

Smear'd Fingerprints



Somebody died in the oil mine last night. They found him in the sixth branch of Keir's shaft when they went in this morning. I didn't see him, but they say he was one of the young ones. It ain't so strange for somebody to die in the mine, mind you, the only reason I mention it is 'cause somebody killed him. Come to think of it, they took three bodies out this morning. The murdered one, and two from Atten's collapse from six days ago, that they just finally uncovered today. I didn't see them either, but they say they didn't look as bad the murder. I can't get a straight story on what he looked like. One guy told me his head was half off, but I don't believe nothin' that guy says anyway. Others say his head was twisted round backwards, and others say there wasn't nothin' off about him except the caved-in-neck. All anybody can agree on is that somebody done it with their bare hands, and it was one of us, not one of them, cause there was black oil fingerprints all over his face. First guy that told me that, I laughed at him, and asked how he could tell, cause we all got so much oil on our faces and necks, who'd know the difference? But he was right. If I run my right hand down my left arm, it leaves a great big smear. I've seen guys who paint swirls and lines on their faces in it, but I don't do that, cause I try to keep it away from my eyes. Not that you use your eyes all that much down there, but I like to keep them good, you know, cause someday, somehow I'm gonna get outta here, and I'll be glad I took good care of em then.

Anyway. My point was about this dead guy. He's been on my mind a lot. Heavy on my mind. Not so much him mind you, but the guy that killed him, that's what's got me thinking. Who would do it? Who would kill a guy with his bare hands down there in the mine. Our lives are short enough around here without strangling each other or twisting off heads or whatever it was. How come? In all the time I have been here, and— wow. How long has it been? I stopped marking

the days a long time ago; just makes things go by slower... I dunno. Anyway, in all the time I have been here I ain't never seen two guys fight. We don't got the energy for it. There ain't nothing worth fighting over. This whole place is built to suck the fight right out of you. Even above ground, even in the bunks, it's just like being down in the dark. The oil is on everything. dripping, dripping, dripping... where was I? Oh, so who even fights? It couldn't have been a fight. Especially not down there. When I am down there on my knees, digging through the soft-dirt with my hands, I don't care who the guy next to me is, or what he says or what he's done. Right then and there, he's my best friend in the whole world. Best friend. And if I'm at the top of a wet-shaft, hauling up the chain, I don't care who's at the other end. I don't care if he swears seven ways from sundown to stick a knife in my whole family when he gets to the top, I'll keep hauling him up, cause I know what it feels like to be down there with the bucket. And I know the minute I catch his hand, he'd forget the whole deal.

So it don't make no sense that it was angry-fighting. The murder had to be done by somebody crazy. You know, somebody who hurts and kills because they like it. Because it makes them feel strong. But who could it be? It ain't easy figuring out who's that crazy around here. There's some guys who I'm pretty sure couldn't a' done it, just from talking with them, but that only cuts out a few. There is a lot a guys here. More than I can count. More than I can talk to either. Wouldn't want to anyway. Nobody ever has anything to say that's worth saying. A lot of the guys don't talk at all. I go days sometimes without saying nothing. Back early on, I remember there was a long time when anytime anybody would say anything to me, I would just hiss back at them like a cat. Anybody would've pegged me as crazy back then. Maybe now too, who's to say. More'n half the guys I see on any given day look like they could be crazy. This place turns people crazy naturally. We'd all be crazy by now if it wasn't quicker and easier to just burn out and die. But who'd be crazy enough to kill a guy with his hands down in the dark. That takes a special kind of crazy. Not just any crazy is bare-handed killer-crazy. No, I figure it couldn't just be anybody. It's gotta be either one of the real new guys they just brought in, either that or one of the old guys who's been here too long and has snapped. Double snapped. Snapped from a state of already being pretty well snapped.

But there is another idea that has been floating through my mind. What if it was one of the masters that did it? Sure everybody thought of that, and a lot of people said it, too, but everybody knows it couldn't be. If a master wanted to kill one of us, he would do it up here, and do it clean. I have seen it once or twice. No sneaking around in the shafts. No getting dirty and oily and bloody. And certainly no bare hands. The murder had fingerprints on him. Real fingerprints, with the swirls and the creases under the knuckle joints and everything. I heard from people who saw him close. It was done with bare hands, and strong hands.

I've never seen a master without gloves on... but don't even they have fingers inside there? Couldn't a master slip off his gloves just long enough to kill somebody, and then put them back on? Sure he could. But then I am back at "Why?". A master doesn't have to be secret. It's no secret they can kill us if they want to. Why would a master kill one of us like one of us would kill one of us, and then leave it for us to find? To spread fear and doubt? They don't need to. They already got all the fear they want. They have total control. There ain't any fight in us to break out of us. Like I said before, this whole place is designed to suck the fight out of you, like they suck the oil out of the earth. Sometimes I wonder whether it's the oil they are selling, or if they got a buyer somewhere for our souls, and the oil mine is just to keep us busy. But anyway, like I say, it doesn't make sense for one of them to kill one of us, and try to pin it on us. What does it gain them? So we wonder if there is a killer among us. So we wonder whether the guy digging alongside us is dreaming of breaking our necks in the night, so we doubt each other, so we suspect, but what does it matter? That ain't so different from wondering if you're gonna be crushed in a collapse, or drown in a slip, or suffocate in the soft-dirt. What does it matter if your neck gets broken by a guy's hands or by a long slide down a steep shaft? Sure, maybe in the daylight it would hurt more, maybe it would feel a little personal, but down there in dark, being murdered wouldn't be such a bad way to go. At least you would have company from the guy who was murdering you. I'd rather die with a warm human hand around my neck than alone, waist-deep-head-down in the cold oil at the narrow tip of a tunnel.

So my point is, it doesn't make sense, a master doing it. Not any kind of sense I can see anyway. And that leads me back to crazy. If it was a master that did it, it would have to be a crazy one. They're all sadists, but this one would have to be different. Maybe he would kill secret-like to hide it from the other masters, not to confuse us. Maybe the deception is for them and not for us. And why would he want to hide his killing from them, unless of course he considered them to be "on the menu", so to speak. Oh, that is a pleasant thought indeed.

But I am getting too far away from what I know. That is all my imagination, nothing of what I know. All I know is they found a guy this morning that had been murdered in the mine. Murdered bare-handed, with fingerprints smearred where his neck was twisted. That's all I know.

Maybe not all I know. All I *know* know, but there is one other thing I keep avoiding, because I don't much care to think about it, but it is important, and it is what got me thinking so much about this in the first place. It's what I set out to tell you about when I started, but I just keep going off in other directions because I like to try and think logically what might have really happened. Dreams aren't logical.

Last night I had a dream. It was real vivid. But I know it was a dream. I can

tell the difference. It felt like a dream, well, not dreamlike blurry, where everything is blurry and everything changes, and you know your just dreaming. But this was definitely a dream. It felt nothing like being awake. Nothing like I feel now.

I was sliding down a wet shaft. I have only ever slid without a chain once, and I swear my heart didn't beat but once the whole way down, but this time I wasn't scared at all. It was like I could have been climbing down, but I wasn't. In the dream I was sliding. I knew I was in Kier's shaft. Yeah, that's the same one where they found the murder. I've been thinking a lot about that today. Why would I go and dream I was in Kier's shaft? I work in Null shaft, and before that in Bell's shaft, before it slumped. And before that I was in the Main Cleft, and before that in some other places I don't remember the names of, but I've never worked in Kier's shaft. I have never even been down there. I know it ain't a wet shaft, so what I was sliding down in my dream couldn't have been it, I am guessing I was just remembering some other wet shaft I had slid down before. Maybe that same one I slipped down with no chain... But then it's weird that I would think it was Kier's shaft in the dream.

So the shaft ends shallow, and I come in with my head up, and I don't even have to spit. I don't remember getting up, but I remember feeling forward and seeing a light. Up ahead is somebody standing up at a branch-off, holding a firefly jar. I called out to him, and he turns his head, and I can see he is wearing a wide-brimmed hat, so I know it's a master. If I ran into a master just standing there alone down there in real life, I don't know what I would do. I would think it was mighty strange first off, him being alone that deep, or even being there at all in a shaft like that. It just wasn't the sort of place they normally go. And of course, if he hadn't seen me, and maybe even if he had, I would try and sneak away. But not in this dream. I just walked right over to him. Yeah, walked, because of the light I could see the roof was high.

And I came right up to him, and looked at him, and he looked at me, and then he said something. I forget what. I remembered it in the dream. It was something real simple and memorable and appropriate for the situation of him and me standing there in the shaft, but after I woke up I couldn't for the life of me think of what it was. Anyway, it wasn't the words that was important anyhow, it was the shape of his mouth when he said them. I *recognized him*. He wasn't a master at all! He was just dressed like one. He was the man who sold me out here! I only ever got one good look at him before they took me, but I was sure this was him. The stranger who tricked me, trapped me, robbed me, cheated me, and sold me, all in the space of an hour. For a second I could see my wife's face, flash, like it was in front of me, and as she faded, I got back all the pain and all the hate I have been missing for so very long. I got a good clear sharp memory of everything I once had, and how it felt to have it ripped away so

suddenly and so unexpectedly. Wishing for revenge used to keep me awake at night when I first came here, but that was so long ago I didn't even remember forgetting it until that dream last night reminded me. This place makes me so dead inside.

Maybe you can see why this dream bothers me so much, because you can probably guess what I did next. I reached out and grabbed him by the neck and started choking him. But he pushed me away with his one free hand, easy, like I was nothing. He was bigger than me, and stronger, and he just sneered at me cause he knew it. But you know how it goes in dreams sometimes. You can just change them if they aren't going your way. This is another reason this felt like a dream, and not like being awake. I stared at the smeary black fingerprints I had left all around his clean pale neck, and suddenly my hands were back in them again, and I was stronger than him, just because I wanted to be, and I squeezed, and I shook him, and his hat fell off, and he dropped the jar and it broke, and fireflies scattered every which-way. That's something that has been on my mind too. Nobody has mentioned if they found a broken jar by the guy that was murdered. Nobody has mentioned it, but maybe they knew it and just didn't say because they didn't think it was interesting. But I have been afraid to ask about it, because what if they say there was? What if they ask me how I knew, or why I asked? What would I say? I mean, it was only a dream, but I am still afraid to know.

And when I had killed him completely— I broke his neck all to bits and twisted his head around almost backwards, but I never broke the skin, and there was no drop of blood, only oil, oil everywhere— then, I dropped him. And I stood over the body and sobbed for awhile, until finally it came to me that I couldn't just leave him there to be found, and I didn't know what to do with him. Where could I drag him? Where could I hide him? And then the idea hit me that I would trade clothes with him. When they found him they would think he was one of us. And then I thought that if I put on his clothes I could pass for a master, and I could just walk away, and maybe even get far enough away to run before they figured me out. So all in a panic of excitement I started tugging at his coat, but by now the fireflies were mostly gone, and it was getting harder and harder to see, and I couldn't figure out the clasps, but it was a dream, so I just wished our clothes to be switched, and they were, and doing that almost made me wake up I think, because after that point the dream just felt like an ordinary dream. The kind where everything is blurry and everything changes. So I left him there looking like me, and I rushed off looking like him, but I couldn't go back the way I came, I couldn't climb up the wet shaft, so I went looking for another way up to the surface, so I could use my disguise to run away, but I only got more and more lost, and then I lost the hat, which was important. A master wouldn't lose his hat, and I would draw attention on the surface not having it. I don't remember the rest

of the dream. It was just confusion and searching and anguish.

That dream all by itself was enough to wake me up very disturbed. I woke up feeling... emotional. I haven't felt emotional in so very long. So I was already thinking about it and puzzling it over even before anybody told me about the murder in Kier's shaft. So you can understand why I have been worrying so much today. The murder has everybody thinking. Nobody is giving much thought to those two dead guys they pulled out of the other shaft. Well, maybe some people are thinking of them, but they aren't unusual. Everybody is thinking about the murder. But you can see how it's an extra worry for me, what with that dream. It scares me to imagine that it was me that did it somehow, like in a trance, but I know that can't be. It was a dream. It felt like a dream, it happened like a dream. And what's more, I woke up right in my bunk, right where I belong, wearing my own clothes, no dirtier or oilier than I was when I went to bed. How I dreamed it couldn't have been exactly how it happened, but the similarities still scare me. It couldn't have really been a master that was killed, not even in our clothes. Because the masters would have seen his face when they brought him up, and they would have known who he was, clothes or not.

And then I think, what if I just predicted it? Or what if I just saw it through somebody else's eyes? But I don't know what that means, and it still scares me. I know I have never been in Kier's shaft, and I know I have never killed anyone. But I also know how vivid that dream was, and I know where I was in the dream, and I know who I was in the dream, because I was me, and I know who I killed in the dream because it was him, and I know the emotions I felt when I saw him, because they were mine, all mine, purely mine.

Well, now you know what is on my mind. What do you think? Have I gone crazy? Do I have the sort of crazy that spills out of my head and leaves other people dead, somehow, against all reason. All reason that I can figure out.

So now I don't know what to ask for. I want to go to sleep, but I'm afraid to. Either way it goes, I'm afraid. I'm afraid it'll happen again. If I sleep and dream, something else'll happen, someone else'll die. And I'm afraid if I go to sleep nothing will happen, and my dreams will be mundane. Everything will go back to the way it always is, and that too is just another kind of death. A slow tiring death that kills time before the real death, whenever it finally rolls around.

I don't know which to wish for. I don't know which to pray for. I want to fall asleep, and dream a dream where I kill every last one of the masters. But if I dream that, and I wake up and it hasn't really happened, I don't know what I will do. Maybe I will triple-snap. And what if they are dead? Will I be free? Will I ever be able to sleep again? What if I dream them dead tonight, and I run away, and find my way home, and my wife is still there waiting for me. Will I be able to sleep then? What if I dream that I am back here again, and I wake up and find that I am. Will I ever be able to forget this place? Even if my body gets free, can my

dreams get away? The memories are stains on my mind like the fingerprints on his neck. You can't wipe them away, you can only smear them around.

The contents of this story are words, and as such, they are to be read, and remembered, and above all, shared. These words belong to you who read them, but these words also belong to he who wrote them. Please respect his ownership of them.

Released under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/). For more information, see:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>

To contact the author, mail Bob@HamsterRepublic.com

This story is available for free. It does not provide any royalties for me, the author. If you enjoy this story, and out of the generosity of your heart, you want to buy me coffee, donation information can be found at;
<http://HamsterRepublic.com/james/writing/>

If you are interested in buying a printed copy, Smearred Fingerprints is available in paperback form as part of a collection of my short fiction. For ordering info, see;
<http://HamsterRepublic.com/james/writing/>

