

Paralyzed

by

Michelle E. Lowe

Though the living has forgotten, the dead have not.

Knotts checked his pulse as he jogged over the narrow trail cutting through the woodland. The area was undisputedly beautiful. Tall, looming trees, thick with late August leaves. Fireflies were awakening to the twilight, glowing brightly within the deep shadows. Raindrops dripped heavily from branches after a recent rainstorm.

The natural beauty was hardly noticed by Knotts who was too caught up in his conversation over his earpiece.

“Everything has been signed and finalized,” he assured his business partner, Candas. “By this time next year, we’ll make use of this overgrown nightmare.”

In the distance, a doe and three of her fawns raised their heads as he jogged by them. “Soon this whole area will be completely leveled,” Knotts told her.

The trail began bending and Knotts rounded the trees that the path contorted around where tombstones appeared. The gravesite had dozens of stone markers poking out from the high vegetation, all guarded by a five-foot, rusted, iron fence that had seen its fair share of harsh winters. Erected beside the entrance gate was a plaque.

Knotts jogged up to it as Candas said, “Don’t forget that you’re staying in a house on the estate we’re supposed to develop over.”

“Temporarily,” he responded and then disconnected the call. He began reading the plaque while running in place.

On a cold January day, forty-three souls were laid to rest here. Victims of a tragedy that swept over them.

Were these the people killed in the Nightingale Fire? Knotts wondered, feeling a chill run up his sweaty spine.

The forest was once the Nightingale neighborhood, built in the late 1700s. In the winter of 1862, a massive fire broke out overnight by an arsonist while the residents slept, killing dozens, and destroying all but a single house.

Knotts read on. So, it is with great respect that these grounds remain sacred, never to be built upon again.

Until now, Knotts thought automatically.

Despite what the plaque said, there was no legal document prohibiting anything from being developed on the property. That was made evident when his company bought the

woodland without protests from locals. It seemed everyone had forgotten what had occurred here and anyone who did remember had moved away or died off. Not that it mattered to Knotts, for this was prime real estate land.

Knotts jogged on, wondering what should be done about the cemetery. It hadn't been mentioned by the city of Albany. Did anyone even know it was there?

Maybe I can Poltergeist it, and just have the tombstones relocated. As soon as the thought passed through his mind, something halted him to a dead stop.

The crushing of leaves as if someone was running up behind him neared. When he glanced over his shoulder, he saw nothing. It was getting dark now, but enough light remained to show there wasn't anyone else on the trail. The air changed as though he had gone through some kind of portal between his world and another. Everything felt heavy and more humid, sucking away the oxygen.

Knotts's chest tightened, and his skin felt stickier as if he wore a suit of bubblegum. Through the evening's dark veil, the graveyard barely remained in view. The dimmest was punctured only by the fireflies' bright winking dots. Another crunch caught his attention and when he looked, someone appeared from behind a tree.

A dark figure, tall and wide, with a black mist following its movements. The sight of it shackled Knotts's feet to the forest floor. Sweat from his run turned to ice pellets over his hot flesh, causing him to shiver.

Knotts focused on the massive horns, sprouting from atop its head. He imagined it charging him and those horns sinking into his gut, impaling him like meat on a skewer. And when it moved again, Knotts nearly fell over with fright when he suddenly came to his senses.

A buck ran off. The white of its tail fading like a ghost. Damn, Knotts, he cursed himself. *Stop letting your imagination take you over like that.*

He jogged home. Well, temp home, as he told Candas. Just somewhere for him to stay while he oversaw the development progress. When it was all said and done, the house would be torn down.

The place was built in the mid-18th century. It was a standard Victorian home, large with many rooms. The three-story house was located across the Hunson River from the area's 2nd oldest building, the Quackenbush House, constructed in the 1730s. Rumor had it that this very house Knotts stayed in had been home to the arsonist, Hector Levine. According to reports, he also died in the fire after putting a pistol in his mouth in the middle of street and letting the flame, that he started, consume him.

The house was the last remaining structure of the Nightingale Fire. People have lived in the house off and on over the years, with some claiming it was haunted because they would hear noises throughout the night. Paranormal investigators had visited the house in the early 2000s when ghost-hunting TV shows were popular, but nothing was ever found.

Knotts entered the kitchen, flicking on the light and scaring away the cockroaches. He needed to call an exterminator soon.

After retrieving a Smart Water from the fridge, he cracked the cap and took a healthy gulp when a roach scampered across his hand, resting on the counter. Knotts jumped, letting out an involuntary shout. The insect vanished in the space between the stove and counter.

“Nasty ass things.”

Knotts showered, hoping to wash away the eeriness of the evening. Sometimes he allowed his imagination to get the better of him, but hardly did it manifest creepy images like what he saw in the forest. Maybe the graveyard had something to do with it.

Once cleaned, he stepped out of the clawfoot tub, distracting himself with thoughts about the wealth his company was about to acquire.

Knotts failed to lay out a mat or even a towel on the floor, which he realized when his foot slipped out from under him, sending him flaring. He snatched the shower curtain, snapping it off its rings before hitting his head on the high rim of the tub. A ringing blasted like a siren in his ears. He didn't blackout, but his vision faded in and out. He didn't remain on the floor for long. Instead, he gradually pulled himself up, careful not to lose his balance, because once he was down again, he doubted he'd get back up. Serious head injuries could lead to death if the person went to sleep. So, he worked to remain standing and checked himself in the mirror.

He smeared away the fog and studied the trickle of blood running from a knot forming at his hairline. Feeling woozy, Knotts entered the adjoining bedroom, not even bothering to dry off. He needed to dress and go to the hospital to get checked out. The dresser was across the way from the bathroom.

A short stroll until Knotts halted when a stabbing pain struck the base of his skull. A harsh, warming tingle coursed like heated needles down his entire body. At the end of the bed next to him was his phone. He started reaching for it, wanting to call 911, but he never even got that far.

Just as his fingers touched the smooth screen, his whole arm gave out and dropped. Knotts collapsed when his legs lost their strength. He hit the floor and began convulsing, thrashing like the severed tail of a lizard until he seized up and practically locked in place. His whole body stung as if he'd fallen into a patch of stinging nettles. Foam bubbled out of his mouth and his heart banged against his ribs. He was alive, but he couldn't move.

Paralyzed.

He tried screaming, but only a high-pitched moan escaped him. His breath caused the fizzy drool between his lips to flutter like suds in the breeze. Although his body wasn't working, his mind was fully aware, along with his eyes that frantically darted around the vantage point of where he lay.

The end of the bed was directly behind him, a window across the way, with both the bathroom and exit door a few feet away. He tried to remain calm. He had a seizure, he understood that. It explained the symptoms, even the paralysis. His head injury had caused it, and if he guessed right, his immobilization would be temporary. He only needed to wait it out.

Easier said than done. As of that moment, he was on the floor, soaking wet and completely naked. He wished he had placed a rug under the bed, for although his body prickled with painful tingles from the neck down, his head retained normal sensation, including the grainy feel of dirt on the hardwood, pressing against the side of his face. His wet hair was already cooling.

To keep from falling into a full-blown panic, Knotts concentrated on reclaiming his ability to move. He had become completely weakened. Every muscle strained but did nothing. It felt as though he was under miles of water or encased in wet cement.

Seconds ticked by. Soon, too many passed, and he hadn't been able to budge. In the end, Knotts remained on his side with both arms folded in front of him and a leg slightly draped over his genitals. After giving himself a headache, mentally trying to overcome his unresponsive predicament, Knotts took a break.

That was when the scratching began. It started off softly. Knotts had no idea how long it had been going on for or what was causing it, but it didn't help that it was coming from underneath the bed. What made matters worse was that he couldn't turn his head to see behind him. All he was able to do was lay there and listen. As he did, the sound grew louder as though something was crawling toward him. It must be a rat, he told himself. The intensity of the sound, however, indicated it was something larger.

A wild animal, maybe. An opossum or a raccoon had gotten into his house. Knotts let out the loudest moan he could muster to try and scare it away. The scratching continued. Talons scrapped across the wooden surface. It nearly sounded as though something was dragging itself. Sweat beaded over his brow when the scratching was soon accompanied by raspy breathing that Knotts recognized as being human. It wheezed harshly through a damaged windpipe. The smell of burnt flesh touched his nose.

Drag. Scratch. Drag. Scratch.

What exactly was crawling toward him? He felt like a child, frightened of the monster underneath his bed.

Drag. Scratch. Drag. Scratch.

Knotts struggled to move or at least turn his head, but he was completely frozen. He couldn't even rock back and forth, couldn't twitch, or wiggle his toes. The bedroom, that was already small, receded in size, making him feel that he was trapped inside a shoebox.

Drag. Scratch. Drag. Scratch.

The thing was very close now, nearing the footboard.

Drag. Scratch.

Then all went quiet. The only noise came from Knotts's heavy breathing. When he noticed the stillness, he steadied his panting and opened his ears to what could be happening right behind him. Nothing occurred for many long moments. No sounds. No movement. Nothing.

Fingers raked through his hair. Knotts screamed the best he could and shut his eyes as this thing combed jagged nails over his scalp, slid ever so lightly down his face, under his eye, to his nose, and then stopped touching him altogether. Knotts opened his eyes,

expecting to see what had touched him, and he did. He watched as a cockroach scurried across the room and vanished through a small crack in the wall.

Knotts would've laughed if he wasn't so disgusted. As it was with the misty shadow figure in the forest, Knotts's imagination had overcome him. He continued to concentrate on moving and after another stressful time trying to will his body to cooperate, Knotts took another break. There was a faint scent in the air. Like an outside grill had been lit. Knotts ignored it and resumed his fight for mobility. His muscles strained against the invisible force keeping him pinned to the floor. If he was trembling, he couldn't tell. The painful tingles continuously stabbed him all over. He wondered just how long he'd remain like this.

His phone rang. The eerie Kill Bill whistling of Twisted Nerve filled the empty spaces of his room.

Instinctively, he tried reaching for it, but his dead weight arm wouldn't budge. Instead, a rush of prickles flared throughout the useless limb. His only lifeline was so close, and he couldn't even lift his arm!

The phone kept whistling. It was only supposed to take seconds before going to voicemail, but it seemed like minutes, as though his own phone was mocking him that he couldn't get to it. Knotts again worked to get himself moving. If only the caller knew what was happening to him. If only *someone* knew!

The whistling stopped and all went quiet once again. Knotts sighed deeply and to his dismay, he spotted the cockroach. It exited the wall, twitching its gross antennas before scampering back toward him.

No. Don't.

The roach rushed over, targeting Knotts's eye. He quickly shut that one and watched through the other as the bug bypassed his drying drool and came over. His eyelid tickled as the cockroach tapped its antennas against it. The insect then scaled up his face, forcing him to close the other eye and endure the disgusting feel of it climbing with its many, nasty legs over his pressed lips and across his cheek.

When Knotts couldn't feel it any longer, he opened his eyes and looked as best he could until spying it scampering over his body toward his genitals. What had he done to deserve being paralyzed on the floor and violated by a cockroach? Was it the house, even though there had never been anything paranormal found? Was there some otherworldly awareness of his plans for the neighborhood that was no longer there? Ridiculous. It was only his active imagination.

The roach, however, was real, and as it danced precariously around his nether regions, that burning smell grew more potent. A strange glow flickered just outside the window and with it came the screaming. A fire had ignited somewhere. Smoke seeped through the cracks of the floorboards and Knotts's cheek instantly warmed. The calls for help and painful cries outside grew more frantic. It sounded as though people were being burned alive out there.

The entire area was on fire including *his* house and he couldn't *move*! He sucked in smoke through his nose and mouth, choking him. It thickened and within the dark fumes, a horned figure manifested. Knotts recognized it from the forest.

"Eave me alwone!" he mumbled incoherently.

But it did not. Instead, the faceless mass aimed the tips of its horns toward his stomach. Knotts tried sucking in his gut, but the horns touched and slowly sank them through the skin. Knotts shut his eyes and screamed a muffled scream before noticing that both his legs jolted. He opened his eyes and saw no horned creature and no wounds on his belly.

My legs!

The floor was growing increasingly hotter as the fire below was eating its way upward. His face felt melted to the floor and his body sizzled like bacon in a pan.

I'm burning!

His legs jerked again. Was he finally regaining mobility? He focused on getting up, but it was like battling through sticky sludge. He was an insect cocooned within a spider's web. And yet, his hand twitched, and then his legs again. He would've been overjoyed if it weren't for that dreadful and familiar sound.

Drag. Scratch. Drag. Scratch.

From where Knotts lay, he had a clear view of the doorway, leading out into the dark hall. What slowly appeared could only be described as a charred individual. It stretched arm over arm in front of it, scrapping nails across the floor, pulling itself forward, and towing its burnt legs behind it.

Drag. Scratch. Drag. Scratch.

The charred, skeletal form slid into the light of the bathroom and the bright firelight outside, crawling through the rising smoke. It inched closer to Knotts's feet, stretching its mouth open and letting out a horrific wail.

It's Hector Levine!

Knotts thrashed. He actually *thrashed*!

Hector inched closer and reached out. A gnarled finger grazed Knotts's toe, and he pissed himself. His legs twitched again, and the painful tingles vanished under the clawing sensation as Hector scratched at his ankles. Then fire burst out from the phantom's mouth and in seconds, its whole body combusted. Knotts jolted and before he knew it, he was up and running for the door. He made it to the top of the staircase and was just about to rush down to the door below when he turned to see the flaming phantom standing face-to-face with him, aiming a gun at him. The sudden blast caused Knotts to lose his balance, sending him tumbling down the stairs.

* * *

Knotts's body was discovered days later with a broken neck at the base of the staircase. The foul smell emitting from inside was detected by the mail carrier. After his death, Knotts's development plans fell through, and the region was never built upon. It was

simply left at peace. Whether the area had supernatural connections, or it was all in Knotts's head, one thing was for certain, the only surviving house of the Nightingale Fire was now occupied and in the dead of night, you can hear the frightening moans coming from inside as if someone wants to escape.

The End

