

Ceiling Tiles

A Yoopernatural Short

Tales of Life in Deathe

Mark Wolfgang

RON BLANK HUDDLED IN HIS Mop Closet of Solitude on the third floor of the Liberal Studies Building, struggling with the big fat binder of academic bureaucratic legalese gobbledegook that threatened his very existence at Cavendish Junior College, and possibly beyond.

It had come to him as one of those “oh by the way” moments that his boss, Ed Posen, was infamous for.

“*Ohbytheway,*” Ed had snapped after fifteen minutes of incoherent advice on how the campus electrical infrastructure could be vastly improved simply by Ron working *harder, faster and dumber* (“*just follow my orders!—thinking takes too long!*”) and definitely not *longer* (courtesy of an Administration moratorium on overtime). Ed predicted great productivity increases at absolutely no cost whatsoever to the college.

As if.

“Here’s your new job description.” Ed had hoisted the binder off his desk and heaved it at Ron without preamble.

Arms limp at his sides, Ron let the tome bounce off his chest. *Maybe if I don’t touch it...* he thought with a sense of dark foreboding. Then, as it dropped on his foot: *Ow.* He refused to flinch.

“I didn’t know I needed a new job description.” He’d been hired as campus electrician only five years ago. Not much had changed since then. Not the job, not his daily duties, and especially not Ed Posen.

“That’s for your *new* duties.”

Reluctantly, Ron picked up the binder and turned it over to see the cover.

He read with a sense of awe and dread. “Attn: Director of Cavendish Junior College University Campus Sustainability and Recycling.” He glanced up at Ed. “*Director?*”

The pugnacious little ex-welterweight and Reprimander in Chief of campus maintenance planted his fists on his hips and glared at him. “Don’t let it go to your head. You’re still just one of my donkeys.”

With that, Ed had beat a hasty retreat to his inner sanctum and slammed the door.

Ron had lugged the thick volume across the CJC campus to his secret mop closet hideaway to review and weep over. *Obligations and Formal Duties of the Director of Environmental Quality, Sustainability, and Hazardous and Non-Hazardous Waste Reclamation and Recycling and Environmentally and Ecologically Conscious Disposal Division of the Maintenance and Engineering Department of Cavendish University.*

Might as well just call it “Formula for Ron’s Failure,” he thought, considering that ninety percent of it was copied from Federal Environmental Protection Agency regulations, with added bureaucratic legalese—and there was no mention of a budget in any of the 473 densely cryptic pages. The word *University* in the title proved that creation of the manual had been subcontracted to outside legal consultants who didn’t know the difference between a *University* and a *Junior College*. Or they just wanted to suck up to the Administration. Either way, they’d obviously gotten paid by the word, with longer words paying best.

Half an hour later, sitting among the mops and brooms in his secret New Directorship Headquarters, Ron’s head hung low, filled with visions of a colossal downfall, inquiries, fines, reprimands, possibly even federal investigations and termination—his firing at the least, hopefully not his execution, although prison sentences were probably not out of the realm of possibility. His legs were numb from bearing the weight of the volume.

Hearing an odd noise in the corridor outside his closet, he paused to listen, orange highlighter poised over a poisonous phrase. Some kind of scraping, a grunt, a rattle, a stutter of feet on the floor. Setting aside the manual and tucking the highlighter back in his pocket, he unlocked the door and pulled it open. He looked up and down the short hallway. Nothing and no one to be seen. He looked up.

A two-foot-by-two-foot acoustical ceiling tile had been dislodged and partially tucked up into the space above the suspended ceiling grid. And another to the right of it. And two more to the left.

Ron scurried a dozen yards to the west end of the corridor and looked both ways up and down that hallway. No one there. He hustled to the other end and looked down that hallway. No one. But several more ceiling tiles in that hall had been dislodged. He’d come in that way less than half an hour ago, and everything had been fine.

What the hey? Again.

He unclipped his mini-maglight from his belt and focused a tight beam up into each dark hole. No sign that anyone had been working up there. As usual. Only a few Cavendish Junior College people would have an interest in any systems in the ceiling spaces. Him, Mac the plumber, Ted the heating-and-air guy, and maybe a couple techs in IT who might run network and video cables or phone lines—when the work was quick and easy, otherwise they’d pass it on to Ron to do. Or, on rare occasions, Security Chief Big Jim McKee or one of his juniors might be found running surveillance cables.

This was getting to be tiresome. Ron was always finding ceiling tiles out, as if someone would poke their nose up there, look around, and move on, never once taking an extra five seconds to reseal the tile right then, when they’re actually standing on the ladder—or come back and do it later.

A class let out and students streamed out into the hallway, jostling past him as if they might be blind.

Shaking his head, Ron gathered up his five-pound recycling manual—which he would have liked to recycle right then and there—and headed out to do some real work, leaving the tiles dislodged. He’d check back tomorrow.

THE NEXT DAY the tiles were still out. And more tiles besides.

And the day after that, still more.

Finally losing his patience, Ron snagged a six-foot stepladder out of the LSB basement, dragged it to the third floor, climbed up and shone his flashlight around the space above the first hole. Nothing to see. No sign of work done, nothing out of place. He dropped in the acoustical tile, moved to the next hole, and the next. No new cables, no open electrical boxes, no sign of any repairs to pipes.

The dust hadn't even been disturbed.

At lunchtime he made some calls to L'Anse, Baraga and Houghton, checking out their recycling options with special consideration to hazardous materials. Ed Posen—or more likely “Lucifer,” the maintenance department's executive secretary, ever-vigilant fiscal watchdog, and Ed's designated chief executioner, Lucy Ferguson—would probably confront him with the long distance bill when it came next month.

Then, against his better judgment, and carrying his new manual, he popped into the Maintenance Department Office for a bit of clarification from Ed or Lucy on his new duties as “director” of recycling and sustainability—and hoping that neither were in.

Unfortunately, Ron caught Ed trying to sneak out the back door.

“*Budget?*” Ed barked when Ron asked the obvious question. “*There ain't no budget! You're just recycling paper and junk! Whaddaya need a budget for?*”

“Because there's no recycling facility in Deathe.” The village of Deathe had once-weekly trash service for its 500-odd residents, courtesy of the Orphic village handyman, Morlock, who, for all Ron knew, just collected the two community dumpsters at opposite ends of town and dumped everything in the Bottomless Pit in the dead of night. The college tagged onto that service for minimal cost. “We'll need to have everything picked up,” Ron continued, “from papers to plastics, and glass, metal, cardboard, boxboard—”

“I ain't payin' *nobody* to pick up *nuthin'!*” Ed's face lit up like a stoplight. Veins stood out on his neck and forehead. Veins that probably didn't appear in any anatomy book.

“If not picked up, then I'll have to haul everything to a certified recycling center. L'Anse? Baraga?” He shrugged. He had no idea. “Maybe even Marquette. Fluorescent bulbs!” he said before Ed could protest. “*No one* recycles fluorescent light bulbs for free. Or fluorescent ballasts containing PCBs. We'll have to pay someone to take them. Add in boxes, crates, heavy duty plastic bags certified to contain the glass, phosphorus, PCBs, mercury, any other hazardous materials.” He opened the manual to one of the many sections he'd bookmarked and pointed to the relevant paragraphs.

“Then I guess *someone* is gonna have to get rid of them!” Ed glared at him.

Ron turned to the back of the binder, where dozens of forms had been included for his admiration and convenience. “There are *pages* of federal EPA regulations to comply with and document. *Reams!*”

“Just do it! Take care of it!”

“Okay.” He shrugged. “I'll need a delivery van, then,” he insisted. The maintenance department didn't have a van, just one crappy pickup with a rusted-out bed. “With plenty of gas. This will take me

several hours a week if I have to drive to Marquette.” He might be exaggerating for effect, but probably not much.

“*There ain’t no budget! Get over it!* Just memorize everything in there and make it happen. This comes down from the President’s office. She wants to make it look like she’s all holy on environmentalistical crap right now.”

With that, Ed beat his hasty retreat out the back door, and Ron shuffled back to the Liberal Studies Building in defeat.

Dropping down to the second floor with his ladder, Ron stepped out of the elevator and looked up. *More* tiles out. He spotted Erin Coe, the perky coed he’d recruited as his intern—or maybe she’d recruited him as her mentor, he was never quite sure—bustling between classes, and called out to her.

“Hey, old man,” she chirped. “What’s up?”

Ron looked up and pointed. “Open holes in the ceiling. Did you happen to see who did this? They weren’t out yesterday.”

“Nope.” Erin scowled, confused. “I’m sure they weren’t out when I came to class an hour ago.”

“This is getting ridiculous. I’m going to start putting padlocks on all the ladders.”

“Oh. That won’t help.” Erin clutched her books as kids bustled around, bumping her and Ron aside in their rush to classes. “I saw someone popping out tiles last week. He didn’t need a ladder.”

“*Huh?*” Ron scowled into her chestnut eyes. “And you didn’t think to mention this?”

“I thought he was doing some kind of inspection. He had a broomstick. He just poked it up there and jiggled the tiles aside—”

“*What?*” Ron exclaimed. This was his first clue. After at least three years of this. An eyewitness! He grabbed Erin by the shoulders and she almost dropped her books. “Who was it? Did you recognize him? What did he look like?”

“I dunno. Some old guy in brown coveralls. I only saw him from the back. Hmm. Now that I think about it, he didn’t really look up at all, he just moved on to the next tile.”

Ron thought that if he found this guy he’d take the broomstick away from him and beat him with it. *Old guy*. Erin was nineteen. What did she know from old? She thought Ron was old, so for her *old* could mean anyone from twenty-nine to a-hundred-and-nine.

“If you see him again—” Ron began, but the elevator chimed and half a dozen perfectly healthy kids piled out, knocking Erin’s books out of her hands. They tumbled to the floor, and Ron bent to help her scoop them up. The hallway began to empty out again. “As I was saying,” Ron began as they got the books settled into Erin’s arms.

Interrupting him, she pointed her chin down the north hallway. “There he is now!”

Ron followed her eyes. Sure enough, there was a stocky guy in brown coveralls at the far end of the hall, his back to them. He toddled along with a broom in his hand. Stopping, he thrust the broom handle up, popped a tile up, and wiggled it sideways into the space above. Moving a few feet farther on, he repeated his mysterious task.

“Hey!” Ron shouted without response.

“I gotta get to class,” Erin said, running off.

Ron propped his stepladder against the wall and took off after the guy, just as he rounded the corner at the end of the hall and ducked out of sight. Half a dozen more tiles were out that Ron was sure hadn't been when he'd stepped off the elevator just a few minutes ago. He zipped to the end of the hall and turned the corner to see—

No one. Two more tiles were out in this hall, but all the doors to classrooms and maintenance closets were closed, and there was no guy in brown coveralls to be seen. Ron peered in the sidelights of the classrooms. Those that weren't full of kids and teachers were dark, empty and locked. The maintenance and data closets were both locked. He rattled the handles, then unlocked the doors to confirm that there was no one hiding inside.

For the next ten minutes Ron scoured the entire second floor and the stairwells, then moved up and down through the building, searching. The guy—whoever he was—had vanished.

Ron spent the next half hour dropping ceiling tiles back into place.

“THIS DOESN'T SOUND like criminal activity,” Lieutenant “Big Jim” McKee said, sounding a bit put out, which was kind of funny, considering he was in charge of security at a third-rate junior college where the only crime spree in recent memory had been a brief spate of sidewalk graffiti. There had been no arrests.

“Still,” Ron said, “I was hoping you'd put up a surveillance camera or two in the LSB corridors, maybe we can figure out who this guy is.”

McKee considered this for a long moment. “Let's see. There's three floors. That would take half a dozen cameras. More, if we wanted full coverage on each floor.”

Ron knew a little about the security department's budget. It was significant. And he knew McKee had a closet full of motion-sensing cameras that had never been used, their boxes not even opened. The President was very security conscious. At least with her Administration Building. And it had more cameras than it needed. Ron also knew that the President's paranoia outweighed her timidity and most of them had been turned off.

“And,” McKee continued, “we'd have to set them up, and then check them every day, check and view any recordings, and then reset them. A lot of man-hours involved. A *lot*.”

Ron thought of the number of man-hours—more like *boy-hours*—that were currently being spent lounging around in dispatch, the bullpen and the break room, strolling around campus in pairs, enjoying the day, and no doubt hitting on coeds in the cafeteria.

“I've wasted a lot of man-hours reinstalling ceiling tiles.”

McKee waved a dismissive hand. “And then there's batteries...”

“I'll give you batteries,” Ron said, knowing that McKee's camera batteries were rechargeable.

“I don't know. I'll have to run it past the vice president.”

“Never mind.” Ron knew what that outcome of that would be. No vice president ever green-lighted anything, at least not without months of dismissive lack of consideration. “I'll conduct my own investigation.” He rose to leave.

“Now hold on there.” McKee stood up behind his desk. “Investigating is my bailiwick.”

Which you're not doing, Ron thought, but didn't say. He walked past the kiddie cops goofing around in the lobby and headed out the door.

"HE'S BEEN AT IT AGAIN," Erin said. "I can't believe you couldn't catch him. The wheels lock up on your walker, or what?"

"Where?" Ron demanded, ignoring the jab and Erin's wicked grin. He'd kept an eagle eye on the Liberal Studies Building, and after several incidents the second week of September, during which Ron had made no progress in his attempts to catch the villain, there hadn't been any more offenses in three days.

"The Engineering Building. I've been looking for you. There were some tiles out yesterday and the day before, and now again this morning."

They took off at a brisk pace, Ron leading the way, Erin running to get ahead—and calling over her shoulder for the "old man" to keep up. Erin knew the building almost as well as Ron. All the technical classes were there, and she was in her first year of the CJC pre-double-E program—Electrical Engineering, Ron's previous career before coming to Deathe in Michigan's wild and woolly Upper Peninsula and taking the electrical maintenance job at Cavendish Junior College.

Banging into the cool interior of the old brick structure, they paused. Ron spotted two ceiling tiles out, the square holes dark and gaping. Erin made a noise.

"This way," she said, scurrying toward the faculty wing without a glance upward.

"We're too late."

"No, we're not. Look!"

Ron looked. Near the end of the dim hallway, a man in dark brown coveralls was poking a stick at the ceiling. Ron bolted, pounding down the corridor with Erin close on his heels. The mystery man turned the corner and stepped out of sight. Ron slammed into the wall at the end junction. Erin skidded into him. They looked down the adjoining hallway. It was short, and empty. There were only three doors: two offices and a restroom. Ron grabbed at the handle of one office and Erin the other. Both locked and dark. They turned toward the restroom.

"Cover me," Ron joked nervously. "I'm going in." He pushed the door open.

He edged around the privacy wall and saw no one. Creeping to the metal partition, he eased the toilet stall door open. Empty. *What the hell?* There was no window, no hatch in the plaster ceiling. No way out. No escape. He became aware of Erin standing close by.

"Did you see this?" she whispered.

Ron followed her eyes to the mirror over the sink.

"Stop following me," he read, written on the glass in a soapy white smear. *Fingerprints?* There was a wet bar of Ivory soap on the sink.

"Yah, but what's that in the corner?"

More soapy smears. In the upper left corner of the mirror. Another word?

"It looks like... *don't*," Erin said.

Ron squinted and cocked his head. He could sort of see it. Yes... yes, maybe it did.

FOR THE NEXT TWO DAYS there was a flurry of dislodged ceiling tiles in the two buildings. Ron refused to take the bait. He left the tiles out.

Both the LSB and the Engineering buildings were post-war structures, built in 1949, by the same construction outfit, a division of Cavendish Lumber Company formed to retake the local lead in brick construction. Crews were brought in from around the U.P. and beyond. A search of the library turned up two books that detailed the near-simultaneous construction projects. Ron read them both one sleepless weekend. Early Harbaugh, a local roughneck, by then nearly seventy, had run both jobs with his mouth and his fists, and shared his crews between them. It was tough work and wild times, done on a frantic schedule, under brutal U.P. conditions. There were gales of snow and ice, pounding rains, swarms of bugs, mosquitoes, and deer flies, and sweltering summer heat. There were also fights. There were brawls. But for all that there had been only one death, one man killed in an unfortunate construction accident, leaving his family destitute. That had been in September of 1949.

Ron began to form suspicions.

Without permission from Ed or Lucy, he came in to work on a Sunday morning, off the clock. He checked in with the kid at the security dispatch desk, assuring him that he had some critical off-hours maintenance tasks to perform. Then he grabbed his flashlights and a ladder and set about reinstalling every ceiling tile that he found dislodged—after shining the light into the dark spaces and checking every little nook and cranny. Poking tools into holes, prying apart wooden forms. He found plenty of decade's old dust, grime, a few ancient beer cans and whiskey bottles, and hundreds of cigarette butts.

Then late in the day, when the end was nearly in sight, he spotted something else—a lump of aged, dry, cracked leather. A wallet. He pried it out of a crack between two cement blocks where it had probably been trapped for nearly seventy years.

He was about to take it to Security, but then thought better of that. McKee would probably look at it as a curiosity and feel obligated to hand it over to the President, who would probably declare it a piece of college heritage and keep it in her CJC archives. Annie Ristimaki, the town librarian, if she heard of it, would want it for the Deathe Historical Society Museum. Instead, Ron locked himself in his shop with his tools and magnifying lamp and peeled it open like a delicate onion. There was money—several old silver certificates so dark and unique they'd probably get flagged as counterfeit nowadays—adding up to twenty-seven dollars. A few coins, a driver's license and union membership card, some business cards, papers that had to be math cheat sheets for a carpenter.

Ron turned the license over in his hands. He instantly recognized the name, one Ludell Toczydlowski—the victim of the fatal construction accident.

There were also two black and white photographs, cracked and faded. One was of a young woman who looked vaguely familiar. The second was a couple, the same young woman with a stocky man—in dark coveralls.

Then he felt a lump, something tucked deep in the wallet. He tugged he a tightly wrapped scrap of brittle paper and began to unfold it, revealing... A letter, written in very precise, old-fashioned handwriting, the brown ink pallid with age. *To my beloved family, should anything untoward befall me...* A key, secreted within those folds, fell out and clattered onto the desk.

Gently pressing the paper flat on the blotter under his fluorescent magnifying lamp, Ron discovered it was actually some kind of an old treasure map.

FORTUNATELY THE OLD HOUSE was still standing, although abandoned nearly two decades ago, and the property it stood on was still owned—just barely—by the Toczydowski family. Ludell’s kids, now in their forties, found the lock box hidden in the cellar, just as their father had promised in the letter. The key fit. Inside was enough treasure—gold, dozens of rare silver coins, a small bag of diamonds, and several well-preserved stock certificates, bearer bonds and baseball cards—to get the family farm out of tax foreclosure, and cover Ida Mae Toczydowski Janicki’s nursing home expenses until she died, peacefully, three years later, at the age of 97.

Ludell must have been haunting the two Cavendish Junior College buildings for decades, looking for his lost wallet. Or finally leading Ron to find it.

Ron never had an issue with dislodged ceiling tiles again.

Well, except whenever Mac the plumber got access to a ladder. But thanks to a few obscure discretionary powers scattered among the 473 pages of his new job description, the newly-minted Director of Sustainability and Recycling had a plan for that.

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