NICHOLAS SAMUEL STEMBER

CLOSING TIME

Steve lazily watched the mother leading her three young children through the toy department, the harried scene recalling memories of his own youth. One of the children was dressed as a pirate, a personal favorite from his trick-or-treating days, while the other two were costumed as a ghost and witch respectively. A soft sigh escaped his lips as he thought about how easily youth could slip away. If people had told him back then that he would drop out of college and become a night security guard for a major department store, he would have laughed in their faces. But that was exactly what he was now and had been for almost a year.

"Personally," his partner sliced into his thoughts in his usual obnoxious tone, "I can't stand Halloween. Why let the kids up here this late anyway?"

Steve glanced over at Larry, the young man that he was forced to

spend his nights with, and internally groaned. Choosing to ignore his partner, he watched the children nearby, as they hungrily grabbed what toys they could before the store closed in fifteen minutes. He personally agreed that having young children at the mall until ten was a bit late, but he realized he wasn't a parent and could hardly judge.

"Stupid kids," Larry sneered a bit too loudly.

Steve sighed; this was one of many reasons that he had little to no regard for his co-worker. Larry often chose to come up to the top floor to annoy Steve during this frantically hectic time right before closing, only too happy to share his very opinionated views on most everything. At first Steve had thought that he would just get used to it, but a year of dealing with Larry's self-absorbed and overly critical view on everything was almost too much for anyone to handle. Steve would often try to parley his partner into silence, but tonight he decided to keep any comments to himself, hoping that this time Larry would just talk himself dry.

"All those kids begging for candy an' junk," his partner continued, regardless, as he scratched absently at his closely cropped blonde hair. "Stomping around in those dumb costumes. Kind of makes you want to run over them in your car, or something."

Steve pushed his fine black hair out of his face and silently grumbled, amazed that no matter how hard he tried, he simply couldn't find anything of redeeming value in his partner, which was rare for him as he always tried to find some good in everyone. Larry simply seemed to embrace each night with a huge chip on his shoulder, and Steve had no idea where the attitude came from. He looked away from Larry to find that the mother and her three children were gone, but there were still a few stragglers left, as they performed their nightly ritual of slowly abandoning the large store to finally leave it in gloomy silence. Personally, Steve liked the solitude of the job, it gave him time to think, and left him his days free. His job as night watchman was simple enough; Larry, his partner, covered the lower two floors of clothing and furniture, while he covered the upper two floors of appliances, electronics and toys. From ten at night until seven in the morning, they patrolled their respective floors, rarely seeing each other, but always keeping in touch through walkie talkies.

"Time to get to work," he mentioned to Larry as he heard the assistant manager inform the customers over the loudspeaker that they had five

minutes to make their final selections.

His co-worker grinned up at him, his mood seeming to suddenly lighten as a speculative twinkle flashed in his deep blue eyes. "Yep, you enjoy your last night of work, buddy."

Steve met Larry's gaze and hesitated for a moment, noticing his sudden and unexpected change in demeanor. "Just what's that supposed to mean?"

"Only that no one has made it through the night of Halloween patrolling the toy department in well over a decade."

"Oh really?" he scoffed at his partner, "and why is that."

"They say it has to do with the fire that happened here fifteen years ago on this floor."

"Who's they?"

Larry rolled his eyes, obviously annoyed, yet amused that he would get to tell his little story once again. "*They*, meaning everyone in the store. Don't you ever listen to store gossip?"

"Not if I can help it," Steve admitted proudly, but then decided to humor his partner. After all, he had not heard any good Halloween stories yet this year, and here it was, only two hours before midnight. "How could there be a large fire, what about all of the sprinklers?"

"They are here now, but weren't then," Larry paused dramatically, then continued. "Fifteen years ago, on Halloween night, one of those big ghost displays overloaded. You know, the ones that are all lit up."

Steve nodded, he thought that they looked cool, especially the largest one in the center of the department that hung from the ceiling.

"Well, it overloaded and burst into flames. There were no sprinklers then, just a few fire extinguishers on the walls, which none of the kids knew how to use."

"What about the parents and sales associates on duty then?" Steve questioned, attempting to throw a wrench into Larry's horror story.

"They were shorthanded that year, and only one salesman was up here in the toy section. It was a Halloween special reading thing for the kids, he was reading a ghost story to them all while the parents were in the rest of the store shopping. The jerk panicked when the fire spread quickly across the section, and then he passed out before sounding the alarm."

"This really happened?" Steve asked, his tone showing his doubt.

"It really happened."

"Was anyone hurt?"

"The elevator shut down and the stairwell was blocked by fire. Twenty-three children died before the firemen finally arrived to break into the floor. The only survivors were a small handful of kids, and the salesman."

"My God," Steve whispered, his doubts about the story fading.

"But that's not the real clincher," Larry quickly added.

"And what's that?"

"The real person to blame for the fire was the night security guard who had been on duty for that department. He never turned off the power to that floor when he left the night before, and the system super-heated up and finally overloaded the following day."

"What happened to him?"

"Oh, he was fired the next day and was charged with manslaughter or something like that, but skipped bail and has been missing since. And that started the one-year terms for all security on the toy floor."

"What are you talking about?" This story was getting more and more bizarre.

"Look, Steve," Larry continued, his wry smile never fading through the whole story," when were you hired?"

"November first, last year."

"Right, the day *after* Halloween."

"So?"

"That's when each security guard has 'quit', so to speak. Well, at first, they would just quit the day after Halloween and wouldn't say why, but the last number of years they don't even call in to quit anymore, they just vanish during their shifts. I've been here for three years now, and you're the third partner they've hired to cover the upper floors. They offered it to me once, for a lot more pay, but I turned it down. Every Halloween night, the security guard disappears from the toy floor, the very floor that we're on now, the same floor where all those kids died."

Steve found that he had begun to stare at the huge ghost that floated over the section, all lit up and glowing brightly. "So, what happened to the ones that vanished?" he asked quietly, his throat suddenly dry.

"The last few years they just disappeared. Now, each year, on November first, they need to hire a new night security guard for the upper floors. And the last place the former guard had checked in was this department here, in

toys."

"And this has been going on for fifteen years?"

"Yep."

"Police must have asked the older ones who quit about it."

Steve shrugged.

"And the ones that vanished, they must have checked those disappearances out."

"Sure they did, but no leads led to no cases."

"Then why didn't they tell me that when they hired me?" Steve demanded, suddenly feeling anxious.

"Oh, right." Larry said with a wry laugh.

Steve had to admit that the story would have turned him off the job. Then he looked at the smirk that his partner had on his face and suddenly felt anger flush through him. "You're just pulling my leg, you idiot. It's all bull."

"Maybe, buddy," Larry answered through his grin. "But you'll find out for yourself tonight."

The final chime interrupted them, signaling the fact that all the customers had left the store, and the place was finally shutting down.

"Well, time to get to work," Larry said with a forcefully hyped-up eerie tone in his voice as he waved his fingers about. "*Watch out for the ghosts.*" Then he laughed and headed for the lower floors.

Steve silently cursed for a few minutes as he got up from where they had been sitting and watched the three sales associates clear out their cash drawers and get their coats.

"Have a good night, Steve," the department manager said with a cheerful wave as she left, though she hesitated for a moment as she entered the elevator, holding the door open.

Steve looked back over and saw she was just staring at him from inside the elevator, an odd expression on her face, but then she noticed him staring back and she quickly smiled and waved again.

"Happy Halloween, Steve."

Steve waved halfheartedly in return as the elevator door closed, then walked out into the hallway as the lights in the store dimmed to a mere flicker. He took out his large flashlight and turned it on, preparing for his first round. For a long moment he looked back at the toy department in uncer-

tain apprehension, then laughed out loud.

"God, Steve," he berated himself aloud, "I don't believe that you actually let that idiot get to you. You're better than that." He chucked again, but the laughter was forced and without mirth, a hollow sound that produced no comfort.

He hesitated for a moment at the elevator as he waited for it to return, a sudden urge coming over him, and he decided that he had to take another look back into the dimly lit department. With a look of determination on his face, he reentered the toy department and looked around. All of the mannequins, wearing various Trick or Treat costumes, stood in frozen images of Halloween mirth as he bathed each of them with his high-powered beam. Halloween decorations were all over the displays and walls.

"I can't wait 'till you guys are all taken down tomorrow morning," Steve whispered. Then looked up with a start as he saw some motion overhead.

Bringing his light up quickly, he stumbled back as he saw the huge ghost looming overhead.

"Jesus," he said through clenched teeth, "I hate that thing!"

Suddenly his walkie talkie hissed at him. "Yo buddy, how ya doing?"

He pulled out his walkie talkie and activated it, "Just fine, Larry. What do you want?"

"Oh, nothing," Larry said through a chuckle. "Just wanted to see if you were still alive."

Steve snapped a short obscenity and then shoved the walkie talkie back on his belt suddenly happy their patrols kept them on separate floors. He turned around and left the toy department to head back to the elevator, just as the huge ghost overhead pivoted slightly, almost as if to watch him leave. Steve detected the movement with his peripheral vision and quickly swung back around, looking up again. The ghost, a large construct of an inflated plastic casing over a metallic frame suspended by steel cables, swayed back and forth a bit. Steve let out the breath that he realized that he had been holding.

"Gotta be the ventilators," he quietly rationalized, then quickly left the floor.

It was many hours later, around three in the morning, when Larry finally called him again. Steve had spent most of the night down in appliances and

electronics, avoiding the top floor and the toy department like it held a contagious strain of bubonic plague. But he knew that he had to go up again soon, since he had to check in at each department at least three times during the night.

"Steve, buddy," came Larry's annoying drone, "still living, huh?"

"Disappointed?" he responded, his voice laced with sarcasm.

"Nope, not at all," Larry answered through a chuckle. "I bet that you're hiding in appliances or electronics and haven't been in toys all night."

"Just leave me alone and return to what you do best...which is nothing."

"Nasty, nasty, buddy," Larry laughed. "Have fun."

Steve put away the walkie talkie and sighed. "Larry's right," he grumbled quietly, annoyed with himself, "I am cowering here on the third floor."

The young guard cursed internally and then got up from the chair he was resting in with determination. He walked over to the elevator and entered, set on returning to complete his round in the toy department.

He left the elevator, one floor up, and strode into the toy department with a bravado that he had not felt in a long time, like the valiant knight entering holy lands on a crusade. He pulled out his flashlight like a sword and turned it on, bathing the large, dimly lit room in dancing shadows. He began to sweep the area when his feelings of valor suddenly drained out of him like water in a bath that had lost its drain plug. There, in the shadows ahead, he was *sure* that he had seen a movement of some sort.

He pulled out his walkie talkie and activated it. "Larry," he whispered into the small device, "I could use some help here on four. We may have an intruder." But the only answer he got was static. "Larry?" he asked again, but still no response. He put the walkie talkie back on his belt as his lips tightened. "Damn," he whispered, "where the hell is he?"

Suddenly his nervousness turned to annoyance as an obvious thought came to mind. "Of course," he half whispered to himself. "Why rely on just taunts to scare me when you can come up here and do it in person?"

On the off chance what he saw wasn't his partner playing a Halloween prank on him, he quickly scanned the toy department for something to use as a weapon. Settling on a baseball bat held by one of the mannequins, he took it and held the makeshift weapon in one hand and the flashlight in the other, as he started to slink over to where he had heard the noise, hoping to surprise Larry. He was halfway across the floor when the oddest feeling be-

gan to overcome him, as if something was off...something missing. Suddenly realizing what seemed amiss, he looked up, his lips parting in surprise...*the large overhead ghost was gone*! The baseball bat slipped out of his fingers and clattered loudly to the floor as he continued to stare at the high ceiling in shock. *It was there, how could it have disappeared?*

Then his mind returned to what he had originally assumed was the culprit, replacing his rising panic with anger. "Larry! That's not funny." With newfound resoluteness, Steve started to search for his partner, now certain that this was all some elaborate Halloween prank intended to scare the hell out of him.

"It didn't work," he called aloud. "You didn't fool me." But the words died in his throat as the certainty of his deduction began to fall from him. There was an alert signal on each floor, that let the security know if someone came to the upper floors, and he had not heard that alarm all night--unless Larry knew some way around it, but he doubted that very much. He took out his walkie talkie again and instead of pressing the talk button, he hit the find button, certain he'd hear the squawk of Larry's device hiding in the shadows. But only silence responded to his walkie's chirp. He tried again, and a third time, but nothing.

He caught another movement in his peripheral vision to his right--yet once again nothing was there when he shined his flashlight. A different motion to the left induced him to turn that way as well, with the same empty results. "What the hell?" he hissed through tightly clenched teeth, his fear mixing with nervous fury. "Larry, if this is you, you're going to be very sorry later on."

Steve practically jumped out of his skin as he felt a cold hand come to rest on his back, but it felt small, like the hand of a child. He pivoted quickly to find himself facing one of the mannequins; one dressed up like a witch, the mask on her head was contorted in a deathly grimace as she glared down on him. For an instant he thought that he had somehow managed to back himself into the mannequin, and almost smiled at his stupidity--when he felt another hand on his back from behind, and again it felt small, even though the mannequin in a mummy costume that he now faced was also adult sized.

He swiftly retreated from the two mannequins and darted out of the large room, stumbling backwards into the hallway as his heart raced like a rabbit's. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Steve knew there had to be a

rational explanation for the hysteria he felt encroaching on his sense of reality, but that did not change how he felt...he wanted off this floor now! Turning abruptly, he ran to the large elevator doors and hit the small button, letting out a breath of relief as he heard the mechanism of the elevator respond to his desperate plea, floors below. Yet all confidence melted away like ice on a fire, as another chill traversed the length of his frame, compelling him to look behind--two of the Halloween mannequins stood before him, less than ten feet away.

"No way," he groaned, certain of the fact that there had been no mannequins there before. Yet there was no denying the werewolf and blood-soaked axe murderer that hovered before him. And something else was wrong, he could hear the elevator working, but it was not getting any closer. Steve strained his ears as he listened to the steady whine of the motor below as the elevator struggled to reach him...*it was stuck! But how?* He knew that it had worked fine only a matter of minutes before, to bring him here--what could be holding it up now? Turning to face the toy department, he saw that the gruesome couple suddenly had a companion, one dressed as a vampire--or had it been there all along?

Steve's dry throat clenched as he tried to swallow, the panic surfacing again like a tidal wave, as he searched for another way off the floor. However, the only other exit he knew of was the stairs, and he would have to cross through the department to get there. Those doors were supposed to be locked up tight this late at night, but he had the keys.

Taking a deep breath, he briskly strode back into the heart of the large room, straight past the mannequins...and froze when he felt himself stopped, as if a small hand had grabbed his shirt from behind. His head snapped a look back over his shoulder, to discover that his shirt was caught on the pitchfork of a scantily clad demoness...a mannequin that he swore had been against the far wall only minutes ago, in the adult costume section. He quickly looked towards the stairs again, but there was suddenly another mannequin in his path, one dressed as a zombie, fake blood and worms oozing out of the latex decaying flesh.

"*You let us die,*" came an almost childlike whisper from behind him, but the horse voice held no trace of the innocence of childhood, it was more like a stale draft whistling through a burial vault.

Steve spun around, realizing that two more mannequins had come back

to encircle him as well, the werewolf and the baseball player, who seemed to have retrieved his bat.

"*You were supposed to protect us,*" came another voice from around him.

"*Why didn't you make sure that the power was off?*"

"*We counted on you for our safety.*"

"*Murderer.*"

The voices seemed to come from the mannequins, yet they were so young, so tormented, so vengeful...but why accuse him? His fear rose to dizzying heights as he licked his dried lips and tried to defend himself, though his mind could not seem to formulate the desperately needed words.

"It wasn't me," he finally managed to get out, though his voice sounded like sandpaper on coarse wood. "I didn't do it, someone else forgot to turn off the power, not me. It was a long time ago."

"*No, but you'll do...someone has to pay...and now you can no longer escape,*" came the first voice again.

"*Someone has to pay,*" added another.

"*Someone has to pay,*" echoed a third, as the rest of them joined in chanting, "*Someone has to pay,*" repeatedly as though locked in a child's death song.

Steve felt the small hands begin to claw and grab at him as he struggled to get away, yet he was quickly overwhelmed by their sheer numbers and the 'song' that they continued to drone at him, "*Someone has to pay, Someone has to pay,*" incessantly never ending. He tried to resist as they closed around him and kept grabbing at him, dragging him down, coming down on top of him where he fell. Mannequins surrounded him but it felt like dozens of tiny hands clawing and pulling. At one moment he almost managed to gain his freedom, when a noise from above caused him to glance up. There, hovering near the ceiling, was the large ghost, all glowing and illuminated with power, almost as if on fire.

"No...it wasn't me, please," he half cried, almost desperate, as he tried again to escape the many arms that were holding him down as he wondered what they meant by *'and now you can no longer escape.'* His gaze fixed on the huge glowing display above him that swayed back and forth as the last of his strength failed to break free. "I'm sorry--"

Then, with a screech of slipping metal, it came down on him, its eyes

ablaze with hatred and revenge.

Steve screamed.

The horrid shriek echoed in Larry's ears as it vibrated down the elevator shaft, where he had patiently been waiting. For a long moment afterwards he stood in silence, his deep blue eyes sternly contemplating a small white scar on his forearm...an almost insignificant reminder of the brutal fire that he had barely survived as a child. Then he breathed a sigh of relief, feeling the catharsis of another year's hatred, as he pushed himself off the wall and removed the chairs that were wedged in the elevator doors, keeping them on this floor.

The next day the department store was bustling with post Halloween activity as Larry cheerfully showed the new security guard around the upper floors.

"So where did the last security guard go?" the new guard asked, grateful for the sudden vacancy.

"Who knows," Larry said with a shrug of his shoulders. "He up and disappeared last night around three or four in the morning. I suppose he quit after his shift was over. Some people just aren't cut out for this job, Eric."

"I guess not," Eric said with a gulp, wondering if perhaps this job had not been such a good idea after all. But the money was good, and he did need the night work so that he could go to school during the day.

"Don't worry, buddy," Larry said with a grin. "I'm sure that you'll do just fine. After all, you don't believe in ghosts, do you?"

"Of course not," Eric responded through a nervous smile.

Larry laughed as his gaze drifted to the sales associates pulling down the large ghost from the ceiling, to pack it up for yet another year. "Me neither."

Born in New York City, Nicholas Samuel Stember spent most of his life in the suburbs of Princeton, NJ, but his love of science fiction, fantasy and horror ended up finding him a wife across the Pond and now he lives with her in the Faroe Islands. His works can be found in various magazines and anthologies. He also joined the Horror Writers Association in 2024. For more information check out his website at https://nsstember.com or https://www.facebook.com/nicholassamuelstember