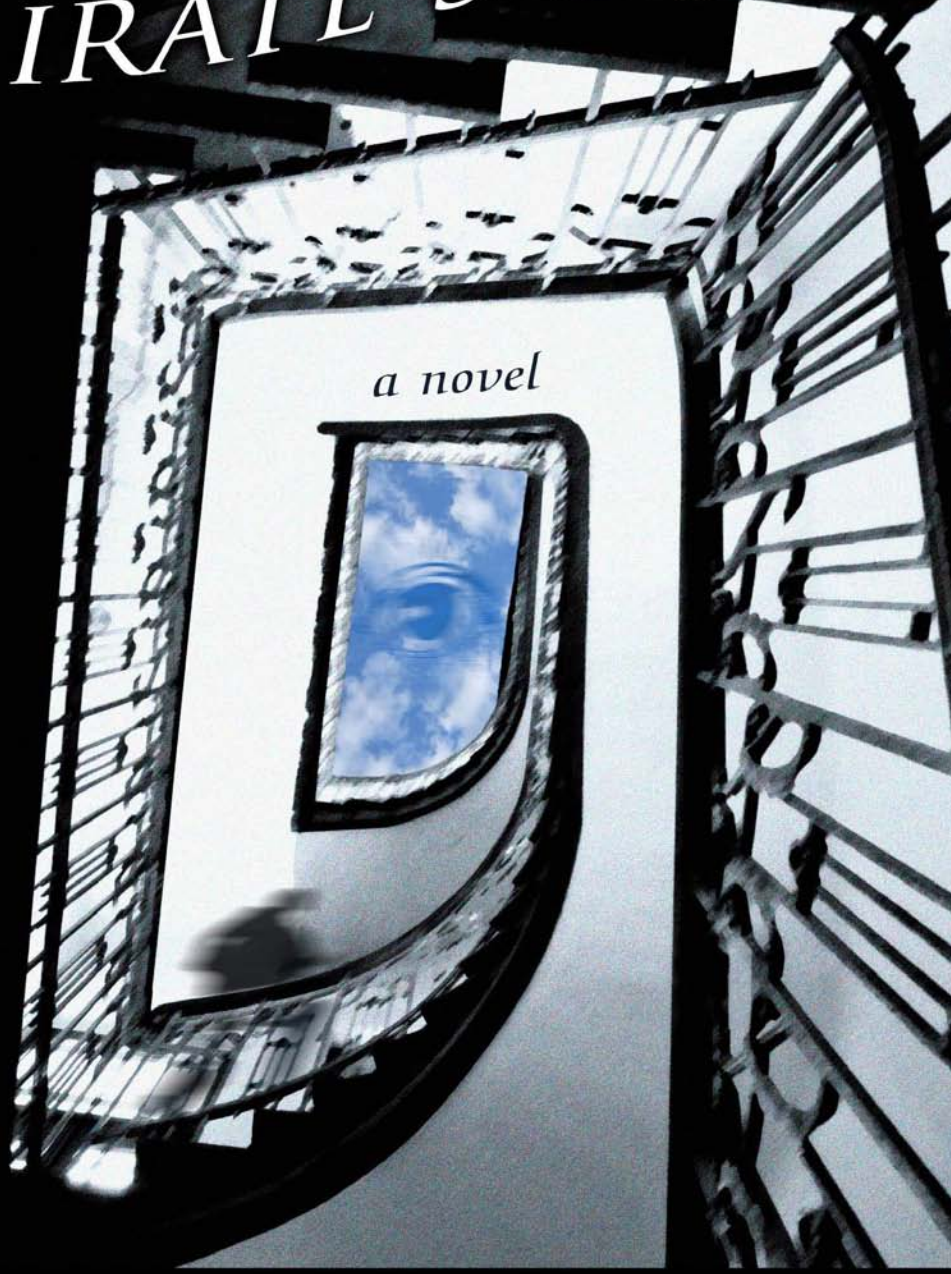


# *The* IRATE SAVANT

*a novel*



LEIN SHORY

The Irate Savant  
a novel  
Excerpt

© 2009 Lein Shory. All rights reserved.

Contact Information:  
shoryland@gmail.com  
<http://shoryland.com>

Cover illustration by Rob Peneguy.

Cover photo by Pawel Kryj.

Thanks for reading.

## DISQUIETUDE

Until today, work in this antiques gallery seemed preferable to alternatives such as chain store retail, where I would be subservient to imbeciles and suffer unspeakable indignities. And I refuse to wait tables. My current situation, however, has become financially untenable, and I am unnerved by an employer who consorts with an addle-pated monster while treating me as chattel.

This hot and humid morning, I watched from my post behind the back counter as a trench-coated, fedora-crowned, and bespectacled grotesque of the foulest order shambled into the long narrow showroom. Despite his hulking frame, he managed to avoid toppling any of the display cases, but his behavior grew increasingly bizarre. He crouched to examine a 1st-century bust of the Roman two-faced god Janus on a bottom shelf, and like a monstrous crab began to shuffle sideways, back and forth, back and forth, examining both faces with great interest, emitting the oddest chirruping and pressing his face against the display case

glass--behavior that, combined with his absurd getup, indicated to me that he suffered from some gross disturbance of the mind.

After inquiring whether I might be of assistance and receiving no response, I decided to ignore him in the hope that he might soon be on his way. I turned back to the Internet and attempted to resume my response to a diverting but flawed online article regarding Turner's landscapes, and I had just recovered my train of thought when a most disagreeable wheezing alerted me he was standing beside the counter.

I should stress that I would never make sport of what the oft-cruel hand of Nature visits upon my fellow creatures, but when I looked up, intending to acknowledge him in as curt a manner as possible, what confronted me proved so harrowing that I started. At first I thought him a victim of severe burns, but his pale, doughy countenance bore no evidence of skin grafting. A mere slit sufficed for a mouth, his nose was but a knoll where others possessed a hill or mount, and the primitive growths on the sides of his face resembled ears to the same degree that seedlings resemble trees. All that I might have taken in stride if not for his eyes, which so protruded from their sockets that they formed an interface with the lenses of his glasses, appearing much the same as a snail crawling up the inside of a fishbowl. From a distance, the dark lenses obscured this horror, but there was no escaping it upon close inspection. I have located on the Web some images of sufferers of the condition *exophthalmos*, though none approaches the severity of this poor soul's affliction.

I struggled to maintain my composure as I again asked if I could provide assistance. He pointed to an item in a tall display case beside the counter, a small, ca. 600 B.C. bronze figure of

Isis suckling Horus, and through a combination of grunts and gestures, indicated his desire to examine it.

I replied that the items on display were not to be removed except in the presence of the owner (the irascible fossil I shall henceforth refer to as the Old Wretch), and then only by appointment, and I pointed to a note to that effect prominently affixed to the case. I asked if he would like for me to schedule such an appointment, but this apparently displeased him, for he grumbled, almost growled. I explained that I did not make store policy and was in fact a mere lowly employee; he was welcome to continue browsing, and I would set a meeting with the owner if he so desired.

His wheezing accelerated, and he leaned over the counter. I noted his imposing build and thick hams for hands, but still I stood firm, steeling myself for physical confrontation if it came to that. Then I heard the office door open behind me, and my employer emerged, tottering on his rickety legs, his gnarled hands like claws at the end of spindly arms. Liver spots adorned his pate; his last remains of hair were only small white tufts above each ear. His still-black, permanently furrowed, wirebrush eyebrows matched a mouth frozen in frown; two beady slits for eyes sat behind bifocals.

He neither spoke nor gestured, but rather merely stared, and then, much as the mere sight of its master might bring a slavish cur to heel, with one final growl the grotesque shambled away from the counter and disappeared into my employer's office.

The Old Wretch then informed me that my services would not be required for several hours. It was only 10:30, and I was not to return before 1:30 unless I did not need the hours and wished to call it a day.

Not need the hours! Could he really believe that I enjoy a luxurious lifestyle on the meager pittance I earn while toiling beneath his oppressive thumb? My landlord and utility companies do not alter my bills each month relative to my employer's inclinations, nor are calories and nutrients necessary for proper health maintenance adjusted according to my pay. Cursed as I am by fate, however, I had no choice, and so I gathered my belongings and departed.

Two months ago, shortly after my arrival in this metropolis, when I chanced upon the help-wanted sign and first encountered he who was to be my benefactor and bane, the withered geezer seemed to recognize a man of remarkable talent and ability when he saw one. He asked what I knew of antiquities, and I responded by identifying several items in his showroom. A Greek black-figure lekythos. An Egyptian amulet of the goddess Taweret. A silver denarius of Hadrian.

"A good start," he said, nodding and frowning his brow.

He spoke of teaching me the trade, characterizing the position as something of an advanced apprenticeship, through which he would impart his knowledge to one who could carry on his work as old age inevitably forced his descent into enfeeblement and dementia. But once I started the job, my questions were viewed with suspicion, and any answers I received were reluctantly given.

I know almost nothing about him. Were I a hapless medieval soul rather than a perspicacious champion of reason, I might think him ravaged by an imbalance of choler rather than decrepitude and innate irascibility. He spends much of the day in his office, sometimes emerging only to issue cruel and unwarranted animadversions upon my person. His slight accent

may be evidence of foreign birth, though I think it more likely native and regional, but from where I have not determined; in any case, it bears no resemblance to the local dialect (even the most extreme forms of which I find a welcome contrast to the various drawls in that execrable land whence I hail). Though he wears a ring bearing what appears to be a crude rendering of the Orthodox cross, nothing else about him indicates he would be a follower of eastern Christianity, and I must assume its appeal is aesthetic rather than religious.

I see no evidence of a revenue stream. The location is ill-suited to attract passers-by, and I could count on both hands the number of patrons who have entered in the few months I have worked here. He may conduct business over the Internet, as evidenced by the presence of, in an otherwise antiquated environment, this dated yet serviceable computer complete with high-speed Internet connection, an incongruity for which I am truly grateful, as I would otherwise surely die of boredom. I believe I have seen a similar machine in his office, into which I have not been permitted or even allowed to view, save for a minimal opening of the door to facilitate communication. But if he conducts business elsewhere I have seen scant evidence in the gallery, for the items on display have changed little since I arrived. Though the windows are rather large, he has nothing on display there, and the tattered canopy and security grills block much of the outdoor light. Worn industrial carpeting covers most of the floor, and display cases of various shapes and sizes line the walls of the long, narrow showroom, at the end of which is the counter where I now sit composing. A short, narrow passageway leads to the Old Wretch's office and a restroom on one side, the storage room on the other, and the back entrance.

But because visitors so seldom enter, I need expend no energy on customer service, and instead am able to explore the World Wide Web while the Old Wretch does whatever he does in his office. Harsh taskmaster though he is, forever obsessed with my own punctuality and given to sudden outbursts of rage during which he unjustly berates me for some perceived transgression, he has nevertheless largely left me to my own devices, and even more importantly, made every pay period so far, despite no apparent income.

Apparently I am expected to do little else but mind the store, a supreme waste of my talents. I am not permitted to handle the merchandise. I am not allowed into the storage room--or what I assume to be the storage room--though this ban has never been voiced; indeed, the room has not even been mentioned, but I have seen him entering and exiting from time to time. As I have mentioned previously, I have been afforded no more than the slightest glimpse into his office. If patrons should enter, I am to establish their potential as buyers and then either refer them to him or usher them out as quickly as possible.

Fortunately he seems to have no objection to my use of this computer, and I have employed it as well as the city library system to improve my knowledge of the antiquities trade--a rather nastier business than I had heretofore been aware. I have begun to suspect that the Old Wretch is dealing in illicit antiquities, and I can only surmise that I was sent away so I would not witness the transference of plunder--for which, I suppose, I should be somewhat grateful, for the antiquities trade is more scrutinized than ever, and remaining ignorant of his shady operations would reduce my chances of being prosecuted. What role the grotesque might have played in the transaction,

I am uncertain, as I can little imagine him as a collector of ancient artifacts; at best he seemed suited for hired muscle, for his presence would undoubtedly prove not only imposing but unsettling as well.

I opted to take an early lunch at an eatery a few blocks away that I have begun to frequent, an unpretentious place frequented by local proles every bit as buffoonish as their rustic rural counterparts, yet I find its simple charms preferable to the noisome superciliousness of the gentrified restaurants that have spread like a cancer across this city. Unfortunately, my meager earnings are insufficient to cover the cost of lunch plus tip more than twice per week, and so the rest of the time I am forced to risk a gastrointestinal affliction at the burrito or wiener stands (or else prepare my lunch beforehand and eat in the gallery, which I cannot bear).

Today I took my seat, placed my order with the amiable if horse-faced waitress, and had read a page of *Three Dialogues between Phylas and Philonus* by Bishop Berkeley (a profound thinker despite his lamentable theism), when I found myself utterly distracted by Her.

The lovely stranger was tall, slender but well-proportioned, with a dark glowing mane clasped behind her and falling well past her shoulders. Her countenance hinted at some indeterminate ethnicity, and her emerald eyes--but I hesitate to write more lest I do her an injustice, for despite my extraordinary elocutionary talents, even I could not hope to fashion together the words to accurately portray her empyreal face. She wore a dark pantsuit, pearls, and underneath the jacket a tasteful lace camisole. She needed no more; though her beauty would have overwhelmed in any case, the secure manner

with she carried herself intensified her charms all the more. She took a seat by herself and seemed entirely at ease eating alone, whereas I must always keep my nose in a book lest I meet the gaze of a stranger.

If the other patrons were similarly stunned I took no note, for though I applied my keen willpower to avoid staring, I ached for each glance I stole. She seemed entirely out of place; though I have observed extraordinary beauties elsewhere in the city, in my experience goddesses such as she neither grace such dining establishments nor appear in this neighborhood. Perhaps she was visiting family or on a business assignment of some sort, or merely took the wrong train stop; otherwise I cannot fathom the cause for her appearance.

The anonymity afforded by this blogging medium permits me to confess that as I sat there I found myself fashioning scenarios in which she and I were together. In truth I lacked nerve, especially in a public setting; my physical charms, though considerable, are nonetheless of the mortal variety, whereas hers were well-nigh divine. To have sought an audience with her would have been tantamount to a mere nonpareil Achaean scaling Mount Olympus to carouse with the gods.

And yet; and yet. What if her intellect were equal to my own, and she also thrilled to the great philosophers, composers, authors? What if she were the companion, the equal whom I have long sought and fate has so cruelly denied me? Were that the case, surely she would notice me as I had her; she would rise, come to my table, comment upon my book, whereupon I would invite her to sit and we would commence rhetorical foreplay.

Such is beauty's power: if only for an instant, it elevates us above the dolor of our workaday existence: we are displaced, the

THE IRATE SAVANT

fetters of our past and present drop away, and the world seems made new. But is that glimpse worth the dysphoria that follows? When she exited I remained drunk on her charms until it was time to return to work. But by the time I entered the gallery I was more morose than before lunch, and I find these confines all the more funereal. As much as I loathe the excruciating job search, I fear I am left with little choice.

POSTED ON MARCH 21, 2007 AT 4:13 P.M.

## THE RUDESBY

Perhaps the cardinal disadvantage of urban life is propinquity to miscreants and subnormals.

My neighborhood had only a passing flirtation with the gentrification that overran so many other areas of the city. Gourmet coffee and crack cocaine are available on the same street. Such a diverse economy allows for still-affordable lodging, though by 'still-affordable,' of course, I mean paying an obscene amount for a tiny, dilapidated room--coined a 'studio apartment,' by some cunning caitiff. And yet it is enough for the humble, quasi-monastic person I am, who shuns the material world in favor of quiet meditation and study.

Several weeks ago I gained a new downstairs neighbor whom I have quickly come to hold in low regard, for he plays his death-metal-rap music at an obscene volume and has no compunction about going shirtless in the halls--proof that boorishness is not solely the province of hayseeds and townies, and that the city can produce a reprobate as ignoble as any from the hinterland.

The old-fashioned, four-story red brick walk-up in which I reside has narrow, claustrophobic staircases offering access to

a handful of units on each floor. Thus there is but one route to my abode, and most evenings on the way to my third-floor apartment I am confronted by this naked-to-the-waist Rudesby sitting and smoking in the window on the second-floor landing, either talking on his cellular phone or listening to his music blaring from the open door to his apartment open. Approximately my height, several years younger than I, in my estimation he possesses no physical virtues to sufficiently warrant displaying himself in such a manner (not that such would be desired even then). Apparently he dislikes polluting his own dwelling with cigarette smoke and feels that exhaling out the window disburdens him of all obligations to his neighbors. He has several times attempted to engage me in crude small talk as I passed, but I have endeavored to proceed on my way with the briefest of acknowledgements.

Last night I brought home a number of newspapers and periodicals to assist with my search for new employment. A computer and Internet connection might prove more helpful and efficient, but I can barely scrape on my paltry recompense, much less afford such a purpose. I turned on Oborin and Oistrakh's exquisite and unsurpassed performance of Beethoven's Sonata No. 2 in A, Op.12 No.2, and sat down to eat dinner and peruse the help wanted ads, but the pleasant strains from my modest stereo could not hope to compete with the monstrous reverberations emanating from below, and I was to concentrate. After eating I moved to the futon and attempted to listen via headphones, but they proved sadly inadequate.

Last night marked the third time this week that I have been so disturbed. Should this continue I will have to take action.

As much as I pity myself for having to endure such churlishness, I pity his rather attractive next-door neighbor all the more, for I at least am separated by a floor, and she by but a paper-thin wall. I know nothing of her, but she seems an agreeable sort (though hardly in the league of the lovely stranger I saw in the eatery); perhaps I will finagle some way of engendering more extensive interaction when next we cross paths. I must take great care when doing so, however, for unlike that land whence I hail where one is expected to engage in small talk with cashiers, in this city so much as meeting another's gaze may signal that one is an eccentric to be avoided.

POSTED MARCH 22, 2007 AT 11:33 A.M.

## ARDATH BEY

Though I pride myself a champion of reason, were I told that the disquieting presence who disturbed the confines of the gallery yesterday possessed an ability to pass through walls, I should at least consider the possibility. He somehow managed to enter the premises without my taking notice at all; neither a creak from the door nor a tinkling of the quaint, old-fashioned bell alerted me to an entry; I simply saw something move from the corner of my eye, and looked up to see a tall slender figure in a dark suit silently walking--almost gliding--toward the Old Wretch's office. I have of late found the Internet interminable, offering nothing whatsoever to distract me, so I would not attribute his circumvention of my keen senses to preoccupation on my part. I spent some moments speculating as to his abilities, resolved to watch for his exit so as to satisfy myself I was not hallucinating, and then resumed my futile quest for online entertainment, when I happened to look up and saw the creature staring at me.

I would estimate his height at 6'5", and possibly greater--imposing stature, to be sure, though hardly his most arresting feature. His head was slightly tilted forward, so that his sockets

seemed even more shrunken and shadowed, and though it may well have been the result of the inadequate and archaic lighting within the gallery, his eyes seemed to glow as they bore into me, and they did not once blink. At first I was unable to unlock my gaze, and sat frozen as must some helpless animal before a predator. When finally my extraordinary willpower allowed me to wrench my eyes from his, I studied his face and grew aware of the disturbing wrinkles everywhere upon it--not from sagging skin, but rather quite the opposite; the skin was thin, stretched taut upon the skull, and the wrinkling seemed more a matter of incredible age and decay than anything else.

As a student of movies (like the inimitable critic Pauline Kael, I refuse to call them "films"), I immediately connected this spectral presence with that of Boris Karloff's portrayal in *The Mummy* of the resurrected Egyptian prince Im-Ho-Tep, also known as Ardath Bey. Indeed, had this revenant sported a fez I should have thought the actor's ghost stood before me, but he in fact wore nothing on his head other than his slicked-back, jet-black hair, a striking contrast to the skin that appeared it would dissolve to powder if touched.

I cannot say with any accuracy how long he stood there staring, for the effect was mesmerizing (again resembling the Karloff character). Finally, however, I inquired if I might be of assistance, whereupon the Old Wretch emerged from his office and once more dismissed me from my services for the remainder of the day.

As it was almost midday I proceeded to the nearby eatery where I had already planned to eat lunch, even though the lost hours meant I could scarcely afford it. I must confess that I have frequented the diner more often since encountering the Lovely

Stranger, and her continued absence served to exacerbate my dark disposition. I cursed my misfortune at becoming entangled in what must surely be a nefarious enterprise: an outward appearance of properly provenanced antiquities, and a discreet back-room business trading in much more valuable, much less documented items for exclusive clientele. Why the Old Wretch consorts with rejects from Universal monster movies I have still not determined, though such hideous abominations certainly heighten my discomfiture and despair.

I had hoped to somehow squirrel away funds sufficient for acquiring an archaic yet serviceable laptop computer on an online auction site, and now such a purchase is all the more difficult; though I have taken precautions to cover my tracks on the Old Wretch's machine, I would much prefer to conduct my job search free of his prying eyes. Additionally, I have come to find recording my ruminations in this online journal a tolerable, even cathartic respite from the execrable drudgery of existence. Though I in general loathe all humanity, my relegation to such gloomy confines with no company save a choleric geezer has inspired a yearning for communication, especially via the distance and anonymity afforded by the Internet. Though I doubt I have any contemporary readers, I am certain that readers in posterity will benefit from my insights.

POSTED MARCH 26, 2007 AT 10:49 A.M.

## INTERMINABLE RACKET

**M**y downstairs neighbor the Rudesby continues to torment me with his unrelenting tintamar.

Last night I decided to view the magnificent *Red River*, which I recently purchased on DVD and have not viewed in many years, and even went so far as to don headphones so that I might be able to hear should I encounter interference. The opening credits rolled, and then the introductory text faded to that magnificent scene of the wagon train in the valley, certainly one of the great opening scenes in cinema. But no sooner had John Wayne's Tom Dunson begun to explain he was abandoning the wagon train for Texas than the thunderous bass from below began, and not even the highest ear-splitting volume drowned it out.

I could tolerate this no longer, and marched down the steps to his floor, where I was forced to pound upon his door until he could hear my knocking over the din. Though exasperated, I endeavored to remain polite; surely, I told him, he did not realize to what degree his music could be heard through the walls and floors, but I would deeply appreciate it if he could decrease the volume to a more reasonable level.

The Rudesby smirked the entire time I spoke, and I suspected that when I finished he would either slam the door or fashion some absurd counter-argument in his defense. And yet he only nodded, and, though he retained the smirk, acquiesced.

I thanked him and turned back toward the staircase, and in the process I almost ran into his winsome next-door neighbor. I begged her apology, which she graciously said was not necessary, and she proceeded into her apartment. I do wish now that I had mustered something about which to comment, though I disdain idle blather. And I hope that she did not misinterpret my presence at the Rudesby's door as an indication that I in any way associate with him, or heaven forbid, consider him a friend.

If her countenance would not launch a thousand ships, it is nonetheless highly agreeable. Her figure is well-proportioned, neither fatty nor waifish, and her attire invariably accentuates it without being whorish. She strikes me as a pleasant sort of person, though I have not had opportunity to verify this assumption via colloquy. We have exchanged smiles when passing, perhaps thrice now, and I believe we might have conversed the second time if not for the Rudesby's aural terrorism.

I will confess that, despite the Rudesby, I have come to look forward to ascending or descending the stairs, in hopes that I might encounter her, and that I suffer a twinge of disappointment when, as is most often the case, I do not see her. I will admit that I have paused on my landing a few times in hopes that I might hear her door opening, and so hasten down. I am not even ashamed to say that I have lingered at my mailbox a few extra seconds when I heard someone alighting the stairs. What of it? I am no predator, nor the sort of barbarian

preoccupied with chasing women to the detriment of all other pursuits. I am, however, but flesh and blood, and thus subject to the same attractions and urges as anyone. I have neither followed her nor attempted to leave her gifts, nor acquire her phone number so as to call and breathe heavily into the receiver (such would require consulting the reverse phone books in the library, and I suspect those volumes are quite out of date; an Internet search might well be more fruitful but could require some expenditure and identification).

No doubt she is attached, or uninteresting, or altogether unpleasant, or some combination thereof, yet I have found her quite compelling in my brief glimpses and encounters; perhaps it is merely a matter of pheromones ideally suited to my receptors—or, equally likely, she is but a blank slate upon whom I might project a solution to my loneliness, my endless and heretofore fruitless quest for an equal. I have found myself several times in the past weeks fashioning elaborate scenarios in which some lucky turn of event forces an encounter and dialogue, and a satisfying relationship ensues. Such is the state of my wretched isolation that I have at times quite lost myself in these silly fantasies. Yes, I know: absurd, childish, pathetic, and I would never share such thoughts were it not for the anonymity afforded by the blogging medium.

POSTED APRIL 2, 2007 AT 10:18 A.M.

## AN UNWELCOME DISPATCH

This morning, while crammed amongst the huddled masses as I rode the elevated train to work, my cell phone rang in a manner to which I was unaccustomed, and once I reached my stop and was able to freely employ my appendages, I learned I had received the following text message:

### WHAT DID KINCAID FIND IN THE GRAND CANYON?

I have been unable to identify the sender, though I have been most frustrated attempting to navigate the phone's non-intuitive menu.

At first I thought it likely that I was the victim of a marketing attack for some obnoxious movie or reality television program. I decided to ignore the message, but after I arrived at the antiquities gallery and exhausting the menial tasks imposed upon me by my cruel employer, I found myself looking up "Kincaid and Grand Canyon" on the World Wide Web.

The only Kincaid I could find associated with the Grand Canyon is one G. E. Kincaid, a perhaps fictional creation who, according to a 1909 article in the Arizona Gazette, happened upon the ruins of an extraordinary underground citadel that, Mr. Kincaid is quoted as saying, belonged to a people “Oriental” in appearance. A Professor S. A. Jordan of the Smithsonian Institute was leading an exploration of the ruins.

The website wherein I located this information trucks in all manner of esoteric absurdities. Perhaps the most amusing element of the page is an account by the author of his attempt to contact the Smithsonian regarding this story. He was apparently informed that the Institute had no knowledge of it nor of any Professor Jordan. And yet, he notes, the Gazette article specifically mentions just such a person as being in their employ. Therefore, the author fatuously reasons, the Smithsonian is hiding something.

*Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*: entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity. The Kincaid story is almost certainly a hoax, and the text message the result of a wrong number. I was most happy to dismiss them both, but upon further contemplation it occurred to me that I may have been charged for the message, and I called the cellular phone company at the earliest opportunity. I was of course forced to navigate a most noisome menu in order to finally speak to a customer representative, a hapless fellow so incompetent he proved unable to identify the perpetrator of this harassment, for he could not even locate a record of any message in my account information, though he nonetheless confirmed that I would indeed be assessed \$.10 for each text message I received.

I conveyed my outrage. Am I to understand, I asked, that I am at the mercy of anyone who wishes to send me a message? Could some stranger, for malevolent purposes or merely for sport, send me hundreds of messages for which I would be charged even though I never wished to receive them?

The customer service representative explained that I had already agreed to such by signing the dictionary-length contract when I initiated phone service. Would I be interested in paying an additional monthly fee in order to send and receive unlimited text messages? I certainly would not. Why would I wish to communicate via such a small screen and buttons suited for a pygmy marmoset? No response.

He did finally offer to change my account so that I could not send or receive text messages, to which I readily agreed. I suspect he was not supposed to mention this option unless asked, as it eliminates easy company profits, but perhaps my ireful philippic frustrated him to such a degree that he felt suffering the wrath of his manager preferable to enduring more from me.

I do find it a curious coincidence that I should receive such a message while in the employ of an antiquary. Perhaps someone is attempting to have sport with me. Is mere minor annoyance sufficient for merriment? Har-de-har. Har-de-har.

I opted to purchase a cellular phone rather than a landline because simple logic favors a phone one can carry anywhere rather than one leashed to a single location. I have no friends with whom I wish to communicate, and even were I not a misanthrope I could not fathom wishing to engage my intimates in constant, imbecilic chatter. However, certain advantages to such a device are readily apparent; for instance, I have stored

the numbers of dining establishments I patronize for carry-out, and through trial and error have determined the approximate time to call when leaving my apartment or the Old Wretch's so that my order will have just been completed upon my arrival. In addition, I am able to contact utility companies and other noisome entities at any time during the day without having to use the Old Wretch's phone and suffer the inevitable castigations. And of course one may need to summon the constabulary in the event of assault by a miscreant.

POSTED APRIL 11, 2007 AT 3:03 P.M.

## AN UNFORTUNATE ENCOUNTER

Whilst I pride myself on the discipline I have imposed upon my life and mind, there are yet several chores that always seem to escape my control, and one of them is laundry.

I would not quite characterize myself as an ascete, though that term is more apt than dandy; my wardrobe is modest, with relatively few articles of clothing that, while originally of good quality, tend to become threadbare through frequent and extended use. Nevertheless, I am apparently incapable of much planning or organizing in regard to washing. Immense intellect does not imply perfection in all things, far from it; indeed, a great mind may be so devoted to its intellectual pursuits that all manner of everyday tasks may be neglected. I often find myself for want of, say, a clean pair of socks while all other articles are laundered. Or I may become distracted and forget in mid-process, and such was the case last night: I loaded clothes into a washing machine in the basement, loaded them into a dryer, then found myself so enthralled in revisiting a dog-eared volume of Yeats that I entirely forgot about the clothes until I was about to retire.

My absentee, criminally negligent landlord refuses to respond to the most basic complaints, but perhaps his most

unconscionable transgression is reckless disregard for tenant safety. For weeks a light on the rickety, narrow stairs has been out, but several calls have produced no response. Though the window affords ample light in the day, come nighttime we tenants are left to stumble up and down in the dark. An accident or assault would no doubt engender a lawsuit far more costly than that of a single bulb, but still the reprobate proprietor cannot be bothered. (And yet how quick he is to slap on a late fee should the rent payment be but a single day late!)

Despite the darkness, I descended to the basement without incident, assembled my clean laundry into the basket, and then ascended. I was, perhaps, still preoccupied with Yeats, and thus not entirely aware of my surroundings, and yet I am certain the absence of proper lighting cloaked the presence of someone on the stairs ahead of me, and I was so startled I almost dropped the basket, until I realized it was the Rudesby, shirtless and smoking.

“Doing some laundry?” he asked.

I nodded. I intended to pass with only a curt nod, but he was having none of it.

“How many clothes do you have?”

“Excuse me?”

“I said, how many clothes do you have? Because you’re always doing laundry, man,” he said. “Going up and down the stairs, doing laundry. Up and down, up and down the stairs,” he said, motioning with his index and middle fingers to simulate legs ascending and descending.

The absurdity of his statement caused me some delay in formulating a proper response.

“Someone stole a load of my clothes the other day,” he said.

Though this news dismayed me, as it seemed certain to increase his rate of shirtlessness, I deeply resented his insinuation. "Are you accusing me of stealing your clothes?" I asked.

"I'm just saying," he said. He took a drag on his cigarette. "Are you always moving furniture or something in your apartment?" he asked, quickly establishing himself a master of the non sequitur.

"I don't follow you."

"Whenever you're up there you sound like you're always moving the furniture or something. And then going up and down the stairs." Again with the fingers.

"Obviously the floors here offer little in the way of absorbing sound," I said. "Your music, for instance--"

"I only play my music for a few minutes, and it's usually to cover up all the racket you're making."

I told him that his definition of "a few" was far more liberal than mine.

He rolled his eyes. "Look man, I'd appreciate it if you'd take it easy with running up and down the stairs and all the goddamn stomping around or whatever it is you're doing."

I replied that unless I were to use the fire escape, which would likely disturb him all the more, the stairs were my only means of ingress and egress, and the same could be said for other residents on my floor. Additionally, I was not constantly moving furniture, and I reserved the right to move freely about my apartment. However, I would take some care on the stairs if he would in turn play his music at a lower volume.

"Whatever, man," he said, and just stood there, staring. Clearly he was fuming and undoubtedly inebriated. For a

moment I thought I might have to set down the basket and engage in pugilistic combat (of which I am a master), but then he rolled his eyes once more and stepped aside, and I proceeded up the stairs; a moment later he slammed his apartment door with such force as to be heard throughout the building.

Upon entering my apartment I briefly entertained donning my hard-soled shoes and dancing some sort of jig, but I saw no reason to provoke him further, and in any case I do not dance jigs. I am, however, quite ireful about the encounter with my neighbor and his absurd grumblings. While I'm certain I have disturbed him with the occasional bump, I am equally sure that I make no more noise than any average person, and quite likely a great deal less. I have lived below others many times, some with small children, and thus have endured much worse, and for much longer. I suspect he is looking for a fight, and though I abhor violence and will seek all means to avoid it, if I am left with no other choice, this Rudesby shall receive far more than he reckoned from me.

POSTED APRIL 13, 2007 AT 10:15 A.M.

© 2009 Lein Shory. All rights reserved.

Contact Information:  
shoryland@gmail.com  
<http://shoryland.com>