

# FUMATORIUM

a short story by Robert Steven Goldstein

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Let me tell you what I do when I need money, which is often. This state of affairs may 'be attributed to the fact that I have neither a job which would enable me to obtain funds honorably, nor friends from whom to obtain them dishonorably. Do not think that I suffer. I have no boss to conciliate and no superiors to impress. Under the circumstances I live quite well. I have at my disposal much time to spend thinking. In the past, imagining myself as quite a philosopher, I spent much of this time questioning my own goals and the purpose of life in general. Now I no longer trouble myself with it. You will soon know of my reasons.

I was about to tell you what I do to earn money. I write, if you wish to call it that. I have in my attic a collection of our city's newspapers from around the turn of the century. They were here when my parents were alive and lived in this house, and here they have remained. When my supply of funds runs low, I rummage through these papers for some little known incident which I write up as a filler for one of the popular magazines. And I live. I have lived this way for many years now, not unhappily, until I was told the story I tell you now. I would not have heard it if I did not live the way I do. Now we must all hear it. It seems only fair.

A filler of mine which had recently been published concerned an incident handled sensationally in several papers about August 1902. A young doctor, Lawrence Williams, had weighed a series of patients at their time of death, apparently to discover whether or not their souls were leaving their bodies. Curiously, in each instance, the scale did indeed register a small but definite weight loss, which the young doctor found a convincing bit of evidence in support of his hypothesis. His peers at the hospital acted quite predictably in banning his experiments permanently, and, rather than forfeit a promising career in medicine, Mr. Williams abided by the hospital's decision and promptly ceased his independent research. It had, admittedly, been of a rather questionable nature.

Several days after the filler's publication, I received an elderly well-dressed visitor at my door. A copy of the magazine was in his hand, opened to the page of the Williams article. He inquired whether I had written it, and when I told him I had, he asked to speak with me for a while. Since there was a sense of urgency in his voice, I invited him in.

He took a chair, refused smoke or drink, and said, "I am Joseph Williams. The man you wrote about was my father. Since you seemed to take an interest in his experimentation, I felt that you might care to discuss his theory in greater detail."

I certainly did not. But you recognize the writhing agony in one who carries with him a secret too potent for the soul of a single man. I nodded that he go on.

"My father did no further work on his theory, and rightly so. It is not for us to tamper with death. If, at death, any part of a man should leave him, it is for us to deal only with what is left, and nothing more. I have learned that, my friend. If in my life I have learned nothing more, I have learned that, and it is enough."

"That isn't what you came here to tell me."

He waited. "No," he said.

"My father did no further experimentation; I did. My experiments on his theory were long and painstaking, but I did not mind it. I enjoyed the work. What I couldn't stand was the secrecy. I could tell no one. No one knew of them but my assistant, whose sad story has now become part of mine.

"My father, as you know, carried on his work at a hospital in Boston, and he was rather well known within its vicinity because of those newspaper articles. I urged my father to move away, to leave the hospital and continue his research. I remember him constantly repeating, 'The experienced men of the hospital know best. They have told me not to continue with my experiments because they know that that is best for me and for all. They are not the kind of men who are selfish or narrow. Listen to them, my son; they know best.' I was then about fifteen.

"A year after, I had begun my study of medicine, and by the time I was twenty-one I was completing my internship at the hospital where my father was now a prominent physician. In those six and a half years, his experiment had been nearly forgotten by everyone, and by now he

thought of it as the foolhardy, time-wasting undertaking of a young doctor.

"My views, however, were not altered. I had learned to keep them to myself by now, and knowing that any further attempt to persuade my father to resume his investigations would be futile, I had decided to carry on subsequent secret investigations on my own, preferably in a city some distance away, which had never even heard of Lawrence Williams and his weighing of the dead."

The old man was quivering.

His voice was hoarse. "Are you sure I can't get you something?" I interrupted. "A drink of water, perhaps?"

"All I ask of you is to hear my story out. It is enough to ask of any man.

"A year after my internship I decided I must go. When I told my father I was leaving to practice in a hospital in New York, he really didn't mind. I had become detached from him in spirit; I wanted to blaze new trails while he stumbled down the old ones.

"I moved to New York and assumed a position in a small clinic, where within a year I had achieved a position of leadership in one of its minor departments. It was then that I took into confidence one Jonathan Franks, whom I had judged from our very first meeting to be openminded and courageous. I explained to him what I planned to do, and how equipment would have to be obtained. He did not seem overly enthusiastic, but it was not his nature to be so. Instead, he seemed quietly proud to accept a challenge and to perform tabooed research in secret. Little did I realize then the strength and perseverance he would instill in me in time of need.

"It was not difficult to confirm my father's initial findings, but it was the WHY I was after. The patients at the time of death were definitely experiencing a slight loss of weight, but I had to know what this loss was caused by. Something was leaving the body, I was sure of it. Whatever it was, it had mass. It could be either solid, liquid or gaseous. We doubted that it was solid or liquid. It was, then, an invisible vapor. We now hit upon our plan.

"Painstakingly we constructed a large glass container from which the air could be pumped to form a total vacuum. We installed in it a sensitive meter to denote the presence of any gas which might destroy the vacuum.

"The time had come. For our experiments now we could use those terminal patients who were unable to regain consciousness before death. Each was put in the fumatorium. A breathing apparatus was attached so that he could have fresh air to breathe and room to exhale waste without disturbing the vacuum.

"We placed a patient in the fumatorium and removed the air.

"Jonathan watched through the glass for the man's breathing to stop. I kept my unwavering eye on the meter.

"'He's stopped breathing!' Jonathan suddenly cried.

"I watched the meter. The needle soared and then returned to zero. The vapor, it was a vapor, had been in there, but somehow it had escaped. But of course it had escaped! It penetrated the glass just as it had penetrated the man's skin and clothing. But that was not the important thing now. What was important was that we knew a vapor had left the body at death. It was the vapor of life, the vapor that started the heart pumping blood, the vapor which makes us think and remember, move and talk. And when it leaves us, we are no more.

"We repeated our experiment many times to insure its accuracy. But now we needed more. We needed to capture and hold that secret of life. But how? This phantom vapor calmly penetrated all barriers in its path. It was Jonathan who came up with an answer.

" 'Lead,' he said. 'Many things that can penetrate all others cannot penetrate lead.'

"I frankly doubted him. Not even lead, I felt, could hold the soul of a man. But it was worth a try.

"Jonathan and I smuggled into the hospital large quantities of lead. For

more laborious weeks, during which we still had to attend to all hospital chores to avoid suspicion, we covered the glass fumatorium with lead.

"We now had to install a new device which would tell us when the patient's heartbeat had stopped, for we could no longer observe his breathing through transparent walls. Finally it was completed, but before we could test it, tragedy struck.

"My assistant Jonathan, finishing work before I did, had entered our private room and was inside the now opaque fumatorium, giving it a routine inspection. It was then that I entered the room in which the fumatorium was kept. I decided to give the vacuum pump a test run, and not realizing that Jonathan was inside it, I locked the door and threw the vacuum switch. It was not until I heard a gasp, a wheeze, and a thud that I knew what had happened. My first impulse was of course to rush at it and fling open the door, and I almost did, before the meter caught my eye. A gas had interrupted the vacuum! It was the air he had exhaled before dying. Of course. But what if another vapor was in there too, trapped by the lead covering we had recently installed? I could take no chances. I pumped the vapor from the fumatorium into a small lead jar, and opened the door and removed the body. Then the idea came to me.

"Jonathan, unlike the patients, did not have a sick body. He had died from an accident, because his lungs could get no air. But if his body could somehow be revived now that air was available, why could he not live again? But how to get the soul back into his body? Since I was a doctor, the only thing that came to my mind was to inject it back. But what was to prevent it from leaving again? I didn't know, but anything was worth a try.

"I knew I would have to construct a hypodermic needle of lead, which would take a while. Meanwhile I preserved Jonathan's body as best I could. The needle was nearly impossible to construct. When I had completed it, I attached to it a long lead pipe through which I would pump the contents of the small container. Five days after Jonathan's death, I was ready.

"He had been preserved quite well. He was set. So was I. I inserted the

needle in his arm and set the pump to work. Soon the task was done. Jonathan just lay there, motionless. But then, no! An eyelash quivered, his body moved, and then he was alive, gasping for the breath which had been taken from him. He was conscious and looked around. I told him I had injected his soul back into his body, and that he was alive again.

"NO, NO: he screamed. He wouldn't stop screaming. He said many horrible things, and then he died. Again."

Here I interrupted old Mr. Williams, who had abruptly ended his story and now sat in profound silence.

"What did he say? Tell me,"

I begged him. "What did he say?"

The old man continued. "He screamed that he had served his sentence, that he was free to go and that I had no right to take him back. He emphasized that he had served his sentence. Which indeed he had. We here on earth, it seems, are here for evil we have done elsewhere. When our sentence is done, we are free to go."

"You don't mean -----

"Of course," replied Williams calmly. "This is hell."