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Hannityville Horror

By Robert Morgan Fisher

Late August and the last thing I want to do is clomp around this maze of hallways, flinging buckets of blood. Fake blood. Red paint. We used to use corn syrup and red dye but it was too sticky and attracted ants and wasps. We've learned through the years that gore doesn't have to be authentic. Entrails, brains and whatnot can just be painted foam rubber. The walls pulsate and shimmer like Hades. I'm suffocating.

After six generations of Hannity's working the soil and raising livestock, we were forced to either declare bankruptcy or reinvent. My father, Bix Hannity, chose reinvention and turned our family farm into The Hannityville Horror. The intention behind this repurposing was to ride out the bad times on the "haunted farm" craze. There are about five hundred haunted farms across the country. Some only operate in October. Others, like us, run on weekends, spring through summer. Seven days a week during the fall. It feeds us through the winter, just like farming used to.

I looked for Mom to stand up to Dad, but she said, "This is about all we got *left*, Linnea."

Trent and Tyler embraced the idea. They were still in grade school then. I couldn't blame them. Anything was better than getting up at four a.m. to pitch silage.

This was supposed to be a temporary fix, something to get us through a couple of fallow seasons. But here we are, nine years on, no end in sight. I'm twenty-three.

Halloween was Daddy's favorite time of year. We used to sell pumpkins. Each fall the spooky decorations got more elaborate. Then he heard about a farm outside of Norman that turned itself into a scary roadside attraction. He thought: Why not here? Still had the old barn and a network of chicken coops. More than enough organic blight to pass for frightening. He was like: *Splash a little blood, put a sign out, charge admission — let's put the scare on people!*

Just a little *too* excited.

We were broker than the Ten Commandments, facing foreclosure. It got to the point where we'd pull bills out of a bowl until the bank balance hit zero. Some months we couldn't even afford to do that.

So there it was, do or die. We slapped on some greasepaint, eyeliner, chewed a mouthful of blood-pellets and pretended to eat brains. The first year was fun, made a buttload of cash. It was like meth money — without the law breathing down your neck or your house burning down. Thanksgiving and Christmas that year were the happiest of my life. The windfall came along just in time to fend off creditors and make us feel rich. I figured Daddy Bix would invest in new farming equipment, make a few repairs, buy seed. But when spring came he informed us all he'd come up with a new "business plan" for expanding Hannityville Horror.

I said, "What happened to the idea that this was a ... whaddyacallit, 'stopgap'?"

That was the word he'd used, *stopgap*. Mom looked over the balance sheet he'd created and pronounced it financially sound — or at least better than what we had going as a straight farm. I pleaded with him: "Keep it seasonal. Don't give up on the land."

The teenage daughter became the conservative parent.

I was in tenth grade and trying to keep as low a profile as possible. I'd been able to pass off Hannityville Horror to my peers as a once-in-a-lifetime impulse, an extended Halloween party thrown by our family for the entire town. But all through winter people kept asking if we were going to do it again. They seemed more enthusiastic than my father. I found this beyond alarming.

I loved growing up on a farm. From an early age I understood how admirable it was to do what we did. Proud to be a farmer's daughter — dirty jokes aside. Lucky to recognize the specialness before it all went away. For that I should feel grateful. I guess.

Daddy Bix takes pride in what we do, even if I don't. We still attend First Christian every Sunday and say grace before every meal. None of the rooms in our attraction have any satanic or erotic themes. That's worth noting since so many of the movies we study as a family (deductible as research) are flat-out sacrilegious. Sexual torture and pentagrams are a big no-no with us.

"Plenty of material in your psycho and zombie genres to keep it entertaining," Daddy Bix declares. "Don't want to give nobody in town a reason to say no."

He says this at the dinner table as if being interviewed by a reporter. I'm impressed, but long to be *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*.

We haven't given up farming entirely. We still grow corn for the corn maze, raise a few hogs, cows and chickens to keep us fed. We're feeding ourselves okay — just not the rest of the country.

Plus, I hate dealing with actors. At the beginning of each school year, I visit the drama departments to recruit performers. To make it sound special, I talk about a Hannityville Horror Repertory Company, but it's really just two steps below carnny work. That's one of my skills: promotion. Daddy Bix thinks actors should be falling all over themselves to work here but it takes talent to attract talent.

First, the high school: I do my little talk, then hold private interviews. Auditions take place after school so screams don't disrupt the classes. They fill out applications and I either hire them on the spot or say try again next year. New hires are given a rehearsal schedule and start date.

Next, the local college: These are better actors but far more insufferable. They have headshots, resumes and a truckload of ego. One new girl catches my eye. Her name is Haven Galt. She's thin, intense, and smokes filterless Camels during the entire interview.

"I hate cigs, but I had to take it up for a role," she says. "Now I'm hooked." Exhale. "I didn't just hate smoking, I feared it. But in acting you go after what scares you."

"That's right," I say. I have never smoked but she sure makes it look attractive. Even when she demurely turns her head and flicks a crumb of tobacco off her tongue.

"I'll do a good job," she says. "Whatever's required. The actor is the director's 'special whore'—Donald Sutherland said that."

"Okay then."

"I can do special effects make-up too."

"Sold."

"Thanks. I appreciate the work. I need to save every penny. I was just accepted into Harvard Drama."

"Didn't know they had drama at Harvard."

"They have everything but Cosmetology."

This makes me laugh.

"My first choice was Yale," says Haven, "but I didn't get in. The auditions for Harvard were held up in Chicago and I thought I did pretty well."

"Looks like it."

"Yeah." Haven gets up, shakes my hand. "A pleasure."

After she leaves, I swim in that hot flushed feeling of a new crush. It isn't sexual, I don't think. I just want to be Haven Galt.

Movie matinee with Daddy Bix. He's looking for upgrade ideas. "You want to stay ahead, you gotta change at least 25% of the operation each year," he reminds us. Mom makes popcorn. I used to love this part, the brainstorming. Now there's twenty things I'd rather be doing. It was at one of these "development meetings" that Daddy Bix came up with our long-running Saw

Pavilion: intestines, razor wire, pig masks and of course, simulated foot removal. This year, Daddy Bix feels *Saw* has run its course and people are a little tired of the gore. He wants to get smarter, try a less-is-more approach. He wants to draft on the implied horror of movies like *Paranormal Activity*.

“You mean low-budget?” says Trent.

“Not necessarily, not necessarily.” Daddy Bix wags a finger. “I’m willin’ to invest, but we’ve got to consider the trends. The current trend? Definitely less is more.”

We watch *The Descent*, which is all about carnage in a cave. Bix would love to create a network of caves populated by flesh-eating humanoids.

“Creating also a *liability*,” I say. I’m the only one who sees the blatant possibility of getting sued. I’ve preemptively saved the Family Ass numerous times.

“Two words,” I say, “Cave-in.”

“Well, you gotta think big, Linnea. But you’re right, it is a gamble and we don’t really have time to tunnel.”

I say, “Nothin’ wrong with thinkin’ big.”

“Right,” says Daddy. “Well — hey, remember *C.H.U.D.*?”

“*Cannibalistic Underground Humanoid Dwellers!*” Tyler high-fives Trent.

“I’m tellin’ ya, could be massive. Lotta work but massive,” says Bix.

“Somethin’ to consider for next year, maybe,” Mom says, pushing her glasses back onto her nose, pretending to scribble a note. She winks at me. Mom knows.

Next we watch *Children of the Corn V: Fields of Terror*. It is Bix’s favorite installment in the *Children of the Corn* series. We revisit it every year for inspiration. It’s lost a little of its glory for me.

“*Children of the Corn V*, people. Pay attention. By far the only one that gets it right. David Carradine, God rest his soul, gives the performance of a lifetime —”

“What about *Kill Bill*?” I challenge. I also liked Carradine as Woody Guthrie in *Bound for Glory*. I’m proud of the fact that Woody was from Okemah.

“— performance of a *lifetime*,” Bix insists. Daddy puts up with me only to a point. One time I remarked that the needle-skinned demon in *Hellraiser* was “most likely a caesarean.” He did think that was funny.

“And introducing a young talent by the name of Eva Mendez.”

“The *Citizen Kane* of ‘Corn movies,” I say.

“Directed by Ethan Wiley, the genius behind *Bear* and *Brutal* — I don’t understand why his name is not a household word. I hope to shake his hand someday. Written by Wiley too, somewhat based upon the Stephen King short story, of course, as are many of our most influential ... um, influences.”

This is Bix’s Robert Osborne Moment, where he pre-critiques the movie we’re about to see, lets us know what to notice. Especially if it’s got material he wants to incorporate into The Hannityville Horror.

Daddy Bix is a member of the Haunted House Association, subscribes to all the blogs and trade magazines. As he unpauses the DVD, I can’t help but both admire and hate his passion. It’s getting dark outside, windows open. I strain to catch the rustle of corn in the breeze. I used to run around barefoot in overalls, get up before first light to milk the cows, play with baby chicks. We used to travel into town every Saturday morning in the truck. Just me and Bix.

Next time I see Haven Galt, she’s wrangling a pair of bullsnakes, wearing them like a necklace. She has on a flight attendant uniform, chatting with Manolo in a suit who is trying to pass for Samuel L. Jackson as an FBI agent. When a nest of bullsnakes was discovered behind the barn, Bix was seized with inspiration. A decommissioned school bus was towed in, remodeled to look like the nose of a 727 and filled with bullsnakes, kings, garters — whatever Trent and Tyler could round up. As cheesy as it is, the whole *Snakes on a Plane* thing works. Guests (what we call customers) sit in the seats while Haven does the preflight rigmarole, fifteen seconds into which overhead panels open up and instead of oxygen masks — snakes. Hundreds of them. I tell people “No snakes are injured during the show!” — but have a hard time believing it. Haven Galt screams like a train whistle. Our Latino Samuel L. Jackson needs work and he is not allowed to swear. He doesn’t need to, as it turns out. From the git-go, it’s the customers who yell: *I have HAD it with these mothafucking snakes on this mothafucking plane!*

We have a hit on our hands.

Haven helps the other actors with makeup, coaches them. I put a little extra in her paycheck.

“Money for smokes,” I say.

“Thanks, but I kicked.”

I realize then that I haven’t seen her with a cigarette all week.

“Must have been hard,” I say.

“Nah, comedy is hard.”

We watch Bix coach a cadre of zombies. He gives them line-readings, tells them to *commit*. Demonstrates how to devour brains with detached gusto. The man has strong opinions about *The Walking Dead* — what it gets wrong, what it gets right.

Haven says, “Your dad should direct movies.”

“It’s occurred to me to suggest that, but then I’d be like ... enabling.”

“I sense ambivalence.”

“You sense right.”

“How long you been doing this?”

“Nine years.”

“Profitable?”

“Very.”

“But you’re trapped.”

“Exactly.”

Sometimes when people say Hannityville Horror, I hear it as Hannityville *Whore*. I feel bad that I spoke out of school with Haven. It’s a betrayal of Daddy Bix and family. The kind of transgression that does not go unpunished in the gothic movies we emulate.

Halloween Eve, our biggest moneymaking night of the year. The long line of people at the gate crackles like a fantastic fuse. Gridlock clear to the interstate. We cycle guests through at a record-breaking pace. Bix is off the hook, dashing around in his lucky hockey mask, toting a chainsaw, giggling maniacally. Trent has on his security uniform. Clouds of bats cross the full moon. All is well.

I detect a disruption in the continuous screams and look toward the west end of Hannityville Horror. Whenever the tenor of terror changes, we notice. I’m already heading to the problem. Tyler shoots out of a side hatch and yells, “Bix!” (the Hannityville Horror version of *Hey Rube!*). I go inside, flashlight ready and find a fifty-two year old man, slightly obese, lying on the ground, very still. One of the zombies popping out of a closet got him good. Tyler helps me pull him to fresh air, our hands under the man’s armpits. I’m a farm girl, strong. I start in with chest compressions. I’m about to ask Tyler to take over for me when Haven Galt appears at just the right moment to spell me.

“Keep going,” I say, “Tyler — ambulance!”

Tyler's already on his cell. Haven jumps in and takes over for me with total authority. I run forty feet to one of two portable defibrillators I took the time to stash and familiarize myself with a year ago. As if born to it, I tear open his shirt, hit the green button, attach the pads, plug in and wait for the command to zap.

"Clear!"

I've always wanted to say that.

The man's eyes flutter. His wife and two daughters appear, out of breath. They take one look at their revived dad on the ground and the discharged defibrillator in my hand. They start bawling loudly and hug me.

A crowd gathers, I look for Bix and don't see him.

"Where's your dad?" says Haven. "Should I find him?"

"No," I say. "I need you here."

I'm amazed how quickly the ambulance arrives. Tyler rides to the hospital with the family. I'm putting away the defibrillator when Bix finally shows up.

"Where you been?" I say.

"Stashing receipts in the safe — is he okay?"

"Think so. Had to zap him."

Bix looks relieved, then turns to Haven. "Shouldn't you be with the snakes?"

"I was helping Linnea."

I think: Yeah, helping Linnea save a man's life.

"Okay. Get back to work," he says. "We got a show to put on!" He flees into the night, like some ADHD kid. I catch Haven staring in disbelief.

"No offense," says Haven, "but that is one self-involved asshole."

"You heard the man, get back to work."

I walk to the house, slam the front door.

I'm almost done packing my suitcase when I become aware of someone behind me. It reminds me of a thousand movies: *Whirl around, hidden knife in my hand, slash the intruder, crawl out the window, wounded maniac gripping my ankle...*

I turn, expecting Bix — but it's Haven.

She pokes the contents. "Supposed to see stacks of embezzled cash — not underwear."

"Sorry. All out of cinematic clichés."

Haven flops on my bed and says, "Now the tornado takes me to Oz."

Out the window I imagine people and things floating by like in the movie.

"Remember the cow?" I say.

"Yeah. How it just looked like a picture of a cow."

"Standing straight up. Total cheese."

Haven props herself up on her elbows. "I took a class where we studied characters. Every character has misbehavior. What do you think Dorothy's was?"

"I don't know. Running away?"

"Close. That's the active part. What gets corrected by the battle scene?"

I have no idea what she's talking about. "I give up."

"When she clicks her heels and says 'There's no place like home,' that's the battle scene."

I just look at her.

"Being lost in the nightmare of Oz is the misbehavior she must fix."

I sort of see. I change the subject. "We've never had a tornado. Not even a funnel cloud."

"Does he know you're leaving?"

"He will soon."

"What's the plan?"

"Not sure," I say. "Maybe I'll train to be an EMT."

"Perfect."

"How come you're not playing stewardess?"

“*Snakes on a Plane* got grounded. Somehow a copperhead made it into the mix.” Haven looks at the ceiling. “And by the way, it’s Flight Attendant.”

“Anyone bit?”

“No. This Pentecostal Preacher guy actually discovered the ‘serpent’ — that’s what he called it — and removed it for us. It’ll probably show up at his next sermon.”

“Does he speak in tongues?”

“Probably.”

“That’s more frightening than any pentagram. Or serpent.”

“Your father is checking to make sure we’re copperhead-free before giving the all-clear. He asked where you were.”

“That why you’re here?”

“Good excuse as any.”

“Right.”

She sits up. “Sorry I called him a self-involved asshole.”

“Hey, it’s true.”

“I say that as an actor. I mean, I recognize the type.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“*Nothing great in the world was ever accomplished without passion.* Hegel said that.”

“Hagle who? I need me some passion.” I lose control of this last word, dragging it out and raising pitch as if it were the last thing blurted while leaping to my doom.

A brief, intense episode of sobbing. Haven offers an embrace.

The kiss is unexpected, prolonged and deep.

And completely organic to the scene.

By moonlight, I write my farewell. It’s honest and kind. No hint of anger. I’m in shock, tingling. My face radiates heat, beautiful brine. The farm is calm, snakes wrangled, everyone exhausted. Crickets, the rustle of corn. Naked girl in my bed, asleep. I consider everything that didn’t seem

possible 24 hours ago: Boston, EMT school — explanations. Just like that guy's artery: crud breaks loose, blockage, pain, panic... rescue.

For the first time in years, I am truly, really, scared. And I love it.

Robert Morgan Fisher recently won the 2018 Chester Himes Fiction Prize and was shortlisted for the 2019 John Steinbeck Award. His fiction and essays have appeared in *Pleiades*, *Teach. Write.*, *The Wild Word*, *The Arkansas Review*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *The Missouri Review Soundbooth Podcast*, *Dime Show Review*, *0-Dark-Thirty*, *The Huffington Post*, *Psychopomp*, *The Seattle Review*, *The Spry Literary Journal*, *34th Parallel*, *The Journal of Microliterature*, *Spindrift*, *The Rumpus*, *Bluerailroad* and many other publications. He has a story in the 2016 Skyhorse Books definitive anthology on speculative war fiction, *Deserts of Fire* and in the 2018 Winterwolf Press Howl of the *Wild Anthology*. He's written for TV, radio and film. Robert holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University Los Angeles and is currently on the teaching faculty of Antioch University Santa Barbara. Since 2016, Robert has led an acclaimed twice-weekly writing workshop for veterans with PTSD in conjunction with UCLA. He often writes companion songs to his short stories. Both his music and fiction have won many awards. Robert also voices audiobooks. (www.robertmorganfisher.com)

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