

THE HUNTERS

By Christopher M. Walsh

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

LESLIE
RICHARD
CLERK
MAID

Mid to Late 30s

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SETTING

A room in a quintessential motel, situated in a rural area off some interstate, in a forgotten corner of the country.

SCENE 1

Lights up on a motel room. It has all the standard accoutrements one has come to expect from a roadside motel.

LESLIE and RICHARD enter. They are a middle-aged couple. Leslie carries cases of recording equipment.

LESLIE

Okay, here it is. First impressions?

She sets the cases down on the bed and starts pulling out the equipment. Richard walks to the center of the room and waits, almost like he's trying to identify a smell in the air.

RICHARD

It's... different.

LESLIE

Different how?

RICHARD

I'm not sure.

LESLIE

You're not feeling anything?

RICHARD

No, there's... something. I think. It's strange.

LESLIE

Maybe it's hiding.

RICHARD

Don't joke. It might be. We don't want to offend it.

(For the first time he notices what Leslie is doing.)

Is that going to take long? Should I run down and grab the luggage?

LESLIE

No need. The clerk said he'd bring it up.

There is a knock at the door.

LESLIE (CONT'D)

Speak of the devil.

RICHARD

That's not funny.

LESLIE

It's an expression.

RICHARD

That you know I don't approve of.

LESLIE

Okay. Sorry.

She opens the door. The CLERK enters with two suitcases. He remains completely cheerful and unruffled throughout this entire conversation.

CLERK

Mister and Mrs. Wayland?

LESLIE

That's us. Thanks so much.

CLERK

It was my pleasure, ma'am.

Leslie hands the Clerk a five dollar bill.

CLERK (CONT'D)

Ah, and thank you.

(Noticing the equipment.)

Pardon me for asking, but are you... photographers?

LESLIE

Of a sort, yes.

CLERK

Nature, that sort of thing? There is some very scenic terrain in this region.

LESLIE

Nothing like that, exactly. We are, um...

RICHARD

We are paranormal investigators.

CLERK

Para...?

RICHARD

We're ghost hunters.

CLERK

Really? Delightful!

RICHARD

You think so?

CLERK

I certainly do! What fun!

LESLIE

Well, yes, it can be.

CLERK

Have you found many? Ghosts, I mean?

RICHARD

We have investigated over sixty reports of hauntings. Of those, seven were legitimate cases of paranormal phenomena.

CLERK

Seven? That's disappointing. What were the rest?

LESLIE

Usually something mundane. An animal infestation. Old pipes. That sort of thing.

CLERK

But every once in a while...?

LESLIE

Yes, we have documented a few cases that we believe qualify as supernatural.

CLERK

That's fantastic! So exciting. So, may I ask what brings you to our little corner of the world?

RICHARD

When we first started out, most of our leads had some sort of history. Every haunted house has a story, and somebody somewhere has told that story, and that story survives in one form or another. Family legacy, urban legend, what have you. Every true haunting we've investigated had something like that attached to it. Many of the false ones, as well. There's always a pattern to trace, if you know what you're looking for.

CLERK

Amazing.

RICHARD

Isn't it?

LESLIE

So, in our research we were following a few threads - unexplained disappearances, a couple cases of insanity where there was no known cause or family history - and we found that these threads formed a sort of a web.

RICHARD

And as we followed those threads to the center of the web, they ended up leading us... here.

CLERK

You don't say? Our little town?

RICHARD

More specifically, this motel.

CLERK

Well that is the darnedest thing.

RICHARD

Indeed it is, because you know what's the strangest part?

CLERK

What's that?

RICHARD

When we really dug in and started looking into the background and history of this place, you know what we found?

CLERK

What?

Nothing.

RICHARD

Pause.

Huh.

CLERK

Right? My thoughts exactly. Not a damn thing.

LESLIE

CLERK

And yet, here you are.

LESLIE

Here we are. You see, every place has something. Every town has a local legend. There's the Army of the Dead in Charleston, Resurrection Mary in Chicago, the Ghost Diner of Spokane... But this place? Nothing. It's like every reference to ghosts, hauntings, or the supernatural have been expunged from the records. That's as big a mystery to us as any of the real ghost stories we've solved.

CLERK

Wow.

LESLIE

So tell us, Mister... I'm sorry, you don't have a name tag.

CLERK

(as if discovering it for the first time:)

No, indeed I don't.

Pause until it becomes clear the Clerk is not going to elaborate.

LESLIE

So, what can you tell us about this place?

CLERK

Oh, not much to tell, really. It's a nice, quiet place. We like it that way.

LESLIE

Really? Nothing unusual ever happen on your watch?

CLERK

Well, I suppose that depends on your definition of “unusual.”

LESLIE

Yes, I suppose it does.

CLERK

Well, I don't mean to be a bother. Feel free to call the office if you need anything.

LESLIE

Much appreciated.

CLERK

Good night.

The Clerk exits. Leslie shuts the door behind her. Richard gasps, as if he'd been holding her breath.

LESLIE

What is it?

RICHARD

The strangest thing. The whole time that man was in this room, I... There was nothing. I couldn't feel a thing.

LESLIE

Nothing?

RICHARD

Silence. But there was a weight to it. A pressure. It's like he blocked the signal.

LESLIE

What about now?

RICHARD

It's there. But I can't pinpoint it. It's coming from nowhere and everywhere at once.

LESLIE

What is it telling you?

RICHARD

Nothing. There is a presence here, but it... I think it's ignoring me.

LESLIE

How? The spirits always want to communicate. Even if it's just to say, “Go away.”

Not these.

RICHARD

“These”? Plural?

LESLIE

Maybe? This is... unreal. Whatever is here, it... It just doesn't care.

RICHARD

How is that possible? If we're right about this, all the disappearances, everything, then how can it be the result of something that doesn't even care if we're here or not?

LESLIE

I don't know. Maybe it's a side effect? What do the readouts say? Are you set up yet?

RICHARD

I've got the monitor running. The spectrograph is showing low levels, but constant. There's something here, no doubt. I think it's worth a try.

LESLIE

Okay. Get the book.

RICHARD

Leslie opens one of her cases and starts to search through it. Richard touches a wall, and is perplexed by the sensation.

Do you mind if I look in your bag?

LESLIE

For what?

RICHARD

The book. It's not in my case.

LESLIE

Yes it is. I saw you put it in your case when we packed this morning.

RICHARD

I know. We went through the checklist, but it's not here now. Can I check your bag?

LESLIE

Richard nods, and Leslie opens his bag.

I don't see it.

LESLIE (CONT'D)

RICHARD

Amazing.

(To the room:)

Are you playing with us? I wondered if you had a bit of trickster in you.

LESLIE

(Looking at her equipment:)

No answer.

RICHARD

No. I wonder...

(Richard opens the drawer in the night-stand.)

Huh. Apparently the Gideons have privileges we don't.

He reaches into the drawer and pulls out a thick book with a pale tan leather cover. Holding the book, Richard begins to tremble, as if he touched an exposed wire.

LESLIE

Richard? Richard?!? What's happening?

Richard drops the book and staggers back.

RICHARD

Skin. It's skin. The book. That's... oh god...

He runs to the bathroom. From behind the door we hear him vomiting.

Leslie picks up the book. She does not notice anything wrong with it.

LESLIE

Are you okay?

RICHARD

(From the bathroom:)

Just give me a minute.

Leslie opens the book and thumbs through the pages. A passage catches her attention, and she stops flipping.

The lights flicker as her eyes roll back in her head. Voices whisper in a long dead language.

Leslie starts to whisper with them.

The bathroom door opens and everything snaps back to normal. Richard enters.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

Did you say something?

LESLIE

Hmm? No. Are you okay?

RICHARD

I think so. God. How can you stand to hold that book?

LESLIE

What's wrong with it?

RICHARD

Can't you feel it? It's bound with human skin!

LESLIE

What? I don't... I don't think so. It feels perfectly normal. Feel it.

Leslie holds the book out. Richard recoils.

RICHARD

No thank you. I saw enough the first time.

LESLIE

I don't understand. Look, it's even got the stamp. You cannot escape the Gideons.

RICHARD

Arturo Velez. Why is that name familiar?

LESLIE

What? Arturo Velez? He was... Hang on.

Leslie tucks the book under her arm while she takes a file folder from her case.

The folder is thick with paper, some held together with paper clips or binder clips, post-it notes sticking out everywhere. Leslie is careful not to lose contact with the book the whole time.

LESLIE (CONT'D)

Here it is. Arturo Velez. Mexican national, emigrated to the US in 1947, started a business in Houston, with his brother - a restaurant. Last seen in 1958. His car was found abandoned, out of gas, about nine miles out of town. No one in his family could explain why he was here. Just left in the middle of the night and started driving. One of the better documented disappearances from back then.

RICHARD

Leslie... Jesus, Leslie... That's him.

LESLIE

What's him?

RICHARD

The book, Leslie! That's his skin!

LESLIE

Richard, what are you talking about? Look at it!

RICHARD

God, can't you feel it?

LESLIE

Feel what? Look at it. It's the same... I don't know, nylon or cardboard or whatever material they make these covers out of. It's blue, for Christ's sake.

RICHARD

Blue?!? Leslie... Leslie, please put the book down.

LESLIE

... Why?

RICHARD

Please. Just put it down. Don't you believe me?

(Pause.)

You don't. You really don't see it. You really think that book has a blue cover?

LESLIE

(Looking at the cover:)

"This Book was placed here by the Gideons. In Memory."

RICHARD

Okay. Okay. Maybe... Maybe it's me. Is there anything on the monitors?

Leslie looks.

LESLIE

Nothing's changed.

RICHARD

Okay. Leslie, listen to me. I don't know how, but this place is doing something to us. Right now. You think you are holding a blue Bible in your hand. I am seeing something very different. At least one of us has to be wrong, right?

LESLIE

Okay.

RICHARD

Read something.

LESLIE

Okay.

(She opens the book to a random page.)

Here we go. Ezekiel, Chapter 20, Verse 25. "I also gave them over to statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by; Man rules now where They ruled once; They shall soon rule where man rules now. After summer is winter, and after winter summer. They wait patient and potent, for here shall They rule again."

RICHARD

That's not how it goes.

LESLIE

I'm looking at it right here.

RICHARD

Leslie, you know the Bible better than anyone I know, and I'm telling you it's not right. You started off right, but then you went somewhere else. Say it again. Don't read from the book. You know it. Say it again.

LESLIE

Okay. "I also gave them over to statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by; I let them become defiled through their gifts - the sacrifice of every firstborn - that I might fill them with horror so they would know that I am the Lord."

RICHARD

See!

LESLIE

See what? I just said the same thing!

RICHARD

No you didn't! You just said it right! You didn't before, but when you weren't looking at the book you said it right! Do it again! Read something else!

Leslie opens the book to another random spot.

LESLIE

"Nor is it to be thought, that man is either the oldest or the last of earth's masters, or that the common bulk of life and substance walks alone. The Old Ones were, the Old Ones are, and the Old Ones shall be. Not in the spaces we know, but between them, They walk serene and primal, undimensioned and to us unseen."

RICHARD

We have to get out of here.

LESLIE

Now what?

RICHARD

We are not equipped for this. This motel isn't haunted. It's something much, much worse.

LESLIE

Do you hear yourself? I'm not going anywhere.

RICHARD

Leslie, come on. Pack up. We're going.

LESLIE

We just got here.

RICHARD

No. We aren't up to this. Come on. Leslie, please.

Pause. There is a shift in Leslie.

LESLIE

I... I think we should stay.

RICHARD

What? What's going on? Leslie?

LESLIE

We need to stay.

RICHARD

What's happening to you? Leslie... I can't feel you anymore. Leslie!

LESLIE

Take it easy, Richard. Why don't you just lie down?

RICHARD

Put the book down. Please. Please, Leslie. Just put it down.

LESLIE

This book? Are you sure you don't want to hear more?

RICHARD

I really don't.

LESLIE

I think you should.

She opens to another random page.

RICHARD

Leslie, stop--

LESLIE

"The nethermost caverns are not for the fathoming of eyes that see; for their marvels are strange and terrific. Cursed the ground where dead thoughts live new and oddly bodied, and evil the mind that is held by no head."

RICHARD

Stop!

Richard grabs the book from Leslie's hands. The sudden sensation takes him to his knees. As much as he might want to, he cannot let go of the book.

LESLIE

"The soul of the devil-bought hastes not from his charnel clay, but fates and instructs the very worm that gnaws; till out of corruption horrid life springs, and things have learnt to walk that ought to crawl."

Leslie grabs Richard's head with both hands. For a brief moment, she seems to have gotten a hold of herself.

LESLIE (CONT'D)

Richard? I have to go soon. They won't let me stay.

For a moment it looks as if Leslie might snap Richard's neck. Instead she kisses him hard. They tear at each others' clothes, the book between them the whole time.

SCENE 2

Lights up on the motel room, the next morning. The room looks well-used. Clothes are strewn everywhere, the bedsheets are tangled, equipment has been knocked to the floor. The Book lies in the middle of the bed.

There is a knock at the door.

MAID

(off:)

Housekeeping.

(Pause. Another knock.)

Housekeeping.

Keys jingle, the door opens, and the MAID enters. She surveys the damage, but is unimpressed by it.

A toilet flushes, and then Richard enters from the bathroom. He wears boxer shorts and a bathrobe.

RICHARD

Oh, hello.

MAID

Hello, Mr. Wayland. Sorry to disturb you. There was no answer when I knocked. Shall I come back a little later?

RICHARD

No, no, it's fine. I'll be out of your hair in a jiffy.

(He starts collecting clothes.)

Sorry about the mess. I... um...

MAID

Nothing to worry about, sir. Late nights are a common occurrence around here.

Richard starts getting dressed.

RICHARD

Right. I don't suppose...

MAID

There's coffee at the front desk, a diner just up the road.

RICHARD

Great. Great.

(Getting a good look at the room for the first time.)

Hmm.

The Maid starts putting the room back together.

MAID

Everything okay?

RICHARD

Yeah, I'm... It's weird. You ever have *deja vu*?

MAID

All the time.

RICHARD

Huh. Yeah. Well, I feel like I've got the opposite of that.

MAID

Jamais *vu*.

RICHARD

What?

MAID

Jamais *vu*. The opposite of *deja vu*. Experiencing something you recognize but that still feels out of place or unfamiliar.

RICHARD

Yes. That is precisely how I feel right now.

MAID

Must've been a hell of a night.

Must've been.

RICHARD

MAID

(picking up an item of Leslie's clothing:)

I take it your lady friend left early?

RICHARD

My what?

MAID

Your guest? Left you a souvenir.

She tosses the item to Richard.

RICHARD

Wow. Now that's something I really wish I remembered.

MAID

It happens. Will you be checking out today, then?

RICHARD

Yeah. I'm supposed to be... somewhere. God, I need to get moving.

He starts throwing everything in suitcases. He stops when he picks up a piece of equipment.

MAID

What's that?

RICHARD

Um... I'm not really sure.

MAID

It's yours, isn't it?

RICHARD

It is. I think it is. But I never really... Huh.

MAID

Looks expensive.

RICHARD

That it is. We use it in our work.

Who's "we"?

MAID

Hmm?

RICHARD

You said, "we" use it. Who is "we"?

MAID

Oh, well, just me, I guess. The royal "we."

RICHARD

Ah. And what do we do for work?

MAID

We, um, I am a ghost hunter.

RICHARD

No kidding?

MAID

It's true.

RICHARD

Are there any ghosts here?

MAID

Something about the question puzzles Richard.
He thinks a moment before answering.

No, not that I'm aware of.

RICHARD

Oh well. Tell you what. Why don't you finish getting dressed and check out that diner. I'll finish up and have the clerk take your bags down to your car when you're ready.

MAID

Yeah. That sounds like a good idea. Thanks.

RICHARD

No problem. Have a good day, Mr. Wayland.

MAID

Yeah. Oh, here.

RICHARD

He pulls a couple bills from a pants pocket and hands them to the Maid.

MAID

Thanks, sir. I'll be back in a few minutes.

RICHARD

Okay. Thanks.

The Maid exits.

Richard finishes getting dressed, then looks around the room. He spots the piece of Leslie's clothing and picks it up. It confuses him.

He spots the Book on the bed. He picks it up, flips it open, rifles through a few pages, closes it. He looks at the cover.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

Fucking Gideons.

He tosses the Book and the clothing on the bed, and exits.

END OF PLAY.