



**STRANGE
TALES
FROM
SOUTH
PHILLY**



**AN ANTHOLOGY
PETE BERTINO**



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR: Hello readers! You might be wondering what I mean exactly by strange tales. Well it's hard to give an exact answer but I think I have a good way to describe what you are in store for. This anthology was inspired for my love of TV shows like 'The Twilight Zone' and 'Tales From The Crypt' and so on. I still watch these shows often and love the twist endings.

The episodes of some of these shows had my mind running with wonder and guessing what might be actually going on and why. These stories try to capture the magic that made my heart pound and my hands shake. The first story, 'Hollander's Island' would be at home on an episode of 'Tales From The Crypt'. It's a period piece and was the hardest to write but the one I am most proud of, hope you like haunted houses.

The other stories, except the last, one were inspired by various episodes of 'The Twilight Zone' that have haunted me since I first saw them on Nick at Nite when I was a teenager. The last story in this collection, 'My Friend, Bob', to me would be a good comparison to some episodes of 80s anthology series 'Amazing Stories'. It's a more upbeat story, a comedy that I thought would be a perfect end to this novel about the strange.

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HOLLANDER'S ISLAND BY PETE BERTINO

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DEDICATION: TO THE FILM MAKERS THAT SCARED ME AS A CHILD.

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The man giving the interview had a gelatinous set of jowls that were a bright red and jiggled as he spoke. He put Stanley in mind of the old blood hound his neighbor had. He, the interviewer not the dog, was a man in his 60's with gray hair wearing an expensive suit of a similar color and was the picture of a man with a taste for rich food and wines to accommodate his portly stomach. Stanley could hardly believe such a person could be so large and still function.

Stanley's father said he'd see some odd things amongst the city folks, but this mans obesity still caught him off guard. He did not arise when the secretary let him in and gave just the limpest handshake imaginable. Stanley was already doubtful and this rotund mans briskness upon first meeting redoubled his doubts.

His desk was bare except for the papers Stanley gave him and an ashtray made of stone that held a smoldering cigar that smelled musky, not sweet like the smoke of his fathers pipe. Stanley introduced himself clearly, the fat man, nodded and gestured for Stanley to sit.

"Thank you, Mr Shaw. Cold one out today." Stanley said trying to engage the man in small talk.

"Indeed. Mr Freeling, perhaps you could tell me your qualifications." Shaw said holding his cigar between his pudgy fingers.

Stanley cleared his throat as he sat, the only sounds were the ticking of a clock in the secretary's alcove and a paper boy shouting the days headline while peddling the Pennsylvania Inquirer.

"Van Buren takes oath! Read all about it!"

Stanley felt his stomach turn as Shaw exhaled a puff of smoke. He took a quick deep breath as he settled himself in the chair. The few signs of life Shaw showed became non existent as Stanley recited his proud if some what exaggerated proficiency at book keeping and office management. But Shaw was immobile and looked upon him with narrow eyes.

Stanley felt queasy as the fat man took another lungful of cigar smoke, he held his hand up while Stanley was in mid sentence. He felt like he was drowning in smoke. This opportunity of working for one of the finest real estate firms in Philadelphia society seemed too big for his imagination.

Not for Dawn Anna's imagination though, he saw her yesterday evening for dinner and afterwards they had taken a few moments for solitude in the parlor while their folks sat in the dining

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room. It was a good luck dinner and Stanley felt he would need wagon loads of luck to attain such a job.

"Oh, Stanley imagine living in Philadelphia as man and wife." she said embracing him before sneaking a glance to make sure they were unobserved and stealing a kiss from him.

Though he loved her deeply, his self doubt made it hard for him to show joy. Her cheeks were pink with euphoria and humor but her smile faded when she looked at him closer.

"You're not excited, darling?" she asked as he stood at the window facing the porch with his hands gripping the sill tightly.

"I am worried I may not secure this job. It was never meant for me to begin with. Poor old cousin Arthur, if that horse hadn't kicked him off he'd be on his way, instead of bed ridden with broken legs. He's had a proper education and has been preparing for this for months as I've only had a few days."

He let go of the sill, speaking hurriedly and felt his heart and stomach vibrate with fright as he paced the room, he ran a hand through his hair and clenched his other in a fist as his breathing grew more hectic. Dawn Anna reached out and took his face in both her hands and kissed him, causing him to stop babbling.

"Stanley," she said looking him in the eyes, her hair was the color of apples and honey that shined bright in the light of a lantern hanging in the window. "this man Shaw will take one look at you and know you're the one for the job. He'll give you a housing allowance, and then we'll marry in a fine church in the city. And I want to invite as many people as we can fit inside so everyone can see what a successful man I'm in love with."

She kissed him and they embraced again. He still held reservations when he went to bed that night, and barely slept. His father drove him in their carriage to the station for the red eye train to Philadelphia. Though he loved his father he barely spoke to him on the ride over, when they reached the station his father gave him a pair of ten dollar gold coins.

"You buy a present for my future daughter in law, ya hear?"

“If she’ll marry me.”

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His father’s eye brows that were as white and wispy as spring clouds went up in a question.

“And why wouldn’t she my lad? She loves you.”

“Yes and I her, but if I do not get this job she’ll be devastated, she won’t have me as her husband.”

“Bah. She loved you last week when you was still a foreman or when you was choppin down them pines before that. I remember she fell sweet on ya when ya helped raise barns in Porter village, ya didn’t get no wages then if I remembers correctly. Dawn Anna is a good girl, and if she loves ya this wont be nothin but a speed bump if you don’t get the job. Yer mother, God rest her soul, would tell ya the same. ”

The whole train ride and the two hours he waited before his interview at a cafe on Walnut street, he remembered what Dawn Anna and his father told him, feeling good about his chances until now.

“Mr Freeling, I don’t think you understand what the position I’m offering is.” Shaw said moving his cigar holding hand causing an ash to plop on the desk.

Stanley opened his mouth to speak but Shaw over rode him.

“I’m not looking for an apprentice. I have too many clerks as it is and you hardly have the experience or education for such a title. I’m not entirely sure I would have hired Arthur either. No, I have more need of builders and men that work with tools and the such.” Shaw said brushing the ashes to the floor and wiping his hands with a handkerchief.

“Really? Why?”

“I look over scores new properties across the city, some are homes and apartments with out tenants and or even worse bad tenants leaving me with endless maintenance issues I’d much rather hire someone else to worry over.” he said taking another draw of his cigar.

“Well, than perhaps I understand more than you think, Mr Shaw.”

“Do you?”

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“Yes, I am a foreman with Dark Hollow Lumber, I helped build the saw mill and raised a half dozen barns that are still the finest in all of the village I was born in. I even had a hand in building the bridge that crosses over the Schuylkill river helping connect Dark Hollow road to the main road of Porter so we can haul more wood to the city quicker.”

Stanley felt the words coming out in a comfortable rhythm that was unrehearsed but sounded professional and competent in his own ears. He felt his confidence redouble when Shaw began to nod his head in agreement. Stanley continued as the fat man toked on his cigar again.

“I’ve proficient skills when it comes to all manner of tools. I’ve even used a steam powered saw machine when I was still a lumber jack hauling pines to the mill.”

Stanley folded his arms and simply smiled at Shaws raised eyebrows, he laughed and placed his cigar back in the stone ashtray. It was the most he had moved during the entire interview so far.

“Mr Freeling, I would like you to have this job. I’ve got my pick of handymen looking for work, migrants usually. Dirty Italians and Irishmen mostly, the occasional nigger of course. But I’d prefer and trust a native white man for such seniority. Of course you’ll have a say on who works under you, but I’d like to discuss your salary briefly. I’d be willing to offer two thousand for the first year.”

When Stanley heard the figure he felt his heart drop and possibly his jaw. Shaw had cleared his throat and coughed at his reaction thinking it wasn’t a good enough offer.

“That of course and a sizable housing allowance, eh? You have a fiancée I’m sure who would be eager to share a home with you. That’s a generous proposition, I think. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Stanley felt his heart pound against his chest at the stark realization that he had acquired a high paying job in one of the fastest growing real estate firms in the city, and he and his beloved Dawn Anna would be riding on the fast track of urban society. He nodded and stuttered briefly.

“Thu-thu- thank you, Mr Shaw.” he said shaking Shaws hand and actually getting a grip this time.

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“Come, there is an establishment down the street that makes an excellent roast beef. We’ll discuss more details over a meal. My treat of course.”

Although he was a fat man, the cold damp March weather and perhaps his hunger had him quickly make his way between the sea of people with the grace of a dancer, using a thin brief case he carried as a wedge to get between people not moving fast enough. For Stanley seeing so many people at once left him feeling dizzy, he knew Philadelphia had many people but the sheer volume shocked him when a carriage brought him to down town.

After walking two blocks they came upon an ale house with a hand carved template of cherry wood in its window that said Red’s Beef & Ale. It was crowded with mostly men dressed in work clothes, there was a smell of hard boiled eggs and cooked pork hanging in the air. Amongst the many patrons were serving girls wearing long colorful dresses and white blouses that were cut so low they revealed their cleavage.

Stanley felt the color rush from his face when he thought of Dawn Anna dressed in such an outfit. As they entered a few people looked their way but most continued drinking and eating, celebrating the end of another work week. A young girl wearing a dress the color of teal took them to a corner booth, the seats were hard wood and smelled of pine oil. The girl smiled and welcomed them cheerfully, Stanley thought she was too young by many years to be in such a place, let alone working as serving wench.

Though it was perhaps her youth and her being just few years out of childhood that put the smile on Shaw’s face that grew bigger than his eyes as he peeked at her breasts while she leaned over to serve them their ale a few moments later. Her brown hair was tied up high in a bun, her complexion was youthful though she wore a light rouge on her cheeks. Stanley felt slightly embarrassed that the man who would be paying him so much money treated a girl that way, he felt apprehension for the first time that day.

Shaw talked for a few moments about how good the ale was here and that the beef was the finest served in all of the city. Then he was silent, casting side long glances at the other girls serving patrons at the bar and the other booths. The girl returned to take their order, Shaw gazed her up and down as he ordered a roast beef and insisted Stanley order the same.

“Ahh, how lovely the girls are here. I come for the meat and the sights.” he said once the serving wench left.

Stanley smiled dutifully and took another sip, hoping Shaw had an employment contract in his brief case. He checked his pocket watch wondering if he would have time to catch the last train
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at nine o'clock, though he was reluctant to leave without some kind of guarantee or contract. As if reading his thoughts Shaw asked.

“How soon can you start, Mr Freeling?”

“Immediately, if necessary.” he said feeling that was the best answer.

“Ah, excellent.” he said as the food arrived.

The sandwiches were indeed hearty and came with a ceramic bowl of something called fried chips and another filled with a sauce to dip the sandwiches. Shaw didn't speak, saving his mouth for the food and his attention for the serving girls. When the last bit of food vanished from Shaw's plate he began talking again.

“As I was saying,” he said wiping his chin with a cloth napkin. “I would like you to begin tonight. I have a property that needs evaluation.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes, you have an open ended ticket home I'm sure. The property is a large house and will require a few days to evaluate. When you return I'll have a contract of employment for you. I doubted I would hire someone today so you'll forgive me if you'll have to wait.”

“Not at all. Where is this house?”

“On an island south of here. It is where the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers meet and you'll need a ferry to reach it.”

“I didn't know there was island here.”

Shaw grunted.

“Hollander's Island,” he said as he bit the end of a cigar before lighting it.

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He rummaged in his brief case sitting by his seat and brought out an actual photograph and handed it to him. Stanley had seen one or two over the last few years very good ones, this however was of poor quality. The house looked like two houses connected at the side facing each other at a wide angle like the letter V, the photo itself was bleary as if the house was squirming as the picture was being taken.

“It’s...” Stanley started to say.

“Magnificent.” Shaw finished,

Stanley didn’t agree and thought the double faced house looked like a double broken grin. Shaw said it was magnificent, though he did not even glance at the picture as he gave it to him, and turned it away from himself when putting it back. It was not a big thing but it stood out to Stanley.

“It’s a dozen acres surrounded by a pine forest. The land originally belonged to Stephen Girard, the house is older though I can’t recall who built it.”

“Stephen Girard.” Stanley asked, clearly impressed as Girard was once one of the richest men in America, though he had been dead for decades his name was well regarded still in Philadelphia.

“Yes,” he said smiling at Stanley’s reaction. “it is secluded and quiet and I intend to bring it back to its former glory through renovation. I’m sure you’ll be able to assemble a crew to get it livable again.”

“Unless there is too much damage, structurally speaking.”

Shaw grimaced at his words, but Stanley wanted to let his new boss know there is the possibility of such, as little as he may like it, he continued.

“The islands elevation maybe low at certain points and flood during the rainy season and then there is the roof...”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Shaw said slightly perturbed. “and you shall remedy it all. My goal is to sell and damn the consequences. There are fortunes to be made, my boy.”

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He suddenly took some coins from his pocket and placed a few on the table.

“For the girl, finish your ale and wait for me out front. I’ll find the ferryman and he’ll take you over.”

With briefcase in hand he exited Red’s through throngs of more customers entering, he elbowed a few patrons getting his coat on, ignoring their looks and comments. Stanley finished his ale as the girl collected her fee and wished him a good day. He put his hat and coat on and went outside into the growing twilight.

There was a deep chill and the street was emptying of people as the minutes ticked on and the light grew to an eggplant color as he stood watching the city slowly unwind from the day. There were a few street corner lanterns already alive with flames, unmoved by the early March breeze. Stanley stood out front alone, in the distance people walked here and there and the noise of people back inside Red’s was a distant hum of noise.

He stood less than one hundred feet from the street corner where Chestnut going east to west crossed 12th street going from north to south, with his back to the wall on Chestnut. Standing high above at the curb of the cross section was a street lantern casting a feeble light that did not reach him, nor did it reach the face peering from around the corner on 12th that he suddenly noticed despite the darkness. The eyes were white on the persons face, who appeared to be a Negro woman. He could see a gold kerchief wrapped around her head, but her eyes were what drew him.

They appeared to be almost all white, no iris and the pupils were just pinholes of darkness. Stanley felt ice grow under his skin, all he could see was the bridge of her nose up to the top of her head behind Red’s corner wall, as if her head was sideways. The image made his stomach turn, Stanley was about to speak when the face slowly slid back around the corner.

He felt his heart beating heavily in his chest waiting for the women to reappear. After a moment he slowly walked to the corner still close to the wall. He felt his mind try to make sense of the encounter and felt afraid suddenly she might be trying to rob him. He took a breath and nearly collide with a group of tipsy men talking gaily, his heart was stuck in his chest from the scare as he apologized profusely.

“It’s alright, guvanor!” said a man with whiskey fumes on his breath.

His friends laughed as the man patted Stanley on the shoulder as he passed by. Stanley put his hand to his chest as he looked down the street the woman peeked from but he saw only an empty
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avenue with not a carriage or person about. A few houses lined the street, some with lightened windows, who ever had peeked at him might have lived in one of those houses, he walked back in front of Red's to wait as he reasoned with himself.

He had only seen one or two Negro's before coming to the city. Since then he had seen five or six hauling luggage in and out of the Pullman cars at the train station. He had seen one on Broad street shining shoes for two cents. He had never seen a woman Negro though and thought that was why the sight had surprised him, but certainly not frightened him.

"No, not at all."

He felt his heart regain its proper beat and looked back towards the corner waiting, almost willing the woman to appear again. He held his breath waiting his heart beating evenly, with the occasional jump.

"Ridiculous." he said in harsh exhale.

He walked back to the corner, determined to stand and wait, perhaps he had frightened her by being impolite and staring back at her. He stopped an inch short of the corner, scolding himself for being so immature and was greeted with a harsh shout.

"Damn, harpy." growled Shaw as he bumped into Stanley while turning the corner.

Although, Stanley gasped aloud and had gone a shade paler than normal, Shaw either didn't notice or didn't care and judging by Shaw's current mood, he guessed it was the latter. His heart was doing triple beats but he dutifully asked what was wrong.

"God damn him, won't cross the channel after sunset. Christing Irish are cowardly bastards, they should be thrown out of the country right along with the niggers." he said glaring back down the street where the face peered from.

"Did you see one?" asked Stanley.

"One what?" asked Shaw shortly.

“A...uh...Negro woman. She wore a gold kerchief around her head.”

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Shaw stared back quietly for a moment, he looked pasty and fatter in the light of the lantern. He toked on his cigar and exhaled a cloud of smoke as he answered.

“I saw no one, feeling randy?” he asked with a glint in his eye Stanley did not care for.

“No, I just thought I saw some one I knew was all I meant.” he tried to sound calm and even as he said.

“Indeed. Come,” he said rummaging in his pocket. “there is a men’s clothes shop you’ll need to visit tonight they are open until eight so we must hurry and find a hansom cab.”

“Clothes?”

“Yes,” he said handing Stanley a handful of coins which included a few Double Eagles as well as a scrap of paper with something written on it. “I expect you to spend a few days getting dirty, check the property top to bottom and write down all the damages on a notebook.”

“I...”

“I’ve got the ferryman bringing you everything else you’ll need, go to this address here and tell the clerk my name and he’ll give you a discount on whatever you purchase. The second address here is a boarding house with a morning wake up you’ll be leaving early tomorrow so don’t dawdle out on the streets tonight. Can you ride a horse?”

“Yuh...uh, yes, Mr Shaw.” he said trying to remember everything he said.

“Good, there is livery stable address written there as well, there are a dozen miles of forest until you reach the river. I’ve hired you a horse and the woman running the stable was kind enough to provide a map and compass. Do not lose it as it is only a loan and the horse as well, the Irishman will stable it at his home while you are gone.”

After Shaw hailed him a cab he assured him a contract would be ready for him Monday morning when he returned. The next few hours had blurred by, he had taken time to see a few sights of the locale including the Liberty Bell which sat upon a lovely pedestal of four stout pillars of white

stone. He felt his heart twitch gladly at the sight. He bought a lovely bracelet for Dawn Anna and pocket watch for his father.

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On the way back he strolled on foot and found a stationery store and purchased a note book as well as a few pencils, paper, envelopes and a stamp. He wrote just a short note to his love saying there was a chance he might even be back with her before she got the letter and that he was just bursting with good cheer he thought he'd explode if he didn't get it out some how. He finished it before the cab he took arrived at his final stop.

The boarding house was a two story building on the corner of 12th and Lombard that was of brick and mortar. A few feet from the entrance standing on the side walk was a wooden pole standing many feet higher than the street lanterns. It was branched at its top with a quartet of arms festooned with some type of rope or odd looking string that connected it to another pole further down though it was too dark for Stanley to see another in the distance.

He had seen them here and there since he arrived and every time he saw he had to look up at them feeling both excited and afraid though he wasn't sure why. He entered the building and asked the elderly gentleman who checked him in about the pole out front.

"I've seen them along Broad street mostly. Why are they all tied together with rope?"

"Telegraph my, boy." the old man said.

"Oh, yes. I've read about them in the newspaper."

"Aye, and it ain't rope they got tyin to each other, it's called wire. Sends lectricity so's people can talk to someone far way instantly."

"Imagine talking to someone on the other side of the world instantly. Fascinating, don't you think?" Stanley said enamored by the idea of instant communication.

"Devil's work," the man said harshly and lifted his hand as if he were about to slap Stanley in the face. " if the good Lord wanted us all to talk he'd a made us all speak the same language. No good will come of such technology. Mark my words boy."

Stanley felt taken aback by the old mans sudden outburst, so he dutifully agreed and asked him if there was mail carriage near by. The old mans tone was gentle again and said the mail carrier might be just around the corner as he had just dropped off some letters not ten minutes ago.

Stanley left his bags with the old man and ran around the corner where indeed was the mail carrier untying his horses in preparation to depart. He handed his letter to a soldierly looking 12 older gentleman who dutifully checked the postage before accepting it with a nod and a good day.

He felt light hearted as he checked his pocket watch and noticed the late hour. He wished he could of had time for a hot bath but they did not offer such a service here. Ah well, he had a sudden flash back to he and Dawn Anna going skinny dipping in the river last summer during a long heat wave.

Though they were both still virgins, they had in the last year or so found themselves being left alone more often when ever one of them visited the others home, allowing them to occasionally explore their love in a more intimate way. Stanley turned off the lantern on the small table beside his bed, the room was small but cozy and the bed soft. He left the window that was above the bed and not very big closed and the curtains shut as he buried himself deeply under a sheepskin blanket.

The last thing on his mind as sleep took him was fantasies of indulging himself on Dawn Anna when their wedding night finally came. He dreamed of her briefly, much too briefly for his delight. He found himself rolling in tall grass with her early in the morning and the sun is rising, they are nude and kissing. Their love is so hot it sizzles the dew on the grass that's dripping on their taugt bodies.

The delightful sensation of his loves heaving breasts as it glistened with a few beads of morning dew was gone, so was Dawn Anna. He was on all fours, but it was night now and under him was not Dawn Anna but the serving girl from the ale house. But she was different, her face was frightful with bruises and her eyes that were bright and cheery were filled with blood, one of them stuck out of the socket partially revealing a pink worm like discharge from the corner, her cheeks were covered with deep purplish blue bruises instead of rouge .

Stanley jumped up from her realizing she was dead, his member which a moment ago had felt like it had been forged in iron wilted like a poisoned flower, he was ready to run away but she was gone suddenly. The tall grass remained, but is was stunted and dead where the girl had laid, eaten away by all manner of bug. The untouched grass look infested with bugs, tiny little things with hairy legs and sharp pincers, the tall blades were coated with wispy spider webs, he saw many tiny black hands that were as small as toddler hands begin reaching out from between the blades.

Stanley gasped and ran but only for a moment as he looked around at himself and saw that the dense tall grass was gone and he was now surrounded by tall open spaced pine trees. A forest filled with infinite pine trees, he walks around for hours through the dense and tall trees.

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