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by

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Is the world ready for the truth?

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“Chips, nothing but chips, kid. Sand, almost. This is trash; take it down to Kohn. He’s at the end of this row, the one with oil lamps in front. He sells it by the gram. Look at this, wouldya?”

The antiques dealer lifted up a handful of clay shards, none of them larger than his thumbnail, then poured them back into the canvas bag. “There’s nothing here big enough to read, even. Not that I could read it. You could have made this out of Play-Doh in your back yard for all I know.” Knowing the kid had no idea what that was, he scratched his chin through his iron-gray stubble.

The Arab boy’s steady brown eyes regarded him without emotion. He’d made other sales to Saul Green, and the dealer always put him through a certain amount of song and dance, otherwise he didn’t enjoy it.

“My cousin brought them in. They came from the Bagdad Museum,” the boy said.

“And I’m from New York, but that doesn’t make *me* interesting, either.”

They sat in what was no more than an oversized booth in an out-of-the-way corner of the Mahaneh Yehuda market. The shop was crowded with bronze coins of Roman Israel and the ancient Middle East, small ceramics, elegant pieces of ancient glass, crusader silver pennies, Ottoman jewelry and a few edged weapons. Green had two rules; he didn’t deal in anything bigger than his hat, and he could put his hand on anything in his inventory without taking more than a single step from the counter. Back in Brooklyn he’d operated a pawnshop for thirty-six years. The experience had given him an eye that hadn’t yet failed him in Jerusalem. Value was value, anywhere.

“Your cousin in Bagdad must have come in at the end, after they took all the good pieces out the front door of the museum. I started to see things already a week ago, but they were good things, pieces I didn’t dare buy because they’d been written up in the journals, and I could find them online. They’d only be confiscated. But this is backroom stuff from their dead storage. The public never saw it. They must have kept it stacked in boxes, and it wasn’t worth the effort to label it. If you ask me, I think it’s just your opener. You got anything bigger, kid? Something with some pizzazz? Come on, show me.” Green leaned over the counter trying to make out the shapes in the kid’s backpack.

“My cousin lives in the country. He didn’t hear about it right away. By the time he got there the Americans were already putting patrols up.”

“Now you’re only giving me excuses. Show me the goods.”

The boy pulled out a nearly intact clay tablet covered with cuneiform writing. As the dealer guessed, it had been part his plan not to show this immediately. Saul Green adjusted the reading glasses on his nose and bent over it. He thought it was Babylonian; he’d seen tablets like it before, and this one definitely had the right look. He was suddenly distracted by the smell of freshly fried falafel drifting up from one of the stalls two rows over.

“Well, this is better. It must have been lost under a cabinet for your cousin to find it. I could take it, but it might only be someone’s laundry list or grocery bill. Anything else?”

“One thing more.” Suppressing a grin, the boy retrieved his treasure. Wrapped in newspaper fastened with masking tape was a fractured piece of bluish-gray slate, roughly triangular, but with a flattened apex, and about as large as two spread hands. One face was inscribed with hieroglyphs, and the smooth back bore a small, white-painted Arabic inscription in what Green knew were file letters and numbers. He could read the numbers.

“Ahh? Egyptian, eh? And this came from the Bagdad Museum, too?”

The boy nodded.

“Your country cousin got lucky after all. They probably didn’t have anyone who could translate it so they shoved it aside in a drawer for later, God knows how long ago. I’ll take both of these. Dollars or shekels?”

“Dollars.”

“I’ll give you sixty, no more.”

The boy’s face lit up and his hand came out to accept three twenty-dollar bills from the dealer’s wallet.

Saul Green had a glass-top case at the front of his shop that he kept locked. When the boy left with his money and his bag of chips, Green watched him go down the row toward Kohn’s booth before he cleared a space and placed both pieces inside the case. He dialed the number of a friend who could do a fair, but not great, job translating hieroglyphs, but the man’s daughter said he was gone for a week to Eilat, an Israeli resort on the tip of the Gulf of Aqaba at the northern end of the Red Sea. This did not trouble Green much because it was the look of these things that caught people’s eye, just as it had his. The slate was nicely done, the cutting of the characters crisp and not worn by exposure to the weather. Too bad it was only a fragment, since it looked like part of a

stele, one of the stone tablets that mark ancient boundaries in Egypt. If the arched top had been present, it might have had human figures on it. But what could the inscription matter, after all, on a broken piece of stone three or four thousand years old? It was probably some religious mumbo-jumbo, something Green had little time for. He had not moved to Israel for the religion—he only wanted to be among his own people, and he didn't like Florida because, aside from a few weatherworn Spanish cannon, its visible history had been paved over with strip malls. Despite his career as a pawnbroker, Saul was at heart an antiquarian.

But the ancient world had been powered by religious mumbo-jumbo the way the twenty-first century ran on gasoline and microchips. By brushing it off, Green realized he was doing no more justice to the slate's message than the Bagdad Museum had by ignoring it. He believed he ought to do better. With his digital camera, he made several photos of the slate at different angles to the light. If he had been knowledgeable enough to translate it himself, he would have soon realized that the slate fragment held the key to an event that a great many people wouldn't want revealed, even in the twenty-first century.

By the time his amateur scholar friend returned from Eilat in the following week, Saul Green had sold the piece to a dark-complexioned man in sunglasses who seemed happy to pay \$200 for it. Still, Green mailed his friend copies of the photos with a request for a translation. He didn't expect to get much information from it, and he didn't. Four days after he mailed the photos, Saul Green was dead, murdered by a late night intruder at his shop, where he had stopped in after a dinner party to pick up some Byzantine coins to show to a client who was housebound. The police suspected the murderer/thief was also a technology buff, because, according to Green's wife, who often helped him at the shop, it was only his five-year-old Olympus digital camera and his old laptop that were taken. It didn't make much sense to the widow; Green didn't have any enemies, and many of his coins, which were not disturbed, were valuable. More than a few people were left scratching their heads.

Although so close in time, the Israeli Police never connected the murder of Saul Green with that of an amateur hobbyist in antiques and ancient languages that happened earlier the same day. The victim had been a baker, with a shop not in the Mahaneh Yehuda market, but in another quarter of town.

This second victim had just returned from a week's vacation in Eilat. His wife told investigators he was well rested and looking forward to doing a little translating from a set of photos he'd been sent by a friend with antiquarian interests. But when she looked for them, at their behest, she couldn't find the copies, and she didn't remember who had sent them. Neither case was ever solved.

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