

Shrinkage

A Yoopernatural Short

Tales of Life in Deathe

Mark Wolfgang

“I CAN’T BELIEVE IT,” SAID MICHIGAN STATE TROOPER ALICE LOUISE DUBOSE.

She stood in awe of the Mysterious Wu Fang. Not because of the guy’s many obvious talents. Sure, he owned and operated Wu Fang’s Mexican Bistro, one of the top three restaurants in the little dead-end village of Deathe, and very successful. Of course there were only three places in minuscule town that *legally* made a business of serving food. There was Hoolie’s Cafe, the Buck Snort Saloon, and Wu Fang’s. But still, that Top Three honor was deserved. She’d eaten there on a few occasions. The bistro’s tag line *Home of the Best Pizza in Town* was well-earned.

But right now Wu Fang’s reputation as a restaurateur was not the issue.

What she was seeing in the cellar beneath his ancient “downtown” Deathe storefront was beyond her comprehension.

Alice Louise stood before a nightmare of snaking cables and towering electrical coils, a panel of archaic voltage and ampere meters from bygone decades, and gleaming copper disks and rods. Lightning coursed between two golden balls, snapping and cracking with lethal energy. Wu Fang’s underground physics lab looked like the set of a classic Frankenstein movie, re-imagined with an unlimited budget. Which she was pretty sure Wu Fang didn’t have, but really, who knew? He was mysterious, after all.

Idling power thrummed in the machinery, and through the building, in the tall stone walls and the concrete floor, like the throaty growl of a beast on a slim leash.

“I hope your electrical service has the capacity to handle this,” she said, channeling the concern that would surely have been foremost in the mind of her friend Ron Blank, an electrician and electrical engineer. She had to wonder. The building was over a hundred years old. And Ron had once complained about how UPPCO, the Upper Peninsula Power Company, had long history of ignoring the needs of this “centrally isolated” village.

The equipment before Alice looked like an electrician’s nightmare.

Or a nefarious scheme to throw the entire Upper Peninsula—and maybe half of the North American continent—into darkness.

“I’ve run the math,” Wu Fang said. He was wearing a white lab coat. Of course. Any resemblance to Dr. Frankenstein stopped there. He was dark. Swarthy. Tall and lanky, with sharp Asian features and a

long black ponytail. “The initial spike should be less than ten thousand amps. The UPPCO mains should hold, they’re rated for at least ten milliseconds at that level before they trip. I shouldn’t need more than nine. Nine-point-three, max. Do you want to see my calculations?”

She’d stopped listening at “I’ve run the math.”

Is there such a thing as a mad *physicist*? she wondered. In addition to being a talented actor who used his “Mysterious Wu Fang” persona to confuse, annoy and delight visitors to his restaurant—she’d thought it horribly offensive when she’d met him the first time—she’d learned Wu Fang was a science whiz who held several incomprehensible advanced degrees from multiple universities: in physics, astronomy, quantum mechanics, bio mechanics, and something he called proto-human philosophy, which even Ron thought might be something he made up.

And he was also just a guy who tutored kids from the Deathe Consolidated Schools in science, right here in his rundown storefront on Deathe’s main street.

“You know why I’m here?” she asked. She couldn’t take her eyes off the thing sitting in the middle of the cellar. “You can’t guess?”

“You said something about me using a lot of electricity.” His black eyes glittered with amusement as he stroked and twirled his long, thin Fu Manchu mustache.

“UPPCO requested an investigation. Yeah, they say you’re using an inordinate amount of electricity. They suspected...”

“That I’m growing marijuana in my basement?” Wu Fang’s grin widened.

“Exactly.”

“Well, you can see there’s no pot here.” He waved his arms expansively.

No. No, there was not.

Alice Louise heaved a sigh.

In the middle of this lethal looking mass of snapping, sparking electrical confusion sat this mad scientist’s monster—a pristine Corvette. Bright blue and polished to a mirror finish. Looking even better than if it had just come out of the Chevrolet showroom.

In 1963.

It was, indeed, a 1963 split-window Sting Ray, the Holy Grail of Corvette collectors everywhere.

Possibly—*probably*—worth more than a few tons of pot.

“May I ask what you’re doing here?” *And if you stole this car*, she thought, but left unsaid. For now.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“Okay.” He shrugged “You wouldn’t believe me.”

“I won’t argue *that* point,” she said. “But again... try me.”

Wu Fang beamed, and Alice Louise got the distinct impression he’d been hoping she would ask. She knew that people often wanted nothing more than to tell their story. And sometimes criminals just wanted to confess—to brag about their cleverness.

“You’ve seen *Fantastic Voyage*?”

“Maybe?” It sounded familiar to her. She recalled it to be a movie.

He launched into a long and convoluted story, the way Alice Louise knew some wannabee writers would try to tell the entire story of their 500-page unpublished manuscript with names and places and in-depth character descriptions and backgrounds until she was ready to shoot the storyteller and put them both out of their respective miseries. All she could get out of this tale was that a bunch of medical students in a submarine apparently got shrunk down to microscopic size and injected into some guy’s bloodstream for some reason.

Oh. *That Fantastic Voyage*.

She narrowed her eyes. “So this is a medical experiment?”

“No!” Wu Fang barked in offense. He frowned prodigiously and tugged at his mustache. “I’m going to shrink this car down to one-twenty-fifth scale.” He puffed out his chest, daring her to challenge him.

She declined to take the bait.

“Um. Why?” she asked, truly incredulous.

“Why? *Why*? Don’t you want to know *how*?” He blinked. His fierce black eyes now just looked wounded.

He was tall and sinewy, but she was just as tall. Also well-trained and better-armed. She decided to humor him.

“I *was* wondering how you got the Corvette—and all this stuff—down here in this cellar. I don’t see a door big enough.”

“Yah. Well, sure, but... Um, that’s a State Secret. I can’t tell you that.”

“You took down part of the back wall and dug a ramp?”

“*No!* I mean, well, yah. Okay. But that’s not important right now.”

“What *is* important?”

“How I’m going to do it.”

Oh, yes, this would be good. So good she wanted to prolong the moment.

“Where did you get the Corvette?”

“What? Why? I mean, I bought it. I have the title and all the receipts. I spent a year’s profit from the Bistro to get it back to original condition. *Better than* original condition! You gotta admit, it’s gorgeous, right?”

“Yes it is. Why do you think you want to shrink it down to the size of a model?”

“Because I *can!* And I *will!* You’ll see!”

“But *why*?” Now she was determined to see this through.

“You don’t care *how*?” His eyebrows pinched together, highlighting his confusion.

She shook her head. She now wanted walk him through the whole show and tell.

Wu Fang's eyes softened. "I loved this car. When I was a kid. I mean, not *this* car. Obviously. I loved the 1963 split window Sting Ray. I used to have a model of it. I put it together myself. But it was crap. I botched it. Clumsy." He hung his head in shame. "Ever since, I dreamed of having a *perfect* little model. Right down the last nut and bolt. Every little switch and spark plug. I don't know why." He shrugged. "I just always wanted this perfect little Vette sitting on my shelf to stare at and admire and own."

This was kind of weird.

"But you have the real thing now. Right there."

"Yah, I know. I can't explain it. And I don't have a place to store it and protect it. From deterioration and... and theft. If I can shrink it now, I can lock it in a climate-controlled safe and just bring it out the admire it."

Even weirder. Putting a valuable and useful real thing on a pedestal, to be adored, but not utilized, perhaps never even touched, never caressed for fear of smudging its perfection. She wondered what a shrink would make of this.

"You do realize this is impossible, right?"

"You dare to doubt?" Wu Fang challenged, jerking fully erect, scowling. His eyes gleamed maniacally within his dark, sharp Asian features. His jet black hair practically stood on end. "You think I'm kidding? What you see here is the culmination of a lifetime of research and engineering. And mental calculations, until I, um, also managed to get time on the University of Texas' Stampede supercomputer."

Alice Louise wondered how he "managed to *get* time" on a supercomputer. He backed up a step when he caught her skeptical frown. Cursing herself, she let her face relax into a neutral expression.

"All I have to do," he rushed to say, covering himself and cutting off her next question, "I turn a couple dials, and throw this switch." He stepped to a small control console that sat on a table. An unassuming thin cable ran from there into a large cabinet studded with lights and dials. "You will see this car shrunk down to something you practically stick in your pocket. All the settings are programmed in. I was going to do it tomorrow, but now, well, you're here as my witness. An officer of the law. A Michigan State Police Trooper! Even if no one believes me, they'll have to believe you!"

"Have you even tried this before now?"

"Well, yah. Sure. I did. I mean, it was just small stuff."

"Like what?"

Wu Fang shuffled nervously. "Well, a fruitcake. For one. I—"

"A *fruitcake*? You mean like a *Christmas* fruitcake? Can I see it?" This was interesting. Assuming he wasn't totally loonie, maybe just delusional, how small could he have made a fruitcake? Better yet, now that she was pressing him, how was he going to weasel out of this?

It was coming back to her now. She had seen *Fantastic Voyage* once. She assumed he might have a really tiny simulacrum of an alleged fruitcake he would try to pass off as a miracle of magical physics.

"Well?" she pressed.

"Well, um... no. I mean, you probably could see it, if you had a really good magnifying glass, but, um, I lost it. I mean it was pretty small." He scuffed his toe on the concrete. It was almost endearing.

“Like, you know, maybe the size of a grain of sand.” She gave him a dubious look. “Or maybe even a grain of, um, sugar.”

“Well *okay* then.” Wanting to keep him open and talking, she turned to take in the complex enormity of the electrical machinery that filled the cellar from wall to stone wall and up to the century-old wooden joists twelve feet above their heads. “How does all this work?”

“Space,” he said.

“Space?”

“The universe is made up primarily of space. Lots of it! Space is really, really big, and most of it—as a percentage of it, virtually *all* of it—is *empty!*”

“I suppose that’s why they call it *space*.”

“I know, right?” He was warming up fast again. “And not just on the galactic scale, but there too. We look in all directions and there’s literally trillions of galaxies, each containing literally billions of stars and more billions and billions of planets, and ice and dust and gases, but everything in between is just literally empty space. But also on the atomic and subatomic scale. You look at an atom, at the nucleus of an atom, the neutron and proton, and the quantum particles that form those, and the electrons that swirl around them, and even on *that* scale they’re mostly *empty space!*”

“Fascinating,” she said, almost but not quite feeling it. She was remembering more about *Fantastic Voyage*. Even as a young girl she’d thought it was pretty stupid.

“They say all the visible matter in the entire universe could be squeezed down to a point the size of the head of a pin if you took out all the empty space! That was the Big Bang. All the matter in the universe, at nearly infinite temperature, with all the *space* squeezed out of it! *Can you believe that?*”

“Honestly? No.”

“The math works. I’ve seen it. I understand it.”

“I believe you,” she said, not believing him. She’d heard it from more reliable sources and not believed them, either.

“The CBM—the Cosmic Background Radiation—is proof. It’s the sum of all the heat that was in that single point of matter, now spread out over billions of light years.”

“I’ll take your word for it. So what’s your scheme with this shrinking plan? You just take out the space between all the atoms in your Corvette?”

“Yes! Exactly! I could theoretically shrink this car down to the size of a single atom. But all I want to do is have a perfect, pristine 1963 split window Sting Ray to place on a shelf in my office so I can admire it and know what it is, and how it was done. My little secret, the biggest little secret in the world.”

“So all the atoms will still be right there, inside the car? As it sits on your shelf?”

“Exactly! There’s lots of space in there I can take out. Lots!” He moved over to his control console and adjusted a couple of dials. The machinery that filled the room hummed louder, with barely contained enthusiasm. “You might want to put on these goggles.” He tossed her a pair of smoked glasses with side shields. She caught them and examined them like the antiques they were. Totally opaque. The secret to how he might manage a little sleight of hand? “There won’t be much radiation,” he said, “but I think the photon release will be quite intense.”

Hmm. He may be a mathematician, but something wasn't adding up. She remembered it not adding up for *Fantastic Voyage*, either.

The floor vibrated under her feet. The room seemed to get smaller. The hum increased in pitch and volume.

"How much does your Corvette weigh? Like, two tons?"

He shot her a curious glance. "What? *No*. Not quite. Maybe only thirty-two hundred pounds. Thirty-five hundred max. Why?"

"So what happens to the *mass*?" She had to shout over the rising noise level.

He paused in lifting his dark goggles to his face. "The mass?"

The machinery was building up to a fever pitch. The air took on a curious, almost ultraviolet hue.

"Yeah," she yelled. "If you're just sucking the empty space out of the car, and all the atoms remain..."

He puzzled over that for a long moment. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, aren't you going to have a tiny little car the size of a shoebox that weighs three-thousand, five-hundred pounds, just sitting there on the floor?"

They looked at each other, then at the Corvette. Wu Fang's eyes fell to the floor in the middle distance.

"*How strong is your shelf?*" Alice Louise shouted over the incessant howl and crackle of the machinery. Blue sparks flew from random bits of metal, flashing through the air like lightning. She ducked to avoid a nasty bolt. "*And how are you going to even pick it up and put it on a freaking shelf?*"

Alice Louise didn't know much about quantum physics, then or now, but *that* was the stupid thing she had taken away from her single viewing of *Fantastic Voyage* some three decades ago. And in the movie they'd left several men and an entire submarine inside a guy's head, just behind his eyes. More tonnage than half a dozen Corvette Sting Rays. To say nothing of the spatial volume. But that was just a stupid movie.

Wu Fang slammed his palm on the table, then palmed a big red mushroom button. Alice Louise jerked her goggles up to her eyes, then paused.

The deafening howl wound down until it was once again little more than annoying background noise.

Wu Fang swore an oath.

"Well," he said, regaining his composure, "back to the drawing board."

Alice Louise could report back that, after checking out the entire two-story building, she'd found no pot on the premises, just a harmless mad physicist with some very large electrical toys in his cellar. As long as he paid his enormous UPPCO bill every month, no harm, no foul.

But she'd probably want to check in on him from time to time. She figured even if he found a way further subvert quantum mechanics and squeeze the car's the mass down in proportion to size, he'd still need a pretty strong shelf. What was one-twenty-fifth of three-thousand, five-hundred pounds anyway? More or less? Still a *lot*, she guessed. Oh well, math was never her strong suit.

For that matter, what about that five-pound fruitcake the size of a grain of sand, sitting on the floor somewhere in that cellar? Must make quite a dimple in the rubber mat under the Corvette. Probably ruin any vacuum cleaner that got hold of it.

But that was not her concern.

And besides, this case was closed.

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