

THE PAWN SHOP

Featured in a collection of short stories from

“Your Worst Nightmare”

By Lynn Bohart

Fred Hughes slowly rocked back and forth on his front porch, expending as little energy as possible. The temperature had inched its way to just shy of ninety-eight degrees, causing the heat to rise off the pavement like fumes off a compost heap. The humidity had also intensified, becoming trapped inside the house and making breathing difficult.

Fred didn't have air conditioning, so sleep was nearly impossible. His only option was to remain on the porch long into the night, watching a silent world pass by while waiting for the temperature to drop. Even now, as the clock inside struck twelve, the thermometer by the front door still registered somewhere near eighty degrees.

Fred's house sat on the corner of Elm and Maple Streets in a sleepy Texas town, across from the local pawn shop. Fred and his wife, Bethany, had lived in the house for almost twenty-five years before Bethany died of a brain aneurysm. During that time, the building where the pawn shop was now had been many things, including a pizza parlor, a nail salon, and a barber shop. But old Patrick Covington, who had operated the pawn shop for more than a decade had died suddenly, leaving the building and all its contents behind for the next owner.

A mysterious couple purchased the shop. Fred had only seen them once when they came to look at the property with the realtor. The man was tall and heavy set and wore an Indiana Jones style hat and sunglasses. The woman was short and slender. She had also worn sunglasses and a scarf over her head. The couple had appeared only briefly as they emerged from a long dark sedan and disappeared into the building. A few weeks later, a moving van had pulled up to deliver their belongings.

Outwardly, the appearance of the shop hadn't changed. It was still a small, squat building in need of paint, with an overhang that shaded the front window and a neon sign that glared into the hot, August night: GUNS AND COINS FOR SALE. If the couple had refurbished the inside, it wouldn't have been visible. But within days, customers began to arrive again.

Tonight, as Fred sat on his porch watching nothing in particular, an old pickup truck pulled up to the curb across the street. A tall, lanky man climbed out into the light of the full moon, wearing faded blue jeans and a large Stetson hat. He remained next to the truck for a moment, finishing a cigarette and studying the front of the pawn shop. He didn't seem to notice Fred sitting in the deep shadows of his porch.

As the cowboy threw his cigarette butt to the ground, he turned briefly to look back up the street, as if he were expecting someone. As he did so, the moonlight caught the silver in a heavy necklace around his neck and nearly danced off the silver tips of his boots. He looked like every other cowboy in town, but Fred wondered why he would be visiting the pawn shop so late at night. The cowboy snuffed out the burning cigarette butt with the heel of his boot and went inside.

Fred couldn't remember anyone ever visiting the shop after dark and speculated that the cowboy might have made a special request of some sort. He fully expected the man to re-emerge within a few minutes. Instead, after twenty minutes or so, the neon sign and the light behind the front curtains went out, leaving only the soft glow of a light from the apartment at the back, and the sound of crickets to define the night.

Fred put a match to his pipe and continued rocking back and forth, listening to the crickets, and gazing at the stars, thinking of his Bethany. At one o'clock, the light in the back apartment of the pawn shop also went out, and he casually wondered if the cowboy had left when he'd gone inside to grab a snack. Not being one to spend time worrying about other people's affairs, Fred took a long draw on his pipe and dismissed any remaining questions. Ten minutes later, he opened the screen door and went inside for the night, leaving the cowboy's pickup truck to stand alone at the curb.

The late summer heat continued when morning arrived the next day. Fred stepped onto the front porch to retrieve his newspaper and noticed that the cowboy's pickup was gone. He thought little of it, and spent the day fiddling with his model airplanes, hoping to fix one knocked to the floor by his cat the day before.

He spent the remainder of the week doing odd jobs around the house and visiting the library to pick up a couple of the thrillers he was so fond of. Fred fixed the toaster, paid some bills, and lost himself in a good political conspiracy. When the thermometer hit one hundred degrees, he left his collection of model airplanes to hang silently from the ceiling of his workshop or to lie in pieces on the workbench, because it was just too hot to do anything. People continued to drop in at the pawn shop, but they never stayed long. Time moved on.

Saturday night rolled around hotter and muggier than ever. Even the flies had stopped buzzing and lay on top of the porch railing as if drugged. The air inside Fred's house was as still as a coffin, so Fred made a cold ham sandwich, picked up a book, and went to sit on the porch in the shade of the large hydrangea bush at the corner of the house.

Just after seven, a white van rattled up to the pawn shop and parked, interrupting Fred's reading. He had seen the van once or twice before but had never taken much notice. Although the sign in the pawn shop window said CLOSED, a stocky man rolled out of the van's driver's seat and went quickly inside. Five minutes later, the man re-emerged, carrying a large cardboard box.

Fred set his book down to watch as the man awkwardly rested one corner of the heavy box on his knee to open the rear door of the van. Though it was late afternoon, daylight savings time gave Fred a good view as the man struggled with his burden. Suddenly, the weight in the box shifted and the man nearly dropped it, causing one flap to pop open. A tiny white hand flashed in the setting sun, as if signaling for help. Before Fred's mind could register what he'd just seen, the man shoved the box into the van, closed the door, and drove off in a whirl of feathered dust. Fred swallowed once, tasting the mustard from his sandwich as it rose back up in his throat.

Fred didn't pick up his book again. Instead, he stared at the pawn shop across the street, thinking. At midnight, an old Ford sedan pulled up to the curb in front of the building. This time an older couple, dressed in brightly colored square dance costumes, got out, and approached the building, arms wrapped tightly around each other. The man knocked twice and then waited for the door to open. The couple stepped inside, giggling at some private joke. Fred's curiosity piqued, and he sat forward in his rocking chair, waiting to get a better look at the couple when they returned. But his vigilance went unrewarded. The couple never came out again, leaving their Ford sedan waiting in the gathering shadows by the side of the road.

Fred remained where he was past midnight, wondering what the couple could be doing in the pawn shop. By one-thirty, Fred was too tired to care and went to bed. Sometime later, he woke to the sound of a car's engine but quickly went back to sleep. In the morning, the Ford sedan was gone.

The following week passed uneventfully, until an article in the local newspaper caught his eye on Wednesday. A couple who had been in the area to attend a square dance festival had been reported missing. The article said the family had expected the couple back home in New Mexico after the weekend, but they hadn't returned, nor had they called. All attempts to contact them had failed. The local police considered it a missing person's case. The missing couple were identified as Betty and Joe Camarillo, and anyone with information about the case was urged to contact the police.

Fred contemplated this. The article didn't give a good description of the pair, and he hadn't gotten a good look at the couple he'd seen going into the pawn shop the past Saturday. If there had been a square dance festival in town, most likely there would have been dozens of couples dressed just like that, wandering all over the place. He had no way of knowing if he'd seen the missing people mentioned in the article, so he let it go.

The temperature finally dipped slightly during the next week, making life more bearable. In between chores and working on his airplanes, Fred found himself watching the shop more closely, finding excuses to go onto the porch whenever possible. But only a few customers came and went, and nothing unusual happened.

When Saturday rolled around again, Fred planted himself on the porch after dinner, fully stocked with refreshments and books. He didn't want to have to leave for any reason. Around seven o'clock, the man in the white van appeared again, and carried off another large cardboard box. This time, Fred noticed a sign on the side of the van that read, "San Antonio Imports." There was no mishap this time, so Fred couldn't clarify what he'd seen the week before, leaving the small, plaintive hand an unanswered question.

The night crept by, and Fred was about to give up and go to bed when a car pulled up to the curb at midnight. A woman stepped out, her white dress and wide-brimmed hat glowing in the moonlight, her matching high heels clicking purposefully on the pavement as she approached the building. The moon had passed into the next quarter, so Fred couldn't see who admitted her, but then realized that he never could. In fact, there seemed to be a pattern to these visits. The midnight callers knocked twice before the door opened and then disappeared inside. Moments later, the lone lamp that had thrown shadows behind the grimy curtains went out, leaving the only remaining light coming from the back of the residence.

Fred now began to ponder the situation. Perhaps these people had been invited to play cards with the owners. It made sense. They might play late into the night, leaving just before daybreak. But why weren't there more people? And why didn't they ever come again? A heavy feeling in his stomach told him a simple card game wasn't the answer.

One o'clock came, then two o'clock. And still, the woman in the white dress didn't return to her car. By two-thirty, even the light in the apartment had gone out, leaving the building sitting quietly in the dark.

Fred began to feel foolish, watching a darkened building while the entire town slept. As the clock inside chimed 3 o'clock, he went inside, leaving the woman's car alone in front of the pawn shop.

Half an hour later, the roar of an engine woke him. He made it to the window just as the woman's car made a U turn and passed in front of his house. It was difficult to make out the

driver, but he was sure it was a large man at the wheel, not a woman, and certainly not the woman with the wide-brimmed hat. Although he waited by the window some thirty minutes more, the car never returned, and nothing else moved along the street.

The following week, Fred watched the pawn shop as closely as if it might disappear in the afternoon haze. He made mental notes on the people who came and went. He jotted down license plate numbers. He also kept an eye on the newspaper; in case there was a story about a missing woman.

By Saturday, he had devised a plan. It was September now, and the town was enjoying the Labor Day weekend. Strangers were a common sight, something Fred could use to his advantage. His late wife had always accused him of standing on the sidelines of life, never getting involved. And indeed, he had been watching the pawn shop quietly for weeks. Well, this time, he'd get involved. Something was wrong across the street, and he was going to find out what it was.

He entered the shop just before five o'clock, dressed in a short-sleeved plaid shirt, khaki fishing vest, sunglasses, and a hat complete with fishing lures. Since the owners never appeared outside during the day, and two-thirds of his porch was camouflaged by bushes, he had no reason to believe he might be recognized. But he had concocted the disguise just in case. As he stepped inside a bell tingled, bringing a rotund man through a pair of curtains.

"May I help you?" the man asked in a thick Cajun accent. He smiled warmly and leaned over the counter, placing hands the size of canoe paddles on the glass case. "Were you looking for anything in particular?"

Fred wasn't sure what to say. He hadn't planned the charade too carefully, concentrating only on getting inside to meet the owners.

"No, nothing in particular," he faltered. "I'm just passing through town and thought I'd stop in to see what interesting things you might have."

"Well," the big man continued, "we have the usual... guns, watches, coins, and a few cameras." He gestured to the case and the shelves that lined the wall behind him. Fred looked aimlessly through the glass case, pretending to browse. The man watched him intently.

"Are you interested in jewelry?" the man asked, pointing to a tray of gemstone rings.

"Uh, no," Fred stammered. "Not really."

An awkward moment ensued, while Fred pretended to focus on an antique watch. The air in the shop was heavy, making Fred sweat even in his short-sleeved shirt.

"Do you hunt?" the man asked.

The question took Fred by surprise. "What? No, I don't."

"That's too bad," was the deep reply. "I have some very nice trophies."

"Trophies?"

Fred was aware that the man was staring at him the same way his cat stares at birds in the yard.

"Heads," the man replied, "Ann-ee-malz," he twanged.

"Oh," Fred faltered. "Animals. Sure."

The man seemed friendly enough, and Fred began to doubt his suspicions. Just then, a strange odor that didn't belong among the dust caught his attention.

"Are you cooking something?"

"It's my wife," the man replied with a full smile. "She makes all sorts of... interesting things." He smiled again, but his eyes betrayed another thought.

Fred tried to look interested in a pair of cuff links but couldn't think of a reason to stay much longer.

"Well," he started, "I was in the market for something... I don't know... a little different... something unusual to take home to my wife."

"Where is home?"

The questions startled Fred. He hadn't realized he would have to lie so much.

"Uh, I'm from out West," he replied. "I'm just passing through."

Fred drummed his fingers on the glass case nervously, while the man's smile spread across his face like that of a cartoon cat.

"I see." The man gestured toward the curtain that divided the shop from the apartment. "My wife has a few things you might be interested in, but I'm afraid she's busy right now. Perhaps you'd like to come back tonight... after we close."

The hair on the back of Fred's neck stood up. He glanced at the man but saw only a welcoming expression and an easy manner.

"I'd like that," he replied cautiously. "What time?"

"Midnight?"

Fred felt a sudden chill under the warm breeze of the overhead fan.

"Why... so late?"

"My wife won't be available until then," the man said carefully. "As I said, she's busy right now."

Fred watched the man's face but detected nothing malicious.

"Okay," he said without thinking. "I'll come back at midnight."

He smiled nervously and turned to leave, but the man stopped him.

"Knock twice. That way I'll know it's you. And be sure to wear your fishing gear. My wife will enjoy that."

Fred nodded and stepped into the late afternoon heat, feeling a distinct pressure in the center of his chest. He crossed the street at the light and made his way to the alley, so that he could enter his home through the back door unnoticed. Once inside, he removed the hat and sunglasses and slumped into a chair with a glass of cold beer, thinking about his encounter with the big man.

He really shouldn't be messing around in other people's business. Bethany hadn't meant he should spy on his neighbors. The man with the big hands seemed like just a normal business owner. Fred considered whether to ignore the invitation for the midnight visit. But then again, why should he go? He was curious, and he wanted to see what the man had to offer. What could possibly happen? He wouldn't buy anything or agree to go anywhere. He'd just take a look.

Thoughtfully, Fred sat back, drank his beer, and waited for the long hours to pass.

At five minutes past midnight, he donned his disguise again but replaced the sunglasses with a pair of old reading glasses and quietly knocked twice on the pawn shop door. Only seconds passed before the latch released and the door swung open. The big man stood in the shadows, gesturing for him to come inside. Only the single milk-glass lamp at the front of the shop was lit. An old clock ticked quietly in the corner, and the pervasive odor from that afternoon still lingered in the air. The man moved to the curtain separating the living quarters from the shop and held it back invitingly.

"Please, come in. My wife is looking forward to meeting you."

Fred stepped past the man into a small living room. The air was muggy, and Fred could see steam filling the kitchen just beyond an arched, stucco doorway. The sound of bubbling liquid

was accented by glimpses of elbow and skirt, as the man's wife moved back and forth in the kitchen, focusing on whatever she was doing.

"Is she cooking? Perhaps she's still busy?" Fred asked, trying to be polite.

The man glanced toward the kitchen. "She's just getting things ready. Why don't you make yourself comfortable? My Annie will be ready for you in a minute."

"Thank you," Fred replied nervously.

The pungent odor from earlier in the day permeated the small room and made Fred slightly queasy. He tried to identify the smell, thinking it was some sort of solvent. He swallowed, but his throat closed, making him cough. The big man responded immediately.

"Let me get you a glass of water?" he offered easily, disappearing into the kitchen.

Fred waited, wishing he'd never come. He glanced around the room. It was depressing. There were no pictures, just plastered walls badly in need of paint. The furniture was old and lumpy, and the carpet looked like it hadn't been cleaned in years. As he turned, he finally stopped to face the wall behind him, where he drew in a sharp breath.

A bookcase, filled with dozens of handcrafted dolls, covered the wall from floor to ceiling. No two dolls were the same, and each was dressed in detailed reproductions of authentic clothing. Their small, pinched faces were so lifelike, and their eyes so expressive, that Fred found it unnerving to have them all staring back at him. So unnerving, in fact, that he visibly jumped when his host tapped him on the shoulder.

"I didn't mean to startle you," the man apologized, "I see you've found my wife's little hobby. Impressive, aren't they?"

Fred accepted the glass of water without taking his eyes off a childlike doll dressed in a gingham dress and long braids. The doll's face was so real, he fancied she might speak to him at any moment.

"Yes, they are," he finally replied, clearing his throat and taking a long drink of water. "I've never seen anything like them."

"Well, my wife is a perfectionist. She can take quite an ordinary subject and create a real work of art."

"Is this what you wanted to show me?"

"Yes," the man smiled. "You must admit they're unique."

Fred turned back to the rows upon rows of dolls, thinking they were quite unlike anything he'd ever seen. They were all different. A fireman, a policeman, a baseball player, a bride, a hunter. Bethany had collected Raggedy Ann dolls made from fabric and yarn. They were nothing like this. These dolls were like miniature versions of real people.

"Your wife is very good," Fred said honestly. "Her attention to detail is amazing."

"Yes," the man drawled. "She is good. And no two are alike."

"I can see that. She has really captured some interesting characters."

"You'd make a good subject," the man said quietly.

Fred felt a chill ripple down his back.

"With your plaid shirt and fishing hat," the man continued. "Very quaint."

Fred laughed nervously, feeling his mind swirl a little at the thought. "Me? I don't think anyone would want a doll that looked like me." He took another drink, thinking the water tasted sweet.

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure," the man responded, a broad grin showing a set of perfect white teeth. "There are people in the market for all sorts of things. You said so yourself. Weren't you looking for something unusual?"

“Yes,” Fred admitted, “but I wasn’t looking for a doll.”

“No,” the man replied slowly. “But, maybe... we were looking for *you*.”

Fred chuckled nervously. “Looking for me?” He finished the water. “Why would you do that?”

“Like you said,” the man shrugged, “sometimes people are in the market for something different.” A self-satisfied expression etched its way across his broad face.

Fred turned his attention back to the dolls. His mind began to float as he tried to focus on the doll with the braids. Her hand clutched a small teddy bear. As Fred became lost in the deep pools of her eyes, the man continued to talk behind him, but Fred could no longer understand most of what he said. He turned to hear the man better, but the room swam before him, and he had to reach out for the back of the sofa.

The man didn’t move to help him. He just stood there, a Cheshire cat grin spread across his face. Fred noticed a movement in the background and realized the shop owner’s wife was standing in the kitchen doorway, her short, spikey hair standing out at odd angles, and her large, liquid eyes glinting in the low light. In her left hand, she held a pair of heavy tongs.

“This is my wife, Mr. Hughes.” The man gestured toward the cartoon-like figure in the doorway, his voice echoing from somewhere in the distance. “And I can tell by the look on *her* face that she thinks you’ll do just fine.”

Fred’s knees suddenly buckled. As the room tilted, the big man gently lowered Fred onto the waiting sofa, where his eyes slowly glazed over. Fred’s hand, calloused from years of working at his hobby bench, finally released the empty water glass into a cardboard box on the floor next to the sofa. Several of the finely crafted dolls sat inside the box, including one dressed in a flowing white dress and big floppy hat. Fred’s water glass finally came to rest next to a cowboy doll dressed in faded blue jeans, silver-tipped cowboy boots, and an old Stetson hat.

THE END

Written by: Lynn Bohart, author, freelance writer, story coach

Contact Lynn at: Lildog67@icloud.com

Visit her website at www.lynnbohart-author.com.