

DEATH MILL MANSION:

A Lighthearted Comedy

By Will Hartzell-Baird

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Prologue

The second strangest creature in the known universe is the almost unheard of Sliv Lizard. These lizards reside within a single underground cave no more than fifty yards in length, from which they never venture, largely due to the fact that they react explosively to direct sunlight.

Despite having evolved in an environment with little to no light as a result of their combustible nature, they are bright orange with large green eyes. The males of the species attempt to attract the opposite sex through an elaborate mating dance never seen by human eyes, which is just as well, because any observer would probably not have believed what they were witnessing. Equally bizarre, the idiosyncratic lizards also tend to glow in the dark when excited.

The Slivs' complete inability to blend in with their surroundings, which is nearly unheard of among wildlife, has not inhibited the growth of the remarkable species because the only predators stupid enough to eat the highly explosive Slivs are other Slivs.

For thousands of years, the Slivs lived undisturbed in their native environment, until one calamitous day, when an eccentric scientist constructed his mansion directly above the Slivs' cave, and converted their natural habitat into an unnecessarily large basement, although upon inspection the structure bore more resemblance to a tunnel or a parking garage than to part of the house. In truth, the tunnelish basement was specifically designed to amplify the unusual sounds produced during the Sliv mating season* and funnel them toward the road nearest to the mansion, largely because it amused the mansion's owner to imagine the looks on drivers' faces as they found themselves engulfed in the sounds of lizard sex.

Presently, exactly seven days before the Sliv mating season, the lizards in question were warming up their vocal chords in preparation for the main event, at which they would begin their mating ritual. This rehearsal produced a rather shocking effect to anyone inside of the cave, since there were hundreds of Slivs, lined around the perimeter of the cave-turned-basement, all producing the same mind-boggling mating call. This effect, however, was lost on the wild-eyed man running frantically toward where he hoped the end of the tunnel would be. He was not concerned with the noises of frisky lizards.

He was concerned with whirring noises.

* A single week in November. The Slivs, remember, were not like most creatures.

And they were everywhere. Had he been in an area with corners rather than in a completely straight tunnel, the whirring would have been around every corner. But in this instance, the whirring had to gripingly settle for lurking in the shadows, just out of sight.

He ran faster as the ominous sounds grew louder with proximity. Actually, the noises weren't particularly ominous; they sounded like someone left the fan above their oven running. The sounds only *seemed* ominous because of their origin. And he was distinctly dismayed by being close enough to the source to actually hear the whir.

He gasped for air as he desperately pressed onward. His lungs felt like he had been inhaling acid. Or, more accurately, since inhaling acid feels remarkably like being dead, his lungs felt like he had been inhaling large amounts of air. His feet ached almost as much as his stomach. He wondered what it might be like to be in good shape.

Why hadn't he prepared for this? He knew this day would come. He had had all the time in the world; why had he wasted it? Surely he had been aware of the benefits for a man in his situation to be able to run very fast. He could have sculpted his body into an organic running machine by practicing for this occasion every morning. But instead he had lived his life the way he always had, putting in as little effort as possible. And to what end?

He cursed his choice of words. He didn't feel like thinking about ends right now; his own might come too soon. He could just make out the silhouette of trees in the moonlight at the mouth of the tunnel...

Just a few more yards, he consoled himself, and his troubles would be over. Realistically, they would be replaced by other troubles once he reentered what passed as real life, but at least most of *those* troubles didn't involve being sliced open or bludgeoned to death.

As long as he stayed out of the big cities, at least. He was not a popular guy. It's something about stealing thousands of dollars from the wrong people that wears out a person's welcome. But the point was that he would be engulfed in the harmless, respectable troubles that so many people mistakenly think of as important.

Now he could even make out the *leaves* on the trees, and he knew that nearby the road leading to freedom awaited. Then he noticed something peculiar—the whirring had taken on a different quality. It had gotten louder, yet somehow less...*urgent*. But by that time he was about to cross the threshold into the outside world, so he didn't much care about the sounds he was leaving behind him.

He almost smiled as he leapt into the night air. In the end, he opted against this smile, since the thrill of his victorious escape was somewhat diminished by the white hot pain in the back of his skull. He felt himself slipping away...

It is considerably more difficult to smile when you are dead.*

* In an interesting twist of fate, the man had, in high school, been voted “most likely to be the obligatory guy who dies in the opening scene and has no relevance to the rest of the story.” For some reason, he had always had mixed feelings about that particular victory.