

Flunkies

by

Rob Armstrong

Genghis Cat sits atop the dresser and observes.

Pynchon yanks up the floorboard with a crowbar, "The cat still ain't doing his job. The mice chewed the electric wire. Are you boys setting up traps like I told you?"

"Yes, sir," Eddie holds up a bruised set of fingers.

Pynchon nods. The older man looks at Nelson.

"I've set more traps than clumsy Eddie." Hanson cuts a length of insulated wire to replace the damaged section of the knob and tube array.

"The trap was defective; I wasn't clumsy." Eddie twists the ends of the new wire with the existing line to make the electricity work again.

"Eddie trips over his own shoelaces while wearing slip-on shoes." Hanson sneers as he takes the floorboard from Pynchon to reinstall it.

"Your joke makes no sense. Both of you are chuckleheads," Pynchon blows his nose with a kerchief. "The ghost hunter show will be here filming on Thursday. We must ensure this room, which we now call Pickett's Bedroom, and the other rooms, stay haunted."

Archibald Pynchon overpaid for the run-down Pickett Hotel in Deadwood, South Dakota, with borrowed money collateralized by his slumlord rental properties. Like many places in town, the thirteen-room hotel was said to be – and advertised – as haunted. Three rooms were promoted as being haunted; the same ones that, before Pynchon bought the hotel, had been hard to rent due to numerous complaints that were too expensive to fix.

"I had to sprinkle a lot of manure to leapfrog the line of other haunted places in town to get them to come. Simple tricks only work on imbeciles, but these show producers are more discerning; they crave pizzazz. Both of you will be pulling late shifts in our theatrical

department." Pynchon smiles at his wit as he pushes the kerchief back into the pocket of his overalls.

Pynchon does not tell Eddie and Nelson that he bribed the local historical society to back up his fictional claims that the hotel had once been a hospital where an unethical doctor performed ghastly medical experiments at the direction of the U.S. War Department. Pynchon figured he needed a juicy conspiracy angle to his hauntings; the old cowboy tropes of an angered outlaw or a lonely widow of a gold prospector were tiresome.

"I'll blast the rooms with smells," Eddie says, "and drag chains in the hallway."

"Your last blast smelled like boiled rags. People thought we cleaned the floors with a dirty mop," Nelson heckles. "It's gotta smell like formaldehyde or rotten eggs from hydrogen sulfide. That's the stuff they use in a morgue."

"Nelson is in charge of smells; community college is paying off." Pynchon realigns the frames of the creepy daguerreotype photos he bought at an estate sale. He tells guests the picture of the middle-aged man with a rifle is the fictitious maniacal Dr. Hammond Pickett.

"I'll dress up like Pickett and stand under the window at night," Eddie intentionally moves closer to Nelson to stake his claim because he is taller by four inches. Nelson is not intimidated because he considers himself the alpha among them.

"Let's make this competitive. I'm offering a five-hundred-dollar bonus to whomever between you two knuckleheads does the best job haunting the ghost hunters crew."

"Why are you offering extra money, Mr. Pynchon?" Nelson asks.

"Because if the ghost show creates buzz, and attracts paying guests, then I will finally get out of debt. You've got to spend money to make money. I want both of you boneheads to compete like hell to put on a good show to those woke snowflake California types, especially the show host, Davin Puskin." Pynchon shoulder-slaps Eddie and Nelson, driving his point home as they leave the room.

Eddie hopes to use the bonus to buy his buddies several rounds of beer at the bar. Unlike his friends, he has never been able to play the big man because he is forever broke.

Nelson will buy video games and upgrade his Xbox.

Eddie corners Nelson in the hotel's garden shed after lunch. "Let's work together; whoever wins will split the money with the other."

Nelson shoos Genghis Cat away from a bag of mulch he suspects the feline has used to deposit his bodily waste. He hands a set of hedge sheers to Eddie. "You trim the front bushes for me, and I'll think about it."

At the end of the workday, Nelson declines Eddie's offer. "Nice try. I don't particularly appreciate when people try to glide on my hard work. We each should do our own tricks."

Eddie is irritated at having been hoodwinked into working on the bushes in the hot sun. It was Nelson's assigned duty that day. After Nelson rides his bike home, Eddie returns to Pickett's Bedroom and the other haunted guest rooms and undoes Nelson's ghostly work completed that afternoon. It is not very difficult for Eddie to loosen wire connections to hidden eerie lights or add paint thinner to the fake blood meant to ooze through the wood paneling. As a final act of restorative vengeance, Eddie takes sulfur powder from the store room and mixes it with Nelson's concoctions in the canister that pumps smells into selected air vents.

His skullduggery against Nelson complete, Eddie stays late into the night to craft his trick for the film crew. Genghis Cat follows him wherever he goes. Eddie plumbs rope from the roof to a hallway closet. Loosening the rope unleashes a hangman dummy to fall from the rooftop and sway outside the Pickett Bedroom window.

After a late-night kitchen raid, Pynchon catches Eddie tying a noose around a cowboy creation stained with fake blood. The older man grins like the Cheshire Cat before retiring to his room for the evening. "Here, I thought you were a bigger lunkhead than Nelson. Nice work; don't disturb the guests while you scurry about."

After his boss's bedroom door closes, Eddie smiles at what he considers kind words from Pynchon. Then his smile fades at the hiss of Genghis Cat, who crawls under the hangman doll. He strokes the cat and asks, "Are you the master of the Pickett Hotel?"

Years before Pynchon bought the hotel, Genghis Cat had been the cherished companion of its then-widowed owner, who believed the cat held the reincarnated spirit of her husband. Upon her death, nobody bothered to find another home for the cat. Genghis Cat stayed,

wandering about more or less unassailed. Eddie could not recall seeing the cat eat, and near as he knew, no one bothered to feed him.

The next day Nelson holds of much-needed roof repairs that Pynchon asked him to do. He rigs a wire-framed bedsheet to fly up the stairs of the two-story lobby when a pressure plate on the stairs is triggered. Nelson struggles to balance the counterbalance sandbag in the shadow of the hall ceiling's trusswork.

Pynchon approaches Nelson as the younger man puts away the ladder he just used, "Did you finish up the roof patch?"

"Tight as a drum," Nelson lies. He does not want to waste time on his usual work stuff when he can make five hundred dollars playing at Halloween.

Later in the day, Davin Puskin and his two-person film crew pull up to the hotel in a four-door jeep. The TV host jumps out and spots Nelson moving around in the bushes, unspooling audio wire. "Young man, we need help with our equipment. And tell your boss, Mr. Pynchon, that *Cowboy Ghost Hunters* are here to see ghastly ghosties."

Nelson tells Eddie to help the crew with the heavy boxes while he alerts Pynchon to their new guests.

Pynchon meets Puskin on the driveway. After Puskin gets Pynchon to sign a non-disclosure statement, the TV host says, "We understand that ghost sightings can be hard to produce on demand. Feel free to stage reenactments of spectral activity for the benefit of our cameras. And remember, please don't ask for help from us; integrity dictates we don't direct your actions. We're just documentarians."

Pynchon nods at Nelson, who suddenly appears to give Eddie perfunctory help with hauling equipment. Pynchon assumes Nelson will recognize his conspiratorial affirmation to turn up the spook factor. "Davin, we are honored that you picked us for your show. Around here, we consider our spirits as reliable as Old Faithful."

Unexpectedly, as they head to the hotel entrance, Davin Puskin pitches towards the gravel driveway in a stumbling trip. "That cat snaked between my feet out of nowhere!"

"I'm so sorry, Davin," Pynchon says as he reaches to help the TV host. He snarls at Nelson, "Do something; grab it. Lock that cat in the basement while they're here."

Nelson stammers, "It never lets me close enough to catch it."

"I'll nail it." Davin grabs a helpful of gravel and throws it at Genghis Cat. But the cat is too fast and already under the nearby front porch.

Pynchon whips out his kerchief and offers it to Puskin, who has a visible bleeding cut on his forearm. Puskin snatches it from Pynchon and dabs the wound. Without another word, the TV host storms into the hotel to join his crew.

"Oh, that's gross," Nelson says.

"What is?" Pynchon asks.

"Is that the same kerchief you used to blow your nose the other day? You're wearing the same overalls!" Nelson observes.

"Stop being a numbskull and get going with Eddie to prepare for tonight," Pynchon says.

"Tonight is Eddie's night to produce a haunting. Tomorrow night is my turn." Nelson says. "This way, you know who is responsible for what when awarding the bonus."

In the dining room the next morning, Pynchon sidles over to the *Cowboy Ghost Hunter's* table while they sip coffee in stern dialogue. He asks, "Did you get good footage of our evil Dr. Pickett's midnight shenanigans last night?"

Without answering, Puskin's crew leaves the table, seemingly agitated. The TV host offers Pynchon a chair. "Last night was worse than community theater, maybe tied with the efforts of a middle school drama class. We heard chains rattling outside our windows, and when we looked outside, that guy was dressed in a peacoat from Old Navy over a pair of Kansas City Chiefs sweatpants." Puskin points at Eddie, who spoons scrambled eggs onto the plates of two hotel guests, an older couple from Minnesota. "Filming through a glass window into the moonlight produces horrible results. And remind him that ghosts do not do the chicken dance."

Pynchon is humiliated. "That kid's wheel is spinning, but the hamster's dead."

"What?"

"Nevermind, I'll take care of it," Pynchon tells Puskin.

“If you waste another day, which costs my show more money, I’ll ensure the Deadwood community drives you out of business. The other haunted places will slit your throat for stealing their shot to be on *Cowboy Ghost Hunters*.”

Under the table, Pynchon can feel Genghis Cat brush against his leg.

Later, Pynchon shoves two hundred dollars into Nelson’s hands. “Not a word to Eddie. He blew it big time last night. I’m counting on you tonight. This cash is extra motivation on top of the five hundred you will win if Davin Puskin is pleased. Make sure your tricks happen in the hotel with enough light for filming. Put that community college education to work and make sure that your haunting does not look amateurish.”

“You can bank on me like a squirrel banks acorns.” Nelson tucks the roll of twenty-dollar bills into his back pocket.

After dinner, Pynchon sits in a hard-backed chair in the hotel lobby and waits. He makes Eddie keep him company as a precaution against further stupidity. The young man alternates his attention between being on his phone and watching Nelson, who has positioned himself in the trusswork of the lobby ceiling so that he can orchestrate his tricks.

A few hours later, when it seems that all the guests are asleep, it begins to rain hard. Pynchon mentally applauds himself for getting Nelson to fix the roof before the storm surge from Canada blew in. A flash of lightning lights up the lobby seconds after thunder cracks.

Eddie breaks the silence by whispering, “Do you smell that? What has Nelson done? It smells like a giant skunk got loose upstairs.”

Pynchon agrees and shines a flashlight beam at Nelson up in the ceiling.

Nelson’s expression reflects confusion at Pynchon’s probe. He thinks maybe he forgot a prearranged signal for something. Anyway, he had already triggered the oozing walls of blood in the Pickett Bedroom a minute after the smells started. He plans to haunt the TV crew rooms next.

From Pynchon’s vantage point, he notices a new red light through the Pickett Bedroom's door gap. The light flickers erratically. A muted conversation starts up. Pynchon guesses the TV host is alerting his crew to film the effects Nelson has crafted. Pynchon gets excited. He tells Eddie, “You messed everything up yesterday, but Nelson saves our bacon tonight.”

Eddie points his flashlight beam at a growing puddle of water on the lobby floor. “Or he burns our bacon.”

Up in the ceiling, Nelson also sees the growing puddle of water. He drops down from his hiding spot and sprints up a set of stairs that leads to the attic and then the roof. Along the way, he grabs a toolbox and a tarp. Nelson hopes he can stop the rain from leaking through the roof before too much inside damage is done. Because he lied about doing the repair, he fears Pynchon might keep the bonus money.

Pynchon gets up from his chair and motions for Eddie to follow him up the main stairs. He worries that any neglect from staging the haunting effects could be disastrous. At the top of the stairs, he directs Eddie to the far side of the interior balcony, “Get up there in Nelson’s spot to keep the tricks going.”

Eddie shakes his head. “I’ve no idea what order he planned things. Tonight is his night.”

Pynchon lets out a long angry hiss that sounds like a bike tire with a nail puncture to Eddie. Since they are only steps away from Pickett’s Bedroom, Pynchon whispers. “I saw you the other night setting up a hangman cowboy dummy that falls from the roof. Do that one now.”

Eddie rolls his eyes and chuckles, “That would have been awesome to do last night; I forgot .” He opens a closet door nearby and unties a knotted rope that leads to the roof.

Before Pynchon has the chance to debase Eddie further for his perpetual incompetence, Davin Puskin screams the word *fire!*

The door to Pickett’s Bedroom is thrown open; behind the TV host, the carpet and curtains are ablaze. Later, the fire Marshall will write a report that the fire started from poorly connected knob and tube wires that ignited a mixture of paint thinner and red dye.

Before the fire company arrives, Pynchon responds to the emergency by grabbing an extinguisher which is bolted to the wall as part of mandated life safety. Racing towards Pickett’s Bedroom, he pushes Puskin aside to get a handle on the flames. Eddie follows Pynchon. Pynchon knows that if the hotel burns to the ground, he will be bankrupt; he has purposely undervalued his property to pay less on the annual fire policy.

Suddenly, the window of Pickett’s Bedroom breaks inwards, shelling the room with shards of glass. The cowboy dummy in a hangman’s noose dangles on the other side of the

damage, rocking back and forth. Pynchon cries out at the sight of a prone Nelson face-down on the carpet. Later, after emergency surgery, Nelson will tell the police he was knocked off the roof by the catapulting dummy, and only by the grace of a higher power managed to hold on to the rag-doll cowboy and go for a ride.

The violent crash of Nelson through the glass triggers both Davin Puskin and Eddie. Each reacts differently—Puskin heads for the stairs down to the lobby, while Eddie drops to the floor and cowers. As Puskin rattles down the stairs, he triggers the floor pressure plate (that Pynchon and Eddie were instructed to avoid) and releases Nelson’s spring-loaded ghost, which vaults upwards, accompanied by a blood-curdling scream from hidden speakers.

Puskin screams in fright and jumps backward. The scream startles Eddie, who bolts to his feet. Puskin and Eddie collide, resulting in Puskin pitching over the hallway balustrade. Eddie hears a sickening crunch and a pop. Looking over the railing, Eddie sees the TV host’s body twisted and bent in the light of his flashlight. Blood pools around Puskin’s head.

Several doors in the hotel begin to open, one after the other. The guests are panicked.

The screaming speakers suddenly begin to play something else. The next track isn’t stopped because Nelson is unconscious. Bobby Pickett’s “The Monster Mash” fills the lobby.

Eddie sees Genghis Cat scamper from the shadows to the corpse of the TV host. The cat hungrily begins lapping up the blood, working a trail from the floor spatters to Davin Pushkin’s head wound. Morbid curiosity compels Eddie to watch. He is reminded of when, as a child, a hawk snatched his puppy and took her to the heights of a tall tree to become a meal.

Finally finished, Genghis Cat looks up and affirms Eddie’s presence with a *meow*. Then the feline retreats to the kitchen, swishing his tail to and fro.

The End

