

Spirited Solution
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Ajax Bernard Webster poured two fingers of Jack Daniels into a smudged water glass, then two fingers more. He hoisted the glass and fondled it while he gazed at a picture framed in silver on his desk.

“Are you going to drink that?”

Webster glanced about. It was late. His secretary had gone home hours ago, and he was alone in the office, sure of it.

“Are you going to drink that whiskey?” the voice asked again, a cultured voice, a Southern voice, a man’s voice. “Well, if you’re not . . .”

A hand came over Webster’s shoulder, a hand that relieved him of his glass.

Webster’s gaze followed the hand. When he twisted around, he found himself peering up into the face of a stranger.

“Beauregard Deauchamps Vandalia, at your service.” The man gave a slight bow.

“Vandalia?” Webster asked.

“Late of the Vandalias of Savannah and Louden City.”

“Late? How late?”

Vandalia turned to the hoopskirted woman seated on Webster’s couch. The scent of gardenias emanated from her. “Oh, I’d say Eighteen Sixty-Three, wouldn’t you, Beau?”

“Ahh, Maybelle, your memory is far better than mine. Mine was blown away by that cannonball at the Battle of Waggonville.”

Webster swivelled his chair around. “You’re dead?”

“’Twas a far, far better thing that I have done,” Vandalia said as he rambled to Webster’s side chair. He flopped down and sipped Webster’s whiskey.

Maybelle touched her fan to her lips. “You were the noble one, although, Love, your death left me in a precarious situation.”

“Yes, up here in this damnable Yankee country, trying to save our slaveless plantation.”

“Really, Love, it was just a farm.”

“But an impressively large farm. Eight hundred acres.”

“What little help I did have went to quitting, and, when it became too much for me, I joined you.” She reached for Vandalia’s hand. Their fingers entwined, like tendrils in a grape arbor, and the two gazed into one another’s eyes with a warmth that filled the room.

“Excuse me,” Webster said. He gestured at Maybelle. “You’re dead, too?”

“Quite.”

Vandalia sipped at his whiskey. “I always said the boys over in Lynchburg made the best. Mister Webster, may I pour you a fresh glass?”

“I think I’ve already had too much.” He covered his eyes, but after some moments Webster peered between his fingers. “You’re not really here, are you? I’m just imagining . . .”

Vandalia, dressed in a planter’s clothing of a century and a half ago, brought his glass up in a smart salute. “My wife and I are very much here, sir.”

“Oh Lord.”

Maybelle folded her fan. "Surely you've heard the stories."

"That this house is haunted?" Webster laughed, first embarrassed, then his laugh turned hollow. "But they're just tales old folks tell on Halloween, to scare the neighborhood kids. This house has been my law office for twenty-seven years, and I've never seen nor heard anything out of place in all that time."

"That's because you didn't need us," Maybelle said.

Vandalia put his booted feet up on Webster's coffee table, one ankle crossed over the other. "Rule Nineteen of the IAASD."

"Pardon?"

"The IAASD . . . the International Association of Apparitions, Specters and Doppelgangers."

Webster twisted an eyebrow upward.

"Oh yes," Vandalia said, "we're a very fraternal group."

"Clubby." Maybelle examined her buffed fingernails.

"And what is our membership," Vandalia asked, turning to his wife, "two-hundred – "

"– and forty-three at last count. Not nearly as many of us as the living believe."

"Pretty well scattered about," Vandalia said. "Rule Thirty-Six limits us to an area within one hundred feet of either where we died or our place of last residence."

"There is an exception, Love."

"And a good one, too, or we'd become, shall we say, bored to death, Mister Webster? We are allowed to convene triennially for a weekend holiday."

"Oh, and the partying. We do so look forward to it," Maybelle said. She fluffed her skirts.

Webster hauled the bottle of Jack Daniels over. He cradled it to his chest. "Not that I believe any of this . . ."

Maybelle gazed at Vandalia. "Sweet, he doesn't think we're real."

"Well, this is the first time he has seen us, my dear."

"Perhaps proof would be in order?"

At that, Vandalia came upright, his feet going to the floor. With Webster staring, Vandalia gave his head a sharp twist and lifted it from his shoulders. He set his head on the coffee table and, from there, winked at Webster.

"Oh no."

"Oh yes. Mister Webster, if it weren't for that damned Yankee cannoneer blowing my noggin off, I wouldn't be able to do this. Rule One Hundred Sixteen, IAASD members aren't permitted to play tricks on live beings, not even on dogs who sometimes become overly curious."

"Not fully true," Maybelle said. "We are permitted to frighten mice. Twice I've demoused this house."

"Quite right, my dear." Vandalia saluted his wife, with his hand snapping up to where his brow would have been were his head not on the table.

Webster took a quick nip from his bottle. "Just to steady myself," he said. He wriggled his fingers at the detached thing, as if to wave it away. "If you would please."

"Not at all." Vandalia grasped his head by the ears and planted it back on his shoulders. He gave his head a twist to the right, then to the left. "If I don't lock it into place, I lose it at the

damnedest times.”

Maybelle giggled. “Once we were in the garden and you bent over to inspect the rhubarb
_”

“And I lost it, didn’t I, dear?”

“Took me a full two minutes to find your errant knob rolling about among all those leaves and the brambles of the berry patch. Love, had you not kept whistling ‘Dixie,’ your head would still be out there.”

Webster nipped again from his bottle. “Should I be asking why you’re here?”

“Here?” Maybelle said. She spread her hands, indicating the room in what had at one time been the mansion of the Vandalia Farm, before the land and the other buildings had been sold off.

“Yes.”

“We both chose,” Vandalia said, “quite independently of one another, to come back to our place of last residence. And fortunate that we did because we’ve been able to spend all these decades together.”

“No, I mean *here*,” Webster said. “*Now*.”

“Ohhh.” Vandalia leaned back in his chair.

Maybelle came forward. “You need our help, dear.”

“The hell I do.”

Vandalia clacked his tongue. “Sir, such language. Maybelle and I, we are gentle people.”

“You’re goddamn ghosts.”

“That does it.” Vandalia bounced up. He went to a coat closet and rummaged through a chest-of-drawers in there until he found what he was looking for. When he came out, he carried a pair of leather gloves. “Cur, apologize to the lady or I shall have to challenge you to a duel. And let me tell you, I was an excellent swordsman in my day.”

“I thought you couldn’t frighten people.”

“The second exception to Rule One Hundred Sixteen. In the instance of honor.”

“You’re kidding me.”

Vandalia stepped forward. He slapped Webster hard with the gloves, the blow disheveling Webster’s hair. “Then a duel it is, and with cavalry sabers, those over the fireplace.”

Maybelle worked her fan, a cooing smile on her lips. “Oh, I do so love the drama.”

Vandalia strode to the fireplace. He took down the sabers and examined their hilts.

“Confederate swords, excellent. The finest steel from Birmingham.”

He tossed one to Webster who remained fixed to his chair, his Jack Daniels bottle cradled more closely. The saber clattered to the floor. “You’re crazy.”

Vandalia stepped up. He laid his blade against the lawyer’s neck. “Gather up your weapon, sir. If you fail to do so, Subsection fourteen of the Marquis of Queensbury’s rules permits me to take your head.”

“You are crazy!”

“A pity it would be, and damned painful.” Vandalia flicked his blade, and it made the slightest cut.

Webster’s hand snapped to his neck. When his hand came back, it was tinged with red.

“Well?” Vandalia asked.

“I . . . I apologize.”

“Accepted,” Maybelle said with a generous smile.

Vandalia took a lace handkerchief from his pocket. He drew the blade through the cloth to remove several drops of blood that clung to it. “So you are a gentleman when forced to be one, hmm?”

“Now as to our help,” Maybelle said.

“I don’t have anything that calls for help.”

Vandalia turned the picture frame. He admired the woman’s features preserved there for all time. “Handsome.”

Webster snatched the photo away. “My wife.”

“We know.”

“And we know how much you miss her,” Maybelle said. “A motorcar accident, wasn’t it?”

A twinge of memory flickered at Webster’s eye, forming a tear.

“We never had such noisesome and dangerous conveyances in our day,” Maybelle rattled on.

“A horse might throw us or run away with the carriage,” Vandalia said.

Maybelle stiffened. “Rarely happened.”

“Remember your Uncle Bonaparte?”

“Uncle Boney tipped a bit.”

Vandalia roared, laughter whipping his head back. “You could wring buckets of moonshine from old Uncle Boney. On one of his tipping evenings, he fell from his horse into a well and drowned.”

Maybelle tapped her mate with her fan as he wafted by. “Beau, this is not helping Mister Webster.”

“As always, my dear, you are forever correct.” He swept on around the lawyer’s desk to lean on the back of Webster’s chair. “Maybelle was not completely honest with you when she said we could not travel more than one hundred feet from where we died or from the place of our last residence.”

Webster slid lower. “You said something about a triennial gathering.”

“There is another exception, but it requires that we petition the grand council of the IAASD . . . when we suspect those whom we’ve come to care for might harm themselves.”

Webster glanced up over his shoulder. “You’re saying you two dead people care for me, and after you tried to slice off my head?”

Vandalia tickled the lawyer’s ear. “Child’s play.”

“Hah!”

“No, really,” Maybelle said. She left her seat on the couch, drifted over, and settled on the edge of the desk. “Remember last week? You tried to kill yourself.”

Webster stared at her.

“We heard you grieving for your dear wife.” Vandalia helped himself to a cigar from Webster’s breast pocket. He stuck the stogie in his mouth, then went about patting his pockets, searching for a match. “It’s true. So we petitioned the council to ride with you, and they approved.”

“That night, you went to the cemetery,” Maybelle said. “We were with you.”

“And we were with you when you drove home.” Vandalia rescued a match from the center desk drawer. He lit his cigar and puffed away until he had a good burn going. “You stepped down on that thing you call an accelerator, remember? And you steered your vehicle toward a bridge abutment.”

“But I didn’t hit it.”

“That’s because I wrestled the wheel away from you.”

“I didn’t see you.”

Maybelle put the end of her fan beneath Webster’s chin. She lifted until the two looked into one another’s eyes. “You didn’t see us because you weren’t ready to accept us. You weren’t ready to accept our help.”

There was an electricity in her gaze and in the way she spoke, something that Webster had not experienced for years. He turned to the photograph on his desk. It, too, radiated, the garden and his wife appeared to be alive. He had taken that picture. She seemed to be motioning to him, beckoning him.

His hand, without any willed effort, moved toward the photograph until a fingertip touched the surface, producing a liquid rippling, like mercury disturbed. Webster startled, pulled his fingertip back and peered at it. A silvery bead mounded up on the tip.

“Your souls have touched,” Maybelle said. “You’ve missed her so.”

The liquid spread down Webster’s finger. He watched it, warmed and entranced.

Vandalia laid his smoke aside. He reached across the back of Webster’s chair for his wife. “We understand why you want to be with her. It was the same for us.”

Once more, Webster’s hand moved toward the photograph, moved with the assurance of a robot’s. The fingertips touched, and went on through as the surface again rippled.

“It’s time, dear one,” Maybelle whispered.

Webster’s hand, his arm and his body, too, followed his fingertips through and into the photograph. The image changed. No longer was Webster’s wife alone in her eternal garden, for beside her now stood a man, Webster, in his weary courtroom suit, his necktie askew, his arm around her waist. Their heads touched, both with easy smiles on their faces.

Maybelle squeezed her husband’s hand. “I think the council will be very pleased with this one.”