ARTIFACT

Nobel Booker, age thirty-four, worked as a junior curator at the prestigious Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago.

His job was the culmination of his childhood dream of someday working there. Nobel's father, Marshall, took him as a boy several times a year to see the huge dinosaur fossil skeletons, the life-like animal dioramas, and the eerie early man exhibits. The lad likewise marveled at the extensive collections of cultural artifacts, insects, minerals & gems, and even some Egyptian mummies. All exhibits were dramatically displayed in glass cases and cabinets throughout the museum's world-renowned halls.

Now a father himself, Nobel took his son, Noah, to the Field Museum at least once a month, often accompanied by his wife, Kerry. Booker saw it as a continuation of a kind of beloved family tradition.

One Sunday in late September -- a warm, Indian Summer-type day, with boaters on Lake Michigan enjoying a last sail before the inevitable colder days of October -- Noble was working overtime alone in the dim and quiet basement of the museum, locating a particular item in the Africa section for a U of C graduate student's archaeology research. With over 27 million items -- only a fraction of which could be displayed for the public at any given time -- most of the Field Museum's vast collection was stored down here.

After hunting down the particular tall horizontal file cabinet by using the master cataloging index, Booker found the specific drawer labeled [ETHIOPIA: 1800-1850] that he was looking for. The item he was retrieving -- a tagged, reddish-orange clay pot shard with Coptic inscriptions -- was in the very back of the wide and deep grey metal drawer.

It was then that he noticed something wrapped in faded brown muslin, which apparently had either fallen off the very back of the fully extended drawer or perhaps from the one higher up. Highly unusual, Nobel thought, that someone had been so careless and unprofessional as to have left it there where it was almost undetectable. He reached back deeper and retrieved the neatly covered object.

Carefully unwrapping the musty muslin, the experienced curator beheld a dark carved stone head, about two inches wide and two inches tall. It appeared to have been made of smooth, black obsidian. The face resembled the fierce visage of a Tibetan temple guardian, scowling so as to frighten off the evil or the unworthy. The eyes were closed, as if in deep sleep. Upon lifting it up, Booker noted that it seemed unusually heavy, almost as if it was made of solid lead. At the bottom of the wrapping was a yellowed description card, indicating when and where it was found, and by whom, and more. It stated in detail:

" No. 7945536. Acquired by Professor Colin McTavish, University of Edinburgh -- 30 November, 1828 -- near the holy city of Axum, Ethiopia. Purchased from an aged, self-proclaimed witch doctor named Gorunda. Claimed it was sacred and possessed unique secret powers. Possibly from the 6th century A.D. -- Description: a dark carved stone face with closed eyes, probably made from igneous obsidian; smooth with no damage, markings or inscriptions; size -- 5 cm. x 5 cm; weight -- 850 grams."

In a different shade of ink and in a different hand at the bottom of the tag was added: "Donated by his widow, Mrs. Lorna McTavish, following my husband's sudden death -- 19 January, 1829."

Nobel went back to the nearest computer console at the end of the basement aisle, to check the record on the mysterious object. But there was nothing under the tag number, the name Colin McTavish, the indicated dates, or anything else connected to the find as described. The curator knew that the Field Museum wasn't established until 1894 (and its current Neo-Classical building wasn't occupied until 1920), so some other museum somewhere must have received the object before it wound up in Chicago. How? Why? What was it doing here? Answers to these pressing questions would require some extensive curator detective work -- a challenging task that curators particularly enjoyed.

The next day Booker reported to his department supervisor, Dr. Leonid Voynich -- a genial, white-bearded Russian in his early 60s -- and showed him what he had found.

"Very strange..." Leonid muttered, as he expertly examined the find. After reading the documentation card, he then announced, "Plus, there is a mistake here, Nobel. Look...the eyes of this carving are opened, not closed. See?"

Sure enough, the eyes of the figurine were opened, and dully stared out, as if trying to mesmerize, then capture, one's soul.

"But Leonid, I'm certain that the eyes were closed when I first unwrapped the thing yesterday," the junior curator confessed.

" Perhaps the subdued basement lighting tricked you, my friend," Voynich allowed, smiling. "Yet here we are now with the proof." He held up the curious discovery. The eyes were still opened, yet seemed to be strangely glaring with a kind of -- could it be? -- demonic malevolence.

Nobel asked for permission to take the object home on Friday night, so as to share the puzzling find with his ever-curious father that weekend. Leonid agreed. "That will give me a few days to see if I can learn anything more about this long-buried Scottish Professor McTavish," he remarked.

At day's end, Booker drove the fifteen miles home to the leafy near-north suburb of Evanston, where he had once studied at Northwestern University. When traffic cooperated, his commute took about thirty-five minutes via beautifully scenic Lake Shore Drive and Sheridan Road. He told his family that evening over pot roast, scalloped potatoes, and broccoli what he had accidentally found at work the day before.

"That's pretty cool, Dad!" Noah exclaimed. "Can I see the head when you bring it home to show Grandpa?"

"I don't see why not," his father agreed. "I'm going to give him a look when I go to my parent's house in Oak Park on Saturday."

Kerry smiled while serving up warm apple cobbler with melting scoops of vanilla ice cream on top for dessert. "My two crazy explorers...always eager to investigate anything ancient!" she teased. The family's Jack Russell terrier, Tango, excitedly barked, seemingly in agreement. Noah took advantage of the brief commotion to sneak the dog a tiny piece of pot roast under the table that he had hidden in his napkin. Both parents noticed the ruse, but simply winked knowingly at each other. Nobel's wife worked part-time as a nursing assistant at Cook County Hospital. The couple hoped to have another child soon, with Kerry particularly wishing for their first baby daughter.

Back at the Field Museum the next day, Nobel was stunned to learn that his department supervisor had been killed the previous night by a hit-and-run driver while crossing the street near his Hyde Park home. It was so hard to believe that Dr. Leonid Voynich was dead! Every staff member was upset and saddened, such was Voynich's professional acclaim and popularity. Leonid had left behind a devastated wife and three grown daughters.

"I was just talking with him yesterday in his office," Nobel explained in disbelief to a coworker, Natalie Gellop. "I can't believe he's gone...I was showing him a strange figurine that I came across by accident in our basement's Ethiopia collection." The pair happened to be walking near Voynich's now empty office as they conversed. "Here, let me show you. Got a minute?"

The coworkers saw the brown muslin parcel on Leonid's desk, next to several bouquets of memorial flowers. Booker went over and unwrapped it. The eyes of the obsidian carved head were closed. "That's odd...they were opened yesterday," he muttered. "I was sure of it."

Natalie replied, "No, look...they are opened. See?" She picked the object up and tilted it toward the ceiling's fluorescent lights, then offered the view again to Nobel. There happened to be a magnifying glass on the late supervisor's desk, so Booker picked it up to take a better look. Sure enough, the eyes of the smooth, glass-like figurine were opened -- beady and staring. A brief, odd chill ran through the curator's body as Booker shivered for a moment, but then dismissed the sensation. He next ran his index finger over the small carved eyes to see if anything moved. Nothing. They were solid and motionless, like the rest of the head.

"Leonid said I could take this home on Friday to show my father over the weekend," Nobel explained to Natalie. "But I'm going to take it now so it doesn't get mislaid when this office is cleaned out and packed up." He carefully re-wrapped the artifact and placed it in the left hip pocket of his white lab coat. At workday's end, just after 5 o'clock, he transferred the object to the trunk of his car in the museum's staff parking lot and prepared to drive home. But for some reason, he couldn't resist taking a quick peek at the strange head before departing. Slowly, he unwrapped the cloth. There, of course, was the small black carving. The eyes, however, were closed again...What the hell, he thought, disturbed and puzzled. Am I hallucinating or starting to imagine things? he wondered.

Nobel later told his wife about the tragic death of Dr. Voynich. "The Russian Orthodox funeral is on Sunday. You can join me if you like." But Kerry had to work that day at the hospital, so her husband would have to go to the service alone.

His cell phone woke him at 11:38 p.m. that night. It was another coworker -- a budding young intern, Luther Opaki, one of two whom Booker supervised -- sounding out of breath and very upset.

"Oh God, Nobel, I just found out that Natalie was killed near the Eisenhower Expressway off LaSalle Street downtown! She was changing a flat tire after dark while driving home to her apartment in Lisle...A gang of four black teenagers tried to rape her, then beat her when she started screaming. One of them stabbed her and tossed the bloody knife away. Then all four ran away, according to an eyewitness...Natalie and I had been dating, and the police found my number first on her cell phone call list, and wanted to ask me some questions... Jesus, it's awful, Nobel! I needed to talk to someone...Sorry that I woke you, but I couldn't wait...I don't think I can handle coming into work tomorrow. My emotions are a mess." Luther choked up and started sobbing.

Booker told the intern that it was O.K. to stay home on Wednesday and take care of himself, then ended the call, shaking in shock. Kerry was awake by now too, so they talked in hushed tones so as not to wake Noah or rouse Tango. Nobel shared the details of the terrible phone call with his wife. "Oh my God, how awful!" she gasped, her hands covering her mouth.

The rest of the week at the Field Museum was subdued and mournful. Two horrible staff deaths, back-to-back! Understandably, not much substantive work was accomplished. Most of the museum's workers went numbly through the motions of their jobs. Nobel was relieved when the weekend finally arrived.

When Noah asked to see the carved head at last on Saturday morning while eating a bowl of his favorite cereal, his father -- still somewhat distracted and in a somber mood -- said they would have to do that a little later. His son said that there was no hurry, then took off with his friend, Conner, when they were picked up to be driven to their regular weekend soccer practice.

Nobel soon drove to visit his parents in Oak Park, a prosperous suburb to the west of the city. The town was especially well-known for having several houses designed by the famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright, as well as also featuring the ornate Victorian boyhood home of writer Ernest Hemingway.

Marshall and Sonja Booker met their son at the front door of their house on Linden Avenue. The leaves from the many mature maple and oak trees on the block were changing into their usual autumn colors since his last visit, Nobel noted. A brisk north wind rustled them vigorously.

While his mother went into the kitchen to prepare their lunch, Booker told his father about the two deaths this past week at work. "It was terrible, Dad. You never expect such a thing to happen to people you know." Nobel then opened a shoebox which he had carried indoors with him, inside of which rested the unique, muslin-wrapped artifact.

"The peculiarity with this particular carving is its apparent ability to open or close its eyes, even though it is obviously made of solid stone. I can't figure it out, Dad, nor can I explain it," Nobel confessed. Marshall gently handled the artifact while his son explained how he accidently discovered it in the museum basement, and that it had originally been found by a Scottish professor in Ethiopia in 1828.

"The eyes were absolutely closed when I first unwrapped it last Sunday, Dad."

"Well, son, they are opened now...Look."

And the sinister black eyes indeed looked back at them, coldly. The father and son were both puzzled, but they quickly put the mysterious head back in its wrapping and returned it to the shoebox before Sonja re-entered the dining room with toasted sandwiches (pastrami and Swiss on rye), warm German potato salad ( "...not the best like at The Berghoff, but the Jewel deli does a pretty good job," his Mom remarked), a small plate of sweet gherkins, and three glasses of apple cider ("...fresh from the Farmer's Market this morning!") The rest of Nobel's hour and a half-long visit transitioned to the usual discussion topics among the trio: family matters, neighborhood gossip, State and local events, and -- as always -- the fickle and often cruel Illinois weather. "Time to get the window screens out and the storm windows back in," Marshall announced. "It'll be cold at night again before you know it!" Nobel then got up to go, saying he needed to get back and pick up Noah and his friend from soccer practice.

It took just forty-five minutes for Booker to drive his hunter green Subaru Outback home to Evanston. Kerry met him at the door. But her face was flushed and her eyes had been red from crying. She clutched some tissues.

"You mother just called...Oh, I'm so sorry, Honey!...Your father slipped and fell off his extension ladder while changing out their window screens. The paramedics came, but there was nothing they could do. He broke his neck...they said he died instantly..." Kerry tearfully grabbed and hugged her husband.

Nobel froze in shocked disbelief. Then a dreadful realization slowly rose in the depths of his mind: three deaths in less than a week...all people that he knew...and all of whom had also seen the strange carved artifact when its eyes seemed to open...This was beyond coincidence! That goddamned head must have caused all of this! It must somehow be cursed with the worst kind of evil...

And I have to destroy it before even more deaths are caused, Booker knew without any doubt.

"Kerry, please call my Mom back...tell her to be strong and that I'll drive back to Oak Park in a few minutes to be with her and take care of things...Next, I need you to pick up Noah and Conner from soccer practice. I have to do something right now in the basement. This is very, very important. Trust me. I'll explain everything to you in detail later," Nobel directed. His wife could see by the serious expression on her husband's face that he was totally focused on something critical, so she complied without further hesitation or questioning.

After she left, Booker took the shoebox with the wrapped artifact inside and went down into the basement. Taking it out, the black eyes were again opened -- sinister, looking alert, perhaps even taunting. The whole facial expression of the head seemed to actually sneer at Nobel.

But the museum curator coolly retrieved an eight-pound sledgehammer from a nearby pile of tools stacked in a corner and fearlessly faced the evil carving after putting it on the basement's cement floor.

"Die, you cursed son-of-a-bitch!" Nobel cried aloud as he hoisted up the steel sledgehammer over his shoulder and then swung it down hard on the obsidian stone head, smashing it. The figurine shattered into six larger pieces and several smaller fragments. "Go back to Hell where you belong!" he spat out.

Yet unbelievably, over the course of perhaps sixty seconds, the broken black pieces began to shimmer, then vibrate, then slowly reassemble themselves...

The head had somehow restored itself whole! And now its staring eyes glowed a new fiery orange color in apparent anger and hate -- ready to take its revenge.

Nobel Booker reacted quickly and reached for the sledgehammer to smash the carving again, but he felt a blinding flash inside of his own head -- an explosive headache which drove him to his knees in agony and then into crumpled unconsciousness. A fatal brain aneurysm and massive stroke had felled him.

Outside in the driveway of their suburban Evanston home, Kerry returned in her tan Toyota Corolla with Noah. The boy immediately made his way to the doorway leading down the stairs into the basement to ask his father if Grandpa had really died. "Hey, Dad...Dad, are you still down there?" he called out, and began his descent.

Noah's inquiry was answered with silence, however. But the evil black artifact was down there, calmly waiting...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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