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The Losting Corridor by Matt Wallace

They say it's where anything lost can be found again.

Who are they? The shady players, the racketeers, anyone who operates in the gray markets has heard that number. Every snitch knows about it. When they get their snitch card they're issued a dime to drop and the legend of The Losting Corridor. Holocaust Joe himself came down here looking for the forty barrels of rum some West End Avenue boys hijacked off one of his boats. He found them wedged in the incinerator chute, stuck behind all the memories people stuff down there. It has intrigued celebrities. They say John Barrymore showed up one night, sauced to the gills, and tore down the corridor looking for his profile. What he found was empty bottles, hundreds of them stacked to the rafters of a penthouse suite, a lifetime's worth to refill before his face would once again see a single chisel, a bare centimeter of smooth. So he took a piss on a potted ficus and left. The Detective beat it out of Wilmy, "Wilmy-Doin'-The-Waltz," they call him. He had the goods on Wilmy, photos of him and some girl scouts and their cookies. So Wilmy gave it up: go to a building downtown, doesn't matter which one, and know what you're looking for. You want the brass elevator that only goes up; just wait, it'll be there.

If you know what you're looking for.

So it was, and now here he is, The Detective, riding the big brass elevator, staring at the curvy gold-plated doors like false angel wings. It's just him and the old colored operator in his oxblood tunic with its big gold buttons and epaulettes. He's humming an old negro spiritual, adding a refrain of "Lordy, Lordy" every few broken bars. The operator's right hand is brass. The motor controller's handle is brass. Both are black-veined, and both are one solid piece of metal. The Detective watches it disappear under the operator's crisp sleeve cuff and wonders if the ride ever stops for him, wonders until the old man announces, "31st floor, Losting," and jogs his hand and the handle so the elevator stops.

As the doors part, The Detective thrusts the mahogany butt of his snub-nosed .38 at the operator, like an offering. But the old timer just shakes his head and tips the bladed bill of his cap.

"Might be needin' that now," he says.

The Detective nods. "Yeah, you ain't just bumpin' your gums there, gramps. I'm here looking for a shooter. Lost him down by the docks."

The operator whistles like ain't-that-somethin'.

“Watch the step now.”

So The Detective tucks the heat back inside his trench coat and watches the step, watches his scuffed brown loafers clear it, then watches the brass doors close behind him. He looks down the aging schizophrenic paint along the walls, white fading to blue fading to yellow, all the colors stone washed by wear. The Lusting Corridor stretches far and wide between them, miles of rugs painted with millions of lotus flowers and forget-me-nots, and all different doors, all leading to those places where things fall by, those wayside places that live behind couches and under beds, at the bottom of bottles and ditches and dirt ponds, inside the moments when we stopped paying attention, even for just a little while.

The Detective’s eyes are drawn to the ceiling and into the mandalas that blossom down the corridor’s length. The shapes, all shapes, every shape, turned at every angle, are overgrown there like neglected ivy. Their lines are the color of absinthe and the way they fold and flip and pulse makes you think you drank a fifth of the stuff. There’s supposed to be a map in the mandalas, but there’s no red arrow that points to “You Are Here,” so it’s useless. Only Zen Buddhists and the odd Sherpa can read it, anyway.

Hopheads litter the corridor, fiends and snowbirds and jazzmen turned vipers. They’ve built opium dens in the air ducts. They came here looking for the cure, but if they never had it how could they find it again? So they just stayed. They whisper things at The Detective as he walks by, smoke-trailed things hissed around the sticks of tea hanging from their lips.

“Wanna be tall, jack?”

“A dick or a dropper. Only the wise men know, I guess.”

“He’s one gone cat, though. I guarantee.”

The Detective ignores them. There are plenty of other people combing the corridor; people with road maps, people who’ve lost their way, looking for the St. Christopher Suite; weeping mothers and lumpy-throated fathers searching for wayward children. Some will open a door and find their daughter hustling tricks on the boulevard. Others might only find parts of them. It never ends well in any case, none of which The Detective is on this night, so he ignores them too.

Explorers have found their way onto The Lusting Corridor, probably from the lobbies of fancy hotels on far away continents. They clump up and down in big brass boots and fish bowl helmets searching for Atlantis, or fop about in khaki shorts and safari hats looking for Tanis. If there are cities here they must keep them in those big caged storage bins. They should try the basement, The Detective thinks to himself, an idle thought that translates into little more than a whisper of his interior monologue.

Too many doors, too many choices. No clues. The Detective looks up at the mandalas again, helplessly. Some of the triangles that point above the doors are green, some are blue, others are orange. It’s all Greek to The Detective.

In the end he does what he knows how to do, what he does best: He kicked in doors.

The first room’s dark and The Detective almost trips over a big black lump quivering at his feet. The priest is on his hands and knees, sobbing, his rosary soaking in the puddle of tears and snot he’s dripped onto the carpet. Standing a few feet away is a pixie of a girl, tiny, wearing a pink baby tee, “fides” spelled in glittery letters across breasts that are perfect round plums.

“Looking for a little faith?” she asks The Detective.

“Looking for a shooter,” he says. “I lost him in the park. Lamp lights tripped off the water in Bethesda Fountain and when I blinked he was gone.”

"The only light in here belongs to the Lord Jesus," the girl says. "And to Allah, and to Ishvara. It's the light of Dharma, for those who've gone back to sleep after waking. I and I shines brightly here for its lost children so that they may return to their homeland one day."

"It's dark in here," The Detective points out. He's a detective, he notices things like that.

"You're not looking for the light," she says simply.

The Detective nods. "I'm looking for a shooter. Lost him in the alley behind O'Hanlon's. I pickled a rat movin' in the ash cans. Saw the thing, eyes-up in the muck. It wasn't the shooter."

The Detective backs out of the room. He finds another door, a cheap pile of splinters with loose hotel numbers dangling from it, and takes the whole shebang off its hinges with one good kick. The sound of it falls into a quiet acoustical chasm, a slow plucking that picks the crash apart until there's nothing left but soft steel-wrung fairies dancing up the walls.

The Detective doesn't know the blues, or certainly he'd recognize Robert Johnson. Not the face of the man of whom only two known photographs exist, but the voice, the delta notes he's fingering on a rosewood six-string. He's playing by a nightstand. On it are a bottle of whiskey and a snowless snow globe with a crumbling little ceramic town inside of it.

"You got one sour note in that sea of easy-on-the-ears," The Detective informs Robert Johnson.

"Lost me an A chord. It's either in this here bottle or back in Hazlehurst." And he nods at the nightstand. "I ain't sure yet," he says, pronouncing "sure" like "shore."

Robert Johnson hums along with the melody for a while, then he asks, "Wha'd you lose, boss?"

"A shooter. I lost him in the crowd at a speakeasy on 52nd Street."

"Ain't no 52nd street in Dallas," Robert Johnson says.

There're more doors, more rooms. They're filled with keys, with barking dogs and mewling cats, toys and opportunities, jobs and minds and milk money. Pretty soon there's just the end of the corridor. But if you believe the gab there should be no end. The Losting Corridor is as long as a piece of string, they say.

And yet for The Detective there's only one more door, marked "stairwell." It's opened just a crack, enough to permit a fleshy hourglass clinging to the doorjamb like it's Clark Gable. The dame is wearing blue satin, a cooled down devil stirring her lips with the stem of an onyx cigarette holder. She blows smoke between them and disappears behind the white cloud. The door creaks in her wake.

The dame. She's a part of it. She has to be.

Into the stairwell after her and there's only up, no down. The Detective starts taking the steps two at a time, then three, his shadow made big by the spiraling lamp sconces along the wall hot on his tail.

"Hold it right there, copper!"

It's the shooter, the one who ducked into an old Model A Ford in front of the Grand Central Hotel and got lost in the 10:00 p.m. traffic. The Detective is staring up six steps at a black pinstriped suit and a steel-gray hat with a pencil-thin mustache under it. He's packing a rod too, a big shiny 1911 with the hammer pulled back.

"Reach for the sky, dick, or I'll plug ya," the shooter says.

So The Detective raises his arms, nice and slow.

"Now drop the heat."

But instead The Detective pulls the trigger, blasting the sconce curved six feet up the wall, the lamp in it blazing right above the shooter's head like a bright idea. The bulb goes kablooney and the flash plays devil with his eyes. Molten glass and metal ruin the pinstripe perfection of his suit, scorch half his pencil-thin mustache off. The shooter forgets all about his gun hand, just for a second, but you can fit a slug through a second and that's exactly what The Detective does, gives the shooter a hot lead rose for his lapel.

The Detective stands aside as his body tumbles by, "Watch the step" ringing in his head side-by-side with the gunshots. He watches the shooter flatten out a few floors down and then turns his eyes back up ahead.

There's one more door to kick down tonight, and it takes The Detective out onto the roof, after the dame. The whole case revolves around her, he's sure of it now. The Detective stares up at the mandalas. The shapes in them become more spare as he reaches the top of the stairs, until there's just a circle, a perfect circle like a milky halo hung over the last door. That circle means he's come to the end or back to the beginning.

Either way he'll have found what he's looking for, right?

But all he finds on the roof is the colored elevator operator, epaulettes and all. He's dealing Faro on a cheap card table, vague shadow blocks far behind him that might be buildings and might be nothing at all. His right hand is a mechanical shoe. The brass hand is gone, no doubt it's still part of the motor controller in the elevator. He draws from the shoe for nonexistent players. The way things have shaped up so far The Detective half-expects them to be Tarot cards, but they're not. They're just plain old Bicycle playing cards, he sees.

"Where'd the dame go?" The Detective asks the old man.

"What dame?"

"She came up here. I gotta find her."

"Why's that?"

"I'm on a case."

"No you're not."

"I'm a detective. I'm on a case."

"Yeah? Which case is that?"

"I'm looking for a shooter."

"You done got the shooter."

"I'm looking for a shooter. I lost him up at Coney Island. He got on The Cyclone and—"

"You're looking for a shooter 'cause there's always a shooter. You're looking for a girl 'cause there's always a girl. And they're here because it's all part of whatever it is you really lost."

The Detective feels like that cigarette smoke seeped into his brain. It's curling his gummy lobes like paper. He can feel it.

"And what's that?"

The old man shrugs. "Maybe you're a story someone finished. Ever think of that? Maybe you're a blank page after 'the end' spinnin' its wheels. Not to be mixin' my metaphors now."

"That's all too highfalutin' for me, gramps."

"Maybe a coupla torpedoes bumped you off, then. Maybe you were on the trail of the Black Mask and things went south. Now it's the big sleep."

"I'd know."

"Pfft!" goes the old man. "I'd know," he says."

"Well, what's the answer, then?"

“No answers here, dick. This here’s the nexus of lost things.”

“Nexus?”

“This is where all those things go when you can’t find them. Most people, when they lose things, work piecemeal to find ‘em. Some people, they lucky enough to find the source. Maybe there’s a source for all the answers. Matter of fact, I’m sure they is. But it ain’t here. You gotta find some place they can create somethin’ from nothin’. Here we just got old junk. Here you can find the pieces, but the glue that hold ‘em together? That’s not lost. That’s gone, dick. That’s solid gone. Leastwise it ain’t here.”

The Detective looks down at his .38, snub-nosed and still smoking.

“My advice,” the old man says gently, “don’t sift the pieces. Don’t be like those fools that can’t find what they’re lookin’ for and just stick around, hopin’ it’ll turn up.”

“If it’s me that’s lost then maybe I belong here.”

“It may be you do now.”

Then The Detective says: “What if I’m something else? What if I’m not a detective anymore?”

“Then you’d be something else, I imagine.”

The Detective watches the old man deal Faro. “I wanna lay a bet,” he says, playing his .38 on the Jack of Spades, even money.

“This here’s a sucker’s game,” the operator tells him. “You don’t wanna play this.”

“It’s only a sucker’s game if you expect to win, right?”

The Detective smiles. It’s new for him. Detectives don’t smile, not even when they get the girl.

The operator cocks his head. His blade-billed cap seems to tilt all on its own. He deals the cards. The banker draws a Jack of Hearts. The Detective’s .38 is forfeit.

“Well, lookit that now,” marvels the operator.

A detective without his .38 isn’t a detective, unless he carries a .45, which The Detective does not.

“Did you come here looking for your hand?” he asks the operator.

“Funny thing about that,” the old man says. “I always wondered if my hand would come here looking for me some day.”

They laugh. Detectives don’t do that either. But he’s not The Detective anymore. He’s Something Else.

And whatever that is can’t be found along The Losting Corridor.

Questions for Reflection

- I. What would the world be like if the Losting Corridor was real ?
- II. Can you lose yourself ? What does that mean ?