

NECROCHROME

by Greg Stolze

Blaine looked at his cell phone. He was sitting in a borrowed car, alone. He was uncomfortably cramped, a big guy in a subcompact, but he put off getting out. He was parked in a cemetery. It was a nice day, and the place was crowded. He wondered if all these people would show up if it was raining. That old woman with the picnic basket and folding chair, tapping away at an iPhone and chuckling, he guessed she'd stay at home if it was nasty. The formally dressed family passing around a late model Android, peering at a tablet propped on a tombstone as it showed images... they looked more serious. They'd probably be here with umbrellas. The teenagers? Blaine didn't think so.

He sighed and gazed at his own phone's screen.

BUY NECROCHROME™ FOR \$5.89? YES NO

He tapped "yes."

WELCOME TO NECROCHROME™! WOULD YOU LIKE NECROCHROME™ TO ASSOCIATE WITH YOUR FACEBOOK™, GOOGLE PLUS™ OR TWITTER™ ACCOUNT? YES NO

With a frown, he tapped "no," wondering why the hell anybody would.

PLEASE BE PATIENT WHILE NECROCHROME™ CALIBRATES YOUR PHONE'S ELECTROMAGNETIC FIELD. PLEASE DO

NOT SET THE PHONE DOWN DURING THIS PROCESS.

Blaine drummed his fingers against the steering wheel while the yellow bar crept across the screen, lurching forward and then pausing before finishing up.

ALL DONE! PLEASE ENTER THE NAME OF THE DECEDENT YOU WOULD LIKE TO CONTACT.

With a sigh and a grunt, he levered himself out of the car and set off to find the right grave.

#

Detective Holly Mabon's equivalent to Necrochrome™ was a hard-used, heavy-duty plastic screen over an irritating press-pad keyboard. Using it wasn't like typing on her comfortable office PC, it was like the outdoor pads on gas station pumps. But she was used to it. It was a PMVCA-ii, colloquially called "the Pom." The letters stood for "Postmortem Victim Communications Aide."

She poked in the letters for "**HANNAH BARBEL.**"

Dots crawled across the screen to indicate that the machine was operating, that it hadn't frozen up. (The PMVCA-ii was a lot better about that than her old PMVCA1.3, but it still got

hung sometimes.) She shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. You weren't supposed to move while it tried to make contact, though she had no idea how, exactly, that made any difference. No one seemed able to explain it.

CONTACT NOT INITIATED.

Hannah Barbel had disappeared close to a week ago, ex-husband Philomon Barbel was the prime suspect. Hannah was local, just like "**KENT MAGNUSSON**," the name of a missing 10-year-old from a month back. That one had a custody angle, she was hoping for the C.N.I. reply and got it. "**ALANA AVINGER**" got no response either.

Holly was standing in a drainage culvert where a Yorkie had taken a dump, then scampered off into the undergrowth, returning with a wagging tail and a bloodstained sneaker. The shoe was at the lab, but Holly had been dispatched with the PMVCA-ii in an attempt to beat the turnaround on DNA tests.

With a sigh, she went deeper into the greenery and tried each name again. Though the PMVCA-ii was supposed to have a range of up to a hundred yards, in her experience it was half that at best. Still better than the apps on the smartphones. Those, you had to be directly on top of the corpse. Or at the site of death.

#

Blaine picked through the graves, as slowly as he could without feeling like he was dawdling. He was old enough that he still felt somber in cemeteries, and he was a little startled by a girlish giggle from two rows over. He turned, and the teenage girl sitting there looked abashed.

She was radiant—not in a sexual way, he thought, but in the way of a young woman who is healthy and happy.

"Sorry," she said. "But Mr. Dorsch is kind of hilarious." Her glossy hair flipped forward as she bent over her phone, thumbs drumming on its keyboard. "I should probably tell him that!"

"I... thought they didn't care," Blaine mumbled. He was staring at her.

"If someone's funny, you should tell them," she said. "Otherwise they might stop."

"You're... using Necrochrome?" he asked.

"In-Specter," she said, still looking down at her hands and the glass-and-plastic brick within them. "It's iOS, I think Necrochrome is only Android, right?"

"I dunno," Blaine mumbled. He shuffled his feet, trying to think of something else to ask. "Why are you...?" He gestured at the grave.

"History project!" she said brightly.

He nodded and looked away, not wanting to gaze too obviously. Then he saw the tomb he wanted.

"Have..." He stopped himself before saying "...a nice time," and instead switched to a low-voiced "...'bye."

#

By the time Holly had laboriously keyed in each name from her list (covering recent missing-persons-foul-play-suspected within a hundred mile radius), the area was roped off and being searched. (She'd been promised the PMVCA-3, someday. It was supposed to have a one-kilometer connection radius and a wi-fi infrastructure to download automatically updated lists of potential names, along with a touchscreen interface to let her pick them instead of typing.)

When she got C.N.I. from the last name, she put the PMVC-ii away and joined the search, so she was the one who noticed a small pile of disturbed dirt. It proved to contain human remains, buried under a cinder block to prevent scavengers from unearthing them too soon. They were feet.

When her partner congratulated her, Holly suggested it was because she'd been staring at the screen so long, her eyes were ready to look at nature.

#

The tombstone said "Edward J. Klieber," so that was the name Blaine typed into the program.

CONNECTING...

HELLO?

Blaine's mouth was suddenly dry. "**mr klieber?**" he typed.

There was a pause before the reply appeared.

I AM EDWARD KLIEBER.

this is blaine marchand

Again, the wait. Brief, but longer than it would take someone to type the response.

AUDREY MARCHAND'S SON.

yes

Before every response, that gap. It didn't seem to have anything to do with the reply's length. It was about as long as three long, low breaths would take. Though Blaine's breath was speeding up a little.

YOU'VE COME HERE TO TALK TO ME.

yes

Blaine had read on various blogs that the dead didn't have much curiosity. He wished Mr. Klieber would ask him polite questions, lead him on, let the conversation develop a natural flow... but that didn't seem to be happening.

its the year 2016 Blaine wrote. **im sending you this and getting your responses on a device called a cell phone**

what year did you die? He typed the question even though the headstone clearly said.

1989.

long before proper cell phones then let alone the kind that can talk to the dead

He bit his lip and, ridiculously, found himself slightly tempted to open up Free Flow and solve a few puzzles while waiting for Klieber to respond. Or while waiting to think of a good question.

whats it like being dead?

#

Rumors started in 2012 that the U.S. Air Force was fielding a device that let them communicate with *dead people*. The first question for those who believed (and, really, among mocking skeptics as well) was “what’s it like being dead?”

The answers (usually from bloggers with a product to sell or a viewpoint to espouse) ranged from the prosaic “heaven is nice with harps and halos and no brown people” through trippy rants on the borderline between schizophrenic and psychedelic. Most people ignored it until the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry got its hands on a stolen Air Force device labeled “REVELATOR” (with “For Official Use ONLY” printed on the case, in bigger letters than the name) and announced that it did, indeed, seem that the messages appearing on its

screen were from... beyond the grave. (The CSI spokeswoman who made the announcement visibly winced at the phrase.)

It was a no-win situation for the Air Force. If they’d ignored it, the Revelator would have continued providing high quality evidence, as long as people were willing to reload it when it drained its four D-cell batteries. If they tried to covertly steal or sabotage it, the legend would seem confirmed among the skeptic subculture—a group with well-educated members who knew how to hire lawyers, file subpoenas, and navigate the Freedom of Information Act. So when they seized it by openly, by force, and insisted that it was a “classified information gathering terminal,” it wasn’t because they hoped to avoid a huge media stink. It was because it looked like the least explosive option.

Senate inquests revealed there was not one elected official who knew DARPA had funded a high-tech ouija board. Major Christiana Marreiros had a Ph.D in physics, an electrical engineering degree, and a lifelong fascination with Thomas Edison. It was plans for his ‘necrophone’ that inspired her to attempt contact with the afterlife.

So what was it like being dead? The consensus, once the technology was pried away from Air Force investigators, (who’d been debriefing successful suicide bombers) was “quiet.”

Major Marreiros insisted that her machine was neutral regarding the exis-

tence of anything as unscientifically defined as a 'soul,' that it really was just a way of accessing information that had been organized by a conscious mind, after that mind had ceased to be confined to a physical body. Likening the process to the movie *Source Code* did not make anything clearer, though it did boost sales of the *Source Code* DVD enough that it got re-released with a whole disk of physicists commenting on "light cones" and "the persistence of information." Marreiros herself could only give an embarrassed shrug when asked why these devices required a name before they'd make contact, and then only when physically close to the place of death, or near to the body.

Every college had at least three physics students who claimed to understand exactly how it worked, and why it precluded reading the minds of the *living*. (Meanwhile, the threat of government ESP led a fair number of people to stock up on guns, food and Faraday-cage hats). Some churches decried it as the Devil's trick, while others simply said it was as religion-independent as its creator claimed. Mysterious answers which only dead people could know had no necessary religious dimension, according to the Missouri Synod Lutherans. (People weren't buying it.)

Almost all decedents said that post-life was neither good nor bad, that they were unaware of time's passage, that it most resembled a deep, dreamless sleep. They remembered

their lives, but with varying degrees of clarity. In the absence of hormones and neurotransmitters, their emotions were remote, when they acknowledged any 'feelings' at all. Asked what they wanted, or what they missed, they said 'nothing.' Even the most passionate, in life, seemed tranquil and calm in repose. What grudges they bore were mild, and curiosity seemed to die with the flesh.

In messages from beyond, the question mark was rarely used. The exclamation point? Never.

#

BEING DEAD IS NEITHER HERE NOR THERE, Klieber replied.

can you talk to other dead people?

NO.

yeah thats what everyone says

IT IS TRUE.

Blaine bit through a thumbnail and spat it out on the ground. Most of this stuff had been covered on the blogs. Lots of people posted their conversations with the dead. He didn't understand why.

sorry i just spat something on your grave

that's really disrespectful i know

DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT. IT DOESN'T MATTER.

still i apologize

i wasn't thinking

you cant tell whats happening to the living at all can you?

NOT AT ALL.

right

so you were always really nice to me when i was a kid

Blaine hit 'return' on that sentence and sat for three long breaths. No reply. He waited a couple more. Still nothing.

why was that do you suppose?

I HAD A COUPLE REASONS. YOU WERE A FRIENDLY KID AND I HAD NO CHILDREN OF MY OWN, SO IT WAS HARDLY A BURDEN. ALSO, YOUR MOTHER WAS VERY PRETTY.

yeah about that

Blaine's fingertips trembled above the virtual keyboard.

there wasn't anything going on between you and mom was there?

NO.

Blaine took a deep breath and let out a deep sigh.

because there was always this distance between mom and dad and i thought maybe you were my real dad

I DID NOT EVER HAVE SEXUAL INTERCOURSE WITH YOUR MOTHER. THERE IS NO WAY I CAN BE YOUR FATHER. I DID

NOT MAKE A PASS AT HER BECAUSE I WAS TOO AFRAID.

Blaine nodded his head, even though he knew the kindly widower who'd taught him to throw a football with a spiral couldn't see him. Tears streamed from his eyes, even though Mr. Klieber wouldn't know, couldn't know unless told, and possibly couldn't care.

ok thanks didn't mean to disturb you i should probably get going

i just wanted to know

you know how it is

I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY, BLAINE. YOU WERE A GOOD KID. HAVE A GOOD LIFE.

have a good afterlife

#

Back at the precinct house, Holly was tempted by a donut but had a bagel with margarine instead. She was wiping a smear off her lip when her parter Kinks strolled up with a handful of papers.

"Gimme good news," Holly said.

"Can't I start with the bad news first? 'Cause the DNA off the feet matches the blood on the shoes, which matches the sweat on the insoles, which *doesn't* match anything in any database."

"So no trace evidence from the killer," Holly sighed.

“Nothing biological or, y’know, *ne-cromantic*,” Kinks said, gesturing at the Pom. “But there’s a camera on the ATM at the ranger station. We got a license-plate hit from a stolen car that passed through. Eyeballing the decay-rate, the coroner says the time-stamp on the video is a plausible match.”

“What’s the car?”

“2011 Crown Vic. Lotsa trunk space.”

#

Blaine wished he had a cigarette. He wasn’t a smoker, had only puffed two cigars on special occasions, but he wanted one now. Not for the nicotine, but for the idea of it. For something you could put in your mouth that would make you calm and distract you without making you clumsy or stupid. (Blaine had no experience with Valium, or Klonopin, or Xanax. His medical insurance wasn’t very good.)

Eventually, lacking the delay of a smoke, he got out of his car, picked up his bolt cutters, and went to the storage locker.

Inside, it was the typical mass of ill-stacked boxes and tarp-draped furniture, with dated dusty Christmas decorations and lawn care equipment breaking up the outlines. But beyond that there was a smell. A terrible smell, like an uncooked pork chop going rancid in the sun. Artificial pine scent floated on top of the reek, but only tamped it down to controllable levels.

Blaine stepped back and activated Necrochrome™. He typed in the name “**CANDICE BRUNS**,” then held his breath.

NOT AVAILABLE.

He let out his breath in a deep, chesty whoosh, then took another and held it as he went closer, then tried again.

HELLO.

Blaine swallowed hard.

is this candice bruns?

YES.

His eyes were watering, as if he could smell the stink through them.

im sorry youre dead

did it hurt too much?

YES. IT HURT MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE I EVER EXPERIENCED.

Blaine rushed out of the storage locker and vomited into a storm drain. When he looked down at his phone, the last message from Candice Bruns was followed by “**CONNECTION LOST.**”

He went back to his car and rinsed out his mouth with a few swigs of cold coffee, searched for a mint without finding one, then went back, hoping the open door would have aired out the scent. It hadn’t.

He pressed the ‘reconnect’ icon.

sorry about that i had to leave for a moment

Again, he found himself waiting, as if Candice Bruns would have something she wanted to say to him.

is there any unfinished business you left behind?

The pause.

I HAD TWO DAUGHTERS, CLAUDIA AND SIERRA. CLAUDIA IS SIXTEEN. SIERRA IS NINETEEN, IN HER FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE. I ALWAYS WANTED TO SEE THEM GET MARRIED AND HAVE CHILDREN. I HAD A HUSBAND, ROSS. HE'S GOING TO MISS ME A GREAT DEAL. HE WAS NEVER VERY ORGANIZED, SO I HAD TO TAKE CARE OF PAYING BILLS AND DOING TAXES. ALSO, WE LOVED EACH OTHER A GREAT DEAL. HE'S GOING TO HAVE A HARD TIME OF IT, ESPECIALLY IF HE FINDS OUT HOW PAINFULLY I WAS RAPED AND KILLED.

This time, Blaine set the phone down on a three-legged cedar chest before running out to the parking lot. He didn't throw up again, but he cried. He sobbed until he was hawking snot and choking on it, until he was making strange moans. If you'd asked him what people crying sounded like, really giving in to uncontrolled weeping, he never would have guessed that noise.

When he went back, his hands trembled as he typed. But the smell wasn't troubling him as much.

would it be better for them to know what happened or to never find out?

He bit his lip as he waited for the response.

NEITHER ONE OF THOSE OPTIONS IS VERY GOOD.

Blaine found himself nodding, wiping tears on his sleeve.

which one do you think youd prefer?

It was in the middle of that pause that Holly Mabon showed up.

#

The storage depot manager barely looked at Holly's documents. "Blaine Marchand? Oh yeah, unit 200A, he's in there right now."

She blinked. "Wait, you mean the guy who rented the unit is, at this moment, in it?" She gestured, urgently, at the uniformed officer with her. He nodded and started muttering into the radio mic on his shoulder.

"That's what it says here on the sign-in," the manager said. "Um... guy's had it for years..."

"Can you describe him?"

"Maybe your age? Kinda blond-brown hair. Wearing... ah, jeans, blue shirt? Maybe a green shirt? Like a polo shirt maybe?"

"Tall? Short? Skinny?"

The manager shrugged. "Average, I suppose."

Holly stepped back out to get her bulletproof vest. She left the PMVCA-ii in its charging dock but got out a shotgun and loaded it with beanbag rounds.

"We've got three more cars on the way," her partner said. "Should we send Bill around the back?"

"No," she said. "You go, you're plain-clothes, we don't want to spook this guy by showing him a prowler car... tool up but stay cool, right?"

With the uniformed officer at her back, she flanked the building, her earpiece informing her as more cops arrived. When they were in position, she approached the corner of a wall and glanced around the parking lot by the 200 block of units. She immediately saw puke on the pavement, the door of a cubicle yawning open wide, and a man with blonde-brown hair and a white shirt.

"Blaine Marchand!" she shouted, stepping out and aiming. "Hands up! Hands up!"

#

In addition to poor health insurance, Blaine Marchand didn't have good legal advice. He started out clammed up in the interrogation room, but when he started to cry, by himself, Holly and Kinks closed in.

"Doesn't look good for you," Holly said, tossing a picture of Candice Bruns' mangled feet onto the table in front of him. He flinched.

"I'd like to speak to a lawyer, please," he mumbled. Kinks said nothing but held out a box of tissues.

"What are you going to tell your lawyer, hm? That you just happened to know the name of this dead woman who just happened to die in your storage locker? That you knew it before we even had a missing persons report on her?"

Blaine looked down. "I guess you read what was on my phone, huh?"

"Yeah, and then we got her on our equipment. Shame it's not admissible, 'cause I bet a jury would be real interested in the description of the big brown haired guy who grabbed her off the street, then raped and killed her at such great length."

"I didn't do it," Blaine said.

"Persuade me," Kinks said, gently shouldering Holly aside. He had a bottle of water in his hand and he mutely gave it to Blaine.

"If it was me," Blaine said, "Why would I cut the lock?"

"Maybe you lost the key while you were mangling the corpse so that it couldn't be contacted?" Holly crossed her arms, an expression of withering skepticism on her face.

"I'd never been to that locker before."

"Your car was spotted going to the dump site," Holly told him. "Did you

really think reporting it stolen would break the trail?"

"It was stolen," he said. "Well... taken without permission, anyhow."

"By whom?" Kinks asked.

Blaine looked up and then he looked down again.

"Blaine," Kinks said. "You know who did this, don't you?"

"It wasn't me."

"We can't just take your word for that. This woman's dead. Her daughters don't have a mother... you were asking about that, Blaine. Why?"

He said nothing.

"If you killed her, why would you ask that, Blaine?"

"I didn't."

"Who was it then?"

He took a deep breath, and looked over at the wall to his left. There was nothing there, it was a blank wall, but he stared at it.

"If I tell you who did it," he said slowly, "Can you promise me I won't face any charges?"

Kinks and Holly exchanged a glance. They'd talked this over. When he started to cry, they'd discussed this very possibility with the D.A., since it really *didn't* make sense that he'd call police attention to his car and

then haul body parts in it. Moreover, the signature "Blaine Marchand" on the locker contract didn't match the "Blaine Marchand" handwriting where their prisoner had signed in... or the one on his driver's license.

"I give you my word," Kinks said. "I'll put that on a paper you can sign."

There was a pause, then. About as long as three long, low breaths would take.

"He's taken my car before," Blaine said. "He has a key. And he's pretended to be me for contracts and stuff before—his credit's lousy." He blinked, tearing up again. "I don't know if this is the first time he... did something like this."

"Who, Blaine?"

He looked down at his hands.

"I let myself into his apartment when I was looking for my car," he said. "I figured out where he hid the key... and he had her drivers' license." He took a swallow of water, then looked away at the left wall again. "Candice Bruns. He had her license and a knot of her hair... with blood on it."

For a while the room was silent. Then just the sound of Blaine crying. Then silence again.

"The name," Holly said, and her voice wasn't angry or doubting. But it was firm.

Blaine looked to the left, at that blank, featureless wall. He said nothing, for

the length of maybe three deep breaths.

“My dad,” he whispered. “Blaine Marchand senior. It was him.”