

Safe Haven Asylum

T. L. Eastwood

Writers' Guild of America, West, Inc. Registration

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Stonebridge is a nice, quiet, small town where nothing out of the ordinary ever happens. That's why we were flabbergasted when the old Safe Haven Asylum was shut down for cruelty to the patients. Doctor Wellington wanted to know if the brains of people with mental illness were different from the standard brain. So, he was tying his patients to their beds and experimenting on them. And to be sure he was receiving the best results possible, he used no anesthetics.

I guess we might never have figured this out if old Mrs. Larity's miniature schnauzer hadn't gone hunting for a new bone and dug up an old thigh bone in the field behind the hospital. My mother said that Mrs. Larity had fainted when Rolly laid his treat at her feet. Mr. Larity had to carry her to the couch and give her a shot of brandy before he called the local sheriff's office.

Mr. Larity followed Rolly for a week after that before the dog wandered back to Skeleton Haven, as the field later became known. Sheriff Dan was called, and his deputies dug up 16 corpses.

They put a picture of Dr. Wellington on display every night on the TV during the trial. He didn't look like the fiend they said he was. His face was old and slightly wrinkled, and his silver-grey hair made me think of my grandpa. But then his picture looked through the screen at me. He had one green eye and one blue eye, which gave him a deranged appearance. I looked into those peculiar orbs, and I could feel my blood turning cold. I had the distinct impression that, if I didn't break contact with him, I would turn into a giant popsicle. I turned off the set.

It didn't take the jury long to convict him of the slaughter. The judge sentenced him to the electric chair. He was fried three years later.

For a long time after all this excitement I wondered about the spirits of these dead people. I thought I could hear them whispering when the frosty wind blew in from the north. I thought I saw them flit from tree to bush to tree as they struggled to find the peace they were denied in life. I thought I smelled their putrid flesh when I walked near the river at sunset.

My mother told me I was overreacting, but I didn't think so. I was ten, and I was convinced that the spirits of the dead walked through our small town. That was when I

started reading about the paranormal. It's a passion I retain to this very day. It's also a passion I share with a very good friend of mine. Jess and I met in school about the time Rolly was digging up his famous femur. I would help him with his homework, and he would chat about the unpublished, gruesome details of the Wellington case, which he wheedled out of his father, Sheriff Dan. This, of course, made us instant friends.

Jess considers himself a great amateur ghost hunter and has visited all the local places that he thinks might be haunted. All, except one - the Safe Haven Asylum on Matasnian Road.

He called me up a week ago and asked if I wanted to join him and Martin and Jane for a trip to the old hospital. Needless-to-say, I jumped at the chance. I put on a pair of old jeans, my hiking boots, and my old Ghostbuster's t-shirt, grabbed a flashlight, and was waiting on my front porch when Jess pulled into the driveway in his beat-up Jeep.

"Hey Tory! You look like you're ready to hunt ghosts," he said as he reached across the seat and pushed the door open for me.

"Yeah. You know I am. I'm hoping for a sighting tonight."

"And what are you going to do if we see something?"

"Talk to it."

"Yeah, right. That I gotta see," he said laughing.

Jess backed slowly down the driveway and headed to the highway that led to the old part of town where the asylum was located.

"So, what makes you think this place is haunted?" I asked him.

"Dad told me that some people tried to spend the night on the first floor last year. They didn't make it. They reported hearing screams and crying coming from one of the floors above them. They couldn't say which."

"Why'd they report it to the Sheriff's Office. Did they think your dad could arrest the dead?"

"You know, in Stonebridge, everyone depends on Dad for everything. It sure would be fun to watch him try and arrest some spirits."

We both laughed and then continued to discuss the possibility that the building might be haunted. The more we talked, the more excited I became. By the time we headed up Matasnian Road, I was ready to see some real ghosts - or so I thought.

After a fifteen minute drive, we turned onto an old washboard road, and Jess did his best to hit every pothole on the short trip up the hill. I could see Jane and Martin sitting on the tailgate of Jane's pink truck as we approached.

"Hey guys," yelled Jess as we exited the Jeep. "Everyone ready? I have my digital camera, tape recorder, and flashlight."

"Yep, all ready," said Martin.

"Yah. It sounds like a real spooooky night," giggled Jane.

"Okay, then. Let's go," said Jess.

We walked up the cracked cement that had been the sidewalk that led to the old, dilapidated, concrete building. The foliage had encroached and broken through the walls in several places; ivy crept up the sides, penetrating the walls and entering every available crevice. The once bright peach paint peeled off in long strips that, in the setting sunlight, looked like long tracks of tears. All the windows were broken, and the glass was strewn over the whole area like diamond incusted plaster.

"Are you all excited? I'm excited," chirped Jane.

To prove her point, she began twirling in the fading light, and it seemed to me that her shoulder-length auburn hair turned a blood red.

"I have my flashlight and my camera," she said.

"Okay," said Jess. "Everyone stay close. It's going to be dark soon, and I don't want anyone getting lost in there."

We followed Jess through the broken-down front door. Once inside, the light faded to a dreary gray, and we all turned on our flashlights. We could see footprints and animal tracks in the grime, glass, and trash that bespoke of earlier visitors. Someone had brought crimson paint and applied it generously to the walls, which now bore the marks of every profane word ever spoken by the teenagers of Stonebridge.

"Do ya think we should take the elevator?" joked Martin.

Everyone laughed, and Jess steered us towards the stairs on the left side of the ground floor.

"Someone get something to keep this door open," said Jess.

Martin obliged and found a heavy rock just below the broken front window and placed it in between the door and the frame.

We were all in good spirits as we climbed the stairways from one floor to another. We prowled around, noting the same dingy gray color, shattered windows, broken furniture, and damaged walls.

The sun had departed, and the moon had not yet awoken. The air became colder as we rose from floor to floor. It was definitely not our usual fall weather.

"Okay," said Jane. "I like spooky but not creepy, and this is definitely getting creepy. Maybe we should go back down."

"No way!" I said. "I came here to see a ghost. Let's go up to the top."

"You heard her," said Jess. "Let's check out the sixth floor."

Martin made sure that the door was jammed open, and our small troop bravely walked up the last flight of stairs.

"Ooooh, this really is creepy," whispered Jane.

On this floor, the beds were still intact. The mattresses had deteriorated to lumps of cloth and rusty springs. Manacles were attached to each of the bedposts, one end open as if awaiting new patients. Several faded pictures still hung on the walls depicting bright, sunny rose gardens and beautiful streams.

"Okay, this is really scary now," said Jane. "Anyone else ready to leave?"

As if in answer to her question, there was a loud thud from the stairwell. Jane shrieked, and we all jumped. Martin ran to the door and said, "It's locked. I can't get it open!"

"Okay, here we go," said Jess. "Get out your cameras and tape recorders. This is so exciting; I think we're really going to see something tonight!"

"Are you nuts?" screamed Jane. "I want out! Now!"

I could feel her quivering as I put my arm around her shoulders and tried to calm her down. "It's going to be all right, Jane," I said. "There's nothing here that can really hurt us."

As if to mock me, the room suddenly turned frigid. I could see everyone's breath as it turned to ice and hung in the air. The smell of formaldehyde and ammonia

permeated the room. The atmosphere turned lethal. The metal beds rattled as they swayed gently on the cement floor. The manacles, which had been dangling towards the ground, now moved leisurely to the top of the rotting bedding.

I could feel my eyes growing wider with each new development. I was still holding onto Jane, who abruptly began screaming. I was sure that her high-pitched cries could be heard all the way to the Sheriff's Office - or at least I hoped they could.

Jess yelled, "Tory, shut Jane up! She's going to scare away all the spirits."

"Stop being a jerk, Jess," I said. She's terrified!."

"Okay, just calm her down."

"Come on, Jane; you're only making things worse," I said, shaking her hard enough to bounce her head back and forth.

"Stop that," she yelled. "You're going to make my head fall off."

I stopped shaking her, and said, "Okay, but you have to be quiet."

She shivered a little, and I wrapped my arm around her shoulders again.

By this time, Jess had dropped his equipment bag and flashlight on the floor, switched on his microphone, and draped the recorder strap over his shoulder; he was excitedly snapping pictures as fast as he could.

"This is awesome!" he yelled. "Do you think I'll be able to sell my pics to Paranormal Monthly?"

"Jess, stop worrying about your damned pictures, and help me find a way out of here," said Martin. He had given up trying to open the door and was searching for another way out.

With Jane at my side, I ignored Jess and started to help Martin. Then, I saw it - a milky cloud materializing near the window. Holding my flashlight at hip height and pointing in its direction I yelled, "What's that?"

We all watched in horror as a head gradually appeared, then, what looked like a body weaved in and out of view. An arm slowly rose out of the filmy mist, and the unidentifiable apparition raised his index finger and pointed at one of the beds then at Martin. The bed frame shuddered, then raced across the room; the headboard pinned him to the wall. His flashlight made a loud clunk as it hit the ground and went out.

Someone screamed, and I realized it was me. Taking hold of my fear, I ran to him and tried to dislodge the bed, but, before I could manage it, one of the manacles floated out and grasped my right wrist. I screamed again and tried to pull my arm out of the restraint; it held me tight. I heard Martin gasping for air, and I redoubled my efforts. Instead of loosening, the manacle tightened until my blood could no longer pass beneath it, and my hand began to turn a ghastly, pallid white.

The vision turned gradually towards Jane, who was now standing alone. She added hysteria to her voice as she resumed her screaming campaign.

The ghost pointed to another bed, which quivered then shot towards Jane like a high-powered bullet. It turned lengthwise and pushed her towards the side wall, one of the manacles reached out and clutched her left arm. Trying to keep her flashlight from falling, she squeezed it so hard the metal clip bit into the soft flesh of her right hand; her bright red blood oozed down her fingers and fell into the darkness. At that point, poor Jane couldn't decide whether to continue screaming or to begin crying, so she did both.

"Jess," I shouted. "That's enough pictures; we need your help! Hurry, Martin can't breathe, and Jane is going crazy, and I don't want to have my hand amputated."

Jess finally let his camera fall onto his chest and moved cautiously over to Martin. He tried calmly and then frantically to drag the bed away from him.

"Watch out, Tory!" he shouted as the apparition floated towards me. I could feel the temperature drop to sub-zero. It came within a few feet when it stopped and glared at me. I was gazing into one green eye and one blue eye. My blood swiftly turned to ice.

"It's Dr. Wellington!" I screamed.

I could feel frozen needles penetrate my skin. I felt nauseated and terrified and helpless and inquisitive all at the same time.

He looked intently into my eyes. I had the uncomfortable feeling that he recognized me from that time long ago. And, for some reason, he didn't like what he saw. He placed his right hand inside his misty body and pulled out a razor-sharp scalpel. He brought it up to my eye level and unhurriedly moved toward me.

My blood froze, my heart hammered, my breathing ended. I opened my mouth to scream, but the sound froze in my throat. I was mortified. I knew he was going to hack open my brain. I knew I was going to die.

Jess turned from Martin and dashed toward me. He attempted to shove the doctor out of the way, but his hands simply sliced through the dense fog.

Jess always said his camera worked wonders. Maybe that's the reason he pulled the camera strap from around his neck, held on to it, and swung it through the specter. Unfortunately, this only irritated Dr. Wellington. He twisted his sinister shape in Jess's direction and pointed to the nearest bed.

I could see the horror in Jess' eyes as he backed away and screamed, "Stay away!"

I'm still not sure whether he was trying to help me or trying to snap a picture, but Jess started fumbling with his camera and managed to set off the flash. Dr. Wellington suddenly dropped his arm and turned away from the light as if in pain.

The light must hurt him, I thought.

Jess must have had the same idea.

"Jane, shine your light into his eyes! He doesn't like it!" Jess yelled.

I turned my flashlight directly at Dr. Wellington's head while Jess valiantly walked toward the drifting mist, shooting pictures as he went, forcing the light from the flash to penetrate the doctor's eye sockets as he drifted to the window behind him. The spirit attempted to pass through the window, but couldn't, and he screeched as if in excruciating pain. As suddenly as he had appeared, the doctor disappeared. The building feeling a great deal of relief, shuddered, sighed, and quieted itself.

My manacles dropped off, and I was able to tug the bed away from Martin, who was very grateful to be able to breathe easily again. Jess grabbed his bag and flashlight and then released the unmanacled Jane, who was now merely sobbing, and we all headed for the door.

"Help me, Martin," said Jess, trying to yank the door open. The two men took a deep breath and pulled mightily on the door handle. It trembled, sighed, and opened just wide enough for Martin, Jess, and me to get our fingers around the door jam and pull. It opened sluggishly, a shrill whine coming from deep within its frame.

I'd like to tell you that we walked carefully down the stairs and across the lobby, and then sauntered to our vehicles, but I can't. Jess led the way, the light from his flashlight painting eerie shapes on the walls. We flew down five flights of stairs, bolted through the lobby doorway, and stumbled down the broken sidewalk.

Jane's sigh of relief was the only sound we heard. We reached our respective vehicles and jumped in.

Before the engines came to life, I could hear Jane moaning, "No one drives my pink baby but me."

I looked through my window and saw Martin push her over to the passenger's seat and jump in behind the wheel. Engines now running, each driver maneuvered around the other, and raced down the hill. We didn't stop until we were back in the main part of town.

We gathered at the Coffee Stop, and, with shaking hands now being warmed by hot cups of coffee, we stared at each other.

I sighed deeply, and said, "Well, I think we're safe now."

"Yeah, it didn't look like the good doc could get through the window," said Jess. "I wonder why?"

"Don't go thinking up trouble, Jess. He can't get out and that's that. I don't want to ever see that awful thing again," said Jane.

"Me, too," said Martin. "I've had enough ghost hunting to last me a long while."

"Well, it was definitely an interesting night," I said.

"I wonder if my pics will come out all right," said Jess.

"That thing could have killed us, and all you can think about is your pictures? What's wrong with you?" said Jane.

Jess looked at Jane and laughed. "I have a great idea. How about driving out to the old mining town next weekend? I hear it's haunted!"

"Come on, Jane," said Martin. "I think that's our cue to leave. See you guys later."

"Okay, Martin," said Jane. "But you're not driving my truck! I don't like the way you handled her."

Jane and Martin walked out the door arguing about who was the better driver.
Jess and I nursed our coffees for awhile.

"Well, are you ready for another hunt?" Jess asked me.

I thought about the night's events, the danger, the excitement, the unknown, and said, "Sure. What time do we leave?"