any sense of the word.

I once told my teacher, Mrs. Resenbaum that some scary looking ghost of a one-eyed person who might've been a pirate when alive was ogling her in a very sexual though quite incorporeal way. Of course, I was only twelve at the time so I just said, "Lookit! There's an old dead man with a beard full o' lice wants to

grab your titties, Mrs. Resenbaum! He means bad, I tell ya!"

As the natural course of events ran through, I got spanked and she got raped by the ghost of a black (what they called negro back then) miner. Or that's what the papers in Perry County Ohio reported that she insisted telling the good doctors at the Ridges even while they fastened her straightjacket.

Call them what you will, ghosts, spirits, demons; any name is just as good cause it sometimes just doesn't do these creatures justice. Whatever you want to call them, I had the dubious privilege of having some sort of affinity with the otherworld, the afterlife, the world of the spirits if you will. Some would call it a gift, others would call it a curse. I certainly had no name for it. It was as natural to me as sight and the fact that old people smelled weird.

Around where I grew up though, Rendville, Ohio, seeing dead things meant that I was just a boy with a wild imagination that needed some good ol' spanking with a wet plank, even if I was an only child. That's what I mostly got every once so often I couldn't keep my mouth shut 'cause "I just

saw a mammoth's ghost burn down a zombie dinosaur with a blue slimy kind of fire, pops!"

My father was a miner, my uncle too; grandpa as well. Almost everyone in Rendville was a miner, except for the whores and the bartenders. And Mr. Calliburton, the grocer. At an early age I realised being a miner was just as natural as the ghosts and the other weird stuff that I alone could see and talk to. I began working at the mines before I finished school, because the times were hard and bread, lard and meat didn't come free and something about Roosevelt being such 'a god-damn two-nickel sunava-', which is as far as I ever heard my father swear.

Once I got into the mining business, I got the hang of it really fast. All you had to do was keep digging and chipping stone and blowing up new tunnels all day long, six days a week, twelve hours a day. There was a lot of soot involved and most of the days I missed the sun, but it felt exciting. It wasn't just my hard-working, God-fearing, swamp-mouthed colleagues in the coal extraction business that helped me ease into the job; it was the sheer number of dead things that would talk to me and try to claw and possess their way past me,

the number of heads and assorted tails and life-threatening incorporeal body parts growing the deeper one delved into the bosom of the earth.

It was just as well though because I had seen the shittiest, weirdest, most awful, God-forlorn things from the other side that I just felt like I couldn't be surprised anymore. It came handy, really. When one of them tried to possess a man, I gave it the stare and it just felt so bad about it the next day it got me candy (well, maggots, but that's candy for undead things and their ilk). When they plotted about haunting the mines so they could turn them into a mini-golf club, I read them their rites, God bless my mother's soul, and that made them shrill and shriek and go back to playing poker with the dwarves really deep down (who, I might add, are really not as hairy as people think they are).

Yup, it was thanks to my mother that I could turn most evil spirits away with a prayer. Or a nod, a flick of the wrist and sometimes just breathing their way. She took me to church, insisted that I become an altar boy, and each andevery time I swore she made sure I had my share of pepper and read

the Good Book aloud. And the Prayers. And the writings of Thomas Aquinas. And the latest Opus Dei journal. And every kind of book labeled Religion at the school library. She used to say that "only God can save your soul, Robert Clovis Barhoe, you wicked devil's child!". I still can't believe how literally right she was without ever knowing it. I also miss her raspberry pie.

That reading thing kind of grew on me and on Sundays, right after church, I would take my bike to New Lexington and get on the bus to Cambridge, which sadly wasn't all that active, paranormally speaking. As a lonely poltergeist put it, 'Cambridge? Deader than a dodo, deader than me'. Once I realised it wasn't the prestigious site of knowledge and lore famous around the world that I had hoped for, I settled for the homely library of St. Benedict's School, whose sole staff member at the time, a centenarian by the name of Mr. Galsworthy, was kind enough to leave at my disposal since the library was mostly empty on Sundays. The old man, God bless his soul, snored heavily. He died peacefully on the job too having fallen asleep, much like every day.

Life went on uneventfully for some time. I worked in the mines and kept them from being haunted with very little effort. Sometimes I helped the occasional exorcist or vampire hunter that seemed to be at a loss around our parts (you won't believe how amateurish these kind of people are; they think vampires, of all paranormal creatures, are nocturnal). And in between, I discovered old and exotic tomes at the library, some containing surprisingly lewd pictures and others boring me to death with their Latin. I also picked up a couple of languages on the way: not only Latin, which seemed essential at first, but useful stuff nonetheless like Tauric and Cimmeric. I generally had a blast back in those days, eating Sundaes on Sundays and exchanging thoughts and ideas on the medicinal and religious usage of hallucinogens from first-hand accounts of long-deceased native indians, i.e. their ghosts.

All that changed dramatically when we entered the war in '41. I know that the war started in '39, but nobody really gave a rat's ass about what happened in Europe (largely, nobody does even today). When the Japs hit us, the nation was shocked. Quite

frankly, I wasn't because a leprechaun who had invested heavily in rubber along with a Japanese cousin of his (in case you're wondering, they're called Kappa and they look like frogs or something equally slimy) told me that the 'big fellas' (the Japanese) were going to war and 'pretty much anyone who reads a newspaper can tell'.

Suffice it to say, from then on things are known history, but I felt kind of bad about not doing anything about it. I finally decided to enlist in the Army, because I always had a disdain about the sea, it being a big, salty, flat blue nothing that reeked of fish.

I remember Mother was all teary-eyed when they waved me goodbye at the train station and father looked rather thoughtful and reserved; I later learned he had been terribly constipated that day. He did warn me not to get killed or do anything equally stupid because I would have to make up for all the shifts I'd lose in the mines when the war was over. Grandpa was there too and surprisingly enough a long list of long ago deceased members of my family, going all the way back to the first Barhoe that set foot on American soil, the honourable Jedediah Pontifer Barhow Sr.

(supposedly a judge at a time when the judiciary system consisted of a set of scales and a couple of coins). It struck me as heartening that they all looked very emotional for dead people.

When I arrived at boot camp though, I was quickly disillusioned about what it meant to serve ones country: at first glance, it seemed that wars were fought in the latrines and the kitchens, while winning probably involved a lot of yelling and cussin' for no particular reason. The army had failed to turn me into a man (whatever the saying implies) and instead of shooting Japs or Krauts I was polishing boots and making sure I was clean shaved, every damn morning. I rarely if ever saw dead or undead things during basic; a passing banshee told me there was no point in trying to drive already half-insane people crazy.

Once basic was complete, I was picked practically at random for specialty training as a signal corpsman because my squad leader had remarked, on paper, which made it sacrosanct for the Army, that "Pvt. Barhoe can read and write Inglis". Someone in Personnel thought that was some sort of foreign language probably, so I was trained as a ra-

dio operator. Sadly, that involved polishing boots, shaving every single morning, cussin' and yelling just like basic training, the difference being that I was shown to a radio and told that "that with the dials and all, that's a reey-dee-o".

Through divine providence seemingly, it came with a manual which was easy to familiarise myself with. I soon became an expert in communication, direction finding and signals intelligence, but no-one knew that because no-one had told me to use the radio, because we hadn't seen combat yet.

Almost three months after I had left home and joined up, I realised that until that time we were losing the war without a lot of effort. I was itching to actually get in a fight and show them Japs what men are made of (sometimes literally) as did most of the boys, although I really felt bad for them and wished there was some other away other than blowing each other up.

Expectation turned into excitement after the news about the battles at Coral Sea and Midway. It had been six months since the war had started and all I could think of was that the Navy was getting all the action (even

though the sailor's outfit is actually rather overrated in terms of manliness). I was beginning to think that I had just about enough of sending fake signals for practice to the room next door, when the higher-ups deemed that our time had come and I was shipped along with the rest of the 79th Signals Battalion to Hawaii, in preparation for some kind of operation against the Japs, codenamed Winter River (which to my resentment, did not involve snowmen, snowballs, or any form of snow other than the unfrozen one, water).

Now, I know that most people think that the Marine Corps lifted most of the weight in the battles in the Pacific, and while that might be true, the Army had its share too. The Aussies were in a real bind, and if you looked past the fact that they inhabited a dry prison island, they weren't all that bad and we certainly shouldn't let the Japs turn them into a fish-eating people with beer that had all the drinkable qualities of urine. So we were going to help them, and that somehow involved Papua New Guinea. I know it sounds like some kind of Japanese brand of bad whisky, but it's an island.

Of all the men in the 79th Signals Battal-

ion, I was the only one with any knowledge of Papuan. In fact, there were just three men in the whole U.S. Army that knew the language and seven who had heard of the island (including General MacArthur, of course). My commanding officer told me right off the bat he thought I was lying and I was just 'trying to get some half-ass station somewhere off the grid, idly boning topless natives, eating mangoes and having sunbaths'. He told me that even though he was a God-fearing man, God wouldn't be able to save me when he'd come looking for me when I'd be found wanting. For lack of a better word he was jealous out of his mind, but without good reason.

I was sent to Milf's Bay on Papua New Guinea, attached to a company of engineers. For a couple of weeks, it felt again as if the war was just something we read about on the papers. The fact that we were all wearing army green, working in shifts, doing sentry duty and sleeping in tents seemed like a huge, funny coincidence.

When the bombs and shells started dropping, the fun started to leak like an old man's bladder. Just when I thought I was about to buy the proverbial farm in an otherwise aw-

fully scenic beach somewhere in the South Pacific, while being shelled by the Japanese Imperial Navy (and I'm not talking about seashells) I had a moment of revelation. I would not idly sit around and wait to get blown up. I had to do something but what I was good at was talking with dead things and magical beasts, not shooting guns. I had no idea how this could prove helpful, but then I overheard my Captain on the wire with HQ: a relief force was on the way, but they had to know the exact location and disposition of the enemy forces to have any chances of success. They were looking for some people crazy enough to do some scouting and a radio operator to pass on the intelligence as it was being gathered.

That was me. I volunteered, so my Captain's initial reaction was I'd gone barmy. In a way, that was to be expected from someone who knew Papua. The same night, in a lull from the naval bombardment our makeshift scout platoon moved out into the jungles of Papua. Everyone was complaining about pulling the short straw, and how things could not get any more FUBAR. But then I got lucky and happened onto an ancient spirit of

the jungle forest by the name of Jack (he'd gotten that name from a castaway a long time ago). Jack manifested himself in all his glory, swirling swaths of light and a host of entranced animals, a ghostly pale half-man, half-animal form, the works.

Half the guys started running off into random directions, setting off tripwires and mines while the rest pretty much fell unconscious and collapsed. I introduced myself and told him he'd want to tone it down a bit in the future; other than I explained if he could make the rounds on my behalf. He was happy to give me a hand; he kept complaining about the terrible noise the Japs' guns were making and how he missed the good old days when he did practical jokes to half-mad scurvy-ridden pirates, mostly involving illusions of loot and pointy, sharp bamboo.

Jack was a treasure in hiding; with one sweep of his, in less than an hour, he'd seen everything there was to see on the island and off the shore. He'd also overheard invaluable enemy communications, including sake warming instructions and navy codes of the latest, highest Nazi-enabled Japanese encryption technology.

I hurriedly transmitted the most essential stuff to HQ, and then roused the rest of the platoon. I tried to sound convincing enough in that we had been tear-gassed by the Japs, but myself and the rest of the MIAs had managed to get a fairly good picture of the surrounding Japanese forces before everyone else tripped on a mine.

It was an explanation noone dared to challenge; when we got back early in daybreak, I compiled everything Jack had told me into an intelligence report which I simply dumped on the command headquarter's payroll officer's desk, where nothing goes unnoticed ever. Somehow, someone, was that desperate that blindly believed everything in that report was true. And that turned the whole battle in our favor.

A couple of days later the Japs had eased on the pressure after the army air force struck key troop concentrations and the navy finally got us some cover, urging their fleet components to turn tail. Jack had left me a 'miss you' note in the form of an obscenely shaped mango and a anthropomorphic coconut; even for an ancient spirit, he seemed a bit disturbing for my taste. It was with that mango in

hand that I received an order to fly out immediately back to Brisbane for a debriefing. The order was signed by General MacArthur himself who stated in his post-scriptum that he'd personally flay me to the bone if I failed to explain how I broke the Japs' code.

It was just then that I really wished with all my might that I were safely back home in Rendville, made to eat lots of pepper for all the bad words that came forth from my mouth. I was in deep, deep trouble and that was opinion was only reinforced when I saw that a Colonel from MacArthur's staff had been sent to escort me in my trip. It felt more like a guard for most of the way, though I caught the Colonel viewing me at times with mixed feelings of compassion and awe.

A few hours later I was in Australia; my inital reaction was a profound surprise and joy at the fact that civilisation seemed to continue to exist. Then I experienced a new sense of wonder at the fact that not everything in the world was painted or tinted green (though I must admit, Brisbane on a war footing did look greener than usual). The third surprise was the fact that when we landed, the Colonel handed me over to a person of

dubious character whose affiliation with the Army and the world at large eludes me to this day. Still standing on the tarmac, a short fellow with a weird complexion approached me, wearing aviation sunglasses and a thin smile.

"G'day mate," he said casually looking the other way. He was dressed in a loose shirt and pants, the most notable thing about him a ridiculous-looking cork hat.

"It's actually five in the afternoon, but good day to you too," I replied, feeling unusually awkward for no apparent reason.

"Lookit here, I know it's arvo, but she'll be apples. Let's get some amber fluid first, eh?"

I hadn't got the faintest idea of what he was talking about. He just smiled and led the way. I felt instantly compelled, even magnetised to follow him, though something kept telling me things were a bit off.

"What's that amber fluid you need?" I asked somehow lamely.

"Oh, that's for you, mate. I dunneed any of that. Though I've heard Annie's is a bit bodgy, full of bogans and bitzers," he said and waved right past the airfield's gate guard and onto a waiting Dodge with a large set of bars in addition to the bumper. I followed right be-

hind as if in trance, but couldn't help asking him:

"Just who are you? I'm supposed to meet with General MacArthur."

He smiled and only answered half the question:

"I know mate, we're just stopping by a boozer."

"What for?"

"There's no sprung in givin' the Big Smoke a Captain Cook now, eh?"

"I can't understand half of what you're saying."

"Say, that's right! You're a seppo, ye bastard! Well, it's a spiffy you're not driving then or we might've gotten ourselves a bluey or even a bingle!"

"Could you please speak English?"

"Right-o, don't get mad as a cut snake cobber, HQ's within cooee of Ekka."

"Do you understand me, at all? Nod if you do. I need to see General MacArthur."

"You're all so true blue about yakka, aren't you? I'll just do a yewy over there and we'll rock up."

"I've never felt so lonely in my life. How do you people do it?"

"Oh, you know, just give them flies the Aussie salute, grab a tallie, have some tea, root the cook, have a blue. The usual."

"Right, tea. Can't do it without tea. Are we having any?"

"Too early for that, digger. Hope you haven't gone troppo, have you?"

"Of course not."

He smiled widely and the feeling of terror was intensified. I was beginning to thank I was about to get violently murdered somewhere in a bush, when we arrived at a nondescript building without any guardposts or the like. It seemed innocuous enough to believe the man when he said:

"Let's get inside, shall we?"

I almost felt like kissing him, but a sense of manliness made me refrain.