

## THE NAKED EYE

by Doctor Zero

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Susan was using her hand-held video camera to film a three-foot black snake, trying to convince herself it wasn't poisonous so she could move in for a better shot, when she heard Josh calling "Hello!" from fifty yards away.

"I'm back here, babe," she called, trying not to disturb the snake, which rewarded her efforts by sticking its tongue out at her.

A moment later, Josh's buddy Brandon appeared at the nearest bend in the trail, a blurry charcoal sketch in the dirty green shadows of the late Everglades afternoon. "He wasn't shouting for you, Susan, but you might want to check this out. We found a camp or something."

"So much for your movie career," Susan informed the snake. "Maybe we can set you up with a commercial deal, if you keep that trim figure." She used her fingers to mimic a telephone handset. "Call me. Power lunch."

The snake briefly considered sinking its fangs into her throat, but settled for wagging its tongue at her again.

She folded the tiny Panasonic video camera closed, putting it on standby mode, and followed Brandon to the campsite he and Josh had discovered. Brandon's girlfriend Naomi was there too, poking around with exaggerated caution, as though she expected her ankle to encounter a tripwire at any moment. Naomi was the least athletic of the four hikers – Josh had once remarked she was "built for pleasure, not for speed," which earned him a stiff punch in the arm from Susan. The day had run unexpectedly hot for October in Florida, leaving Naomi fragrant with sweat and noisy with complaints about the heat. Susan found herself glad for the unexpected discovery of the camp site, hoping it would give Naomi a chance to cool down and catch her breath before they hiked back to their cars.

The campsite was small, consisting of three sleeping tents, a larger screened enclosure around a folding table, and a half-dozen camp chairs. Josh belted out another "Hello!" and appeared from behind the tents, looking confused. "Nobody's home," he announced. "They must have gone deeper into the Everglades... hunting gators, maybe?"

"Nope," said Brandon. He was smaller, smarter, and more of a troublemaker than Josh, with a keen eye for detail. Apparently unconcerned with the privacy of the campsite's owners, he was holding up a set of notebooks with identical school logos. "University of Miami." He went into the screen enclosure and took a look at the work table. "Hey, check it out. I think these guys are doing archeology."

"I think we should leave their stuff alone," said Naomi, her whiny voice making her perfectly reasonable position sound annoying. Her interest piqued, Susan went to the work table and flipped her camera open, recording the carefully arranged artifacts laid out in wooden boxes.

"Seminole," pronounced Josh, looking in through the screen. "Gotta be a dig site around here somewhere."

Brandon carefully lifted a crude digging implement from one of the wooden boxes and studied it with a practiced eye. He was a recent veteran of undergraduate courses in local Indian history. "Looks really *old*," he observed. "Older and simpler than most of the Seminole stuff I've seen before."

"We shouldn't be doing this," said Naomi. "What if they come back while we're ransacking their camp site?"

"Oh, come on, I'm not 'ransacking' anything," said Brandon. He winked at his agitated girlfriend through the screen. "I *am* planning to do that later, after we shower and grab a few beers, but trust me, you're my only intended victim." He picked up some large paper sheets and studied them. "I wish they *would* come back. I'd volunteer to give them a hand. This stuff is really cool." He turned

the papers around so Susan could videotape them.

She thumbed the zoom function on the camera and studied the papers through the LCD preview screen. First was a sketch of the nearby dig site, showing four burial mounds in a semi-circle, plus a buried cache of clay pots nearby. Next was a carefully-drawn elevation of a mound, detailing its construction of rocks and clay. Beneath this was a drawing of a small bag, and details of its contents: beads, carved stones, and dust. Some hand-written notes speculated that the dust had once been a mixture of local herbs and animal organs.

Susan panned from the drawings to the work table, and saw what could only have been the little bag pictured by the sketch artist. It was made of ancient, rotted leather, and had once been tied shut with a thong. "What is that?" she asked. "Some kind of medicine bag?"

"Must have been," said Brandon. He examined the sketches again. "Looks like each of the mounds had one of these bags planted on top of it. Maybe some really important dudes were buried there." He set the artwork aside and flipped through a notebook. "Whoa, check this out... it says *the clay pots appeared to contain a hallucinogenic compound, used to enter an elevated state where beings of the spirit world could be perceived...*" He tossed the notebook back onto the work table and lit up like a Christmas tree. "Hey, do you think maybe these guys are out in the 'Glades, going all Timothy Leary with the sacred mushrooms they found?"

"Oh, gimme a break," said Susan. "This stuff is centuries old, right? It would have rotted away into poison by now." She closed her camera and slipped it into the case on her belt, then carefully lifted a square of woven beads, enclosed in a modern plastic bag for storage. Large chunks were missing from the weave, but the part that remained included a pattern of yellow triangles, arranged in a circle. "This is beautiful," she breathed, showing it to Brandon and Josh before putting it back in its place. "They've got a pretty major find on their hands, don't they?"

"Let's find 'em and ask for the whole story," suggested Brandon. He held up a hand-drawn map of the immediate area, and tapped his finger on the location of the dig site. "It's not far. I'm surprised they didn't hear Josh yelling and come running."

"I don't know," said Josh. "It's getting kinda late... we've only got a couple hours of sunlight left. We should head back to the cars..."

"Yeah, come on you guys, let's go," pleaded Naomi. The wheedling tone of her voice spurred Brandon to action. Grinning at his dismayed girlfriend, he left the screened enclosure with his map, took Naomi's hand, and pulled her along as he set off for the dig site. She groaned, but was soon busy negotiating the narrow path through tidal waves of damp foliage, with Susan behind her and Josh bringing up the rear.

It only took about fifteen minutes to find the dig site, after one wrong turn by Brandon, and one mistaken step into a pool of brackish water by Naomi.

They entered from the southeast corner of the site. Before them was the semicircle of burial mounds, and the shallow pit of sealed clay pots, exactly as pictured in the pencil sketches. The mounds gave off a palpable feeling of age – the stones bled thick green moss, and the trees behind them had grown into a tangled wall of wet bark and leaves: dozens of skeletal figures eternally trying to strangle each other, and choking the afternoon sun into gray haze instead. Insects muttered and shrieked in the steamy gloom. The heat and smell provoked an immediate gurgle of disgust from Naomi, but the other three hikers ignored her as they moved past the modern folding tables and battery-powered work lights contaminating the perimeter, and approached the burial mounds.

There were no University students or teachers in evidence.

All four of the burial mounds had been opened.

The left-hand mound had been penetrated carefully. It had a work light set up next to it, along with a folded tarp supporting an assortment of digging tools and brushes. The stones had been slowly pried loose from their mortar of moss and clay, to be piled neatly on top of another tarp. The University of Miami team had removed only a few stones from the top of the mound, just enough to

explore the interior.

The other three mounds had been torn apart. Stones were flung carelessly into the grass and mud. There were no work lights, tarps, or tools arranged beside them.

Josh poked something with his foot, then knelt to pick it up. It was a rotted leather pouch, identical to the medicine bag Susan had found at the camp site. "It was just lying there," said Josh. "Like someone *threw* it. What the hell...?"

"Ancient Indian mushroom party," said Brandon confidently. "Got to be."

"If they're stoned on mushrooms," Naomi asked quietly, "then where did they *go*?"

Susan opened her camera and began panning the dig site. Her skull was buzzing with a headache, doubtless brought on by the heat and humidity. "Maybe the dig team left, and some asshole kids found the site and trashed it," she suggested calmly.

"Asshole kids?" chuckled Brandon. "You mean like us?"

He went over to the mostly-intact burial mound and looked inside. Susan followed him, filming the cramped, filthy space within the dome of rocks. "No remains," she said. "Either it was empty to start with, or the University team took them for preservation. Maybe *that's* where they went."

She stood up, still looking at the LCD preview screen of her camera... and froze.

Someone was standing in the deep shadows of the nearby trees, watching them.

He was big, with broad shoulders and a heavy stomach. She couldn't make out any details – he was little more than a silhouette – but she detected no hint of a hat, hiking gear, or a gun. He was standing very still, but the camera picked up a lazy smear of motion from near his waistline. For a moment, she thought he might have been cradling a large snake near his belly.

"Hey!" she shouted, shocking her friends out of their speculations. "Hey, mister!"

She lowered the camera and started toward the tree line... but the man was already gone. She blinked in confusion. He'd vanished in the blink of an eye.

"What?" said Josh, walking over to her. "Was there somebody there? I didn't see anyone..."

Susan nodded. "Yeah. He was there. Watching us."

"You mean one of the students?" asked Naomi.

"I don't know," Susan replied slowly.

"Maybe you were just seeing things," Josh ventured. "Late afternoon shadows can play tricks on your eyes."

Susan replayed the last few minutes of her video camera's internal memory. "There," she said, tapping the screen with her finger. There was no mistaking the human silhouette lurking in the trees.

"Son of a gun," said Josh. "I don't know who that guy was, but maybe we'd better..."

"Hey, check it out," exclaimed Brandon, who was nosing around the area where Susan's mystery man lurked. He returned with one of the University's wooden exhibit boxes in his hands. "What are these... *teeth*?"

Susan and Josh looked into the open box, and saw it contained a perfectly circular arrangement of what appeared to be human teeth. Susan shivered. "Brandon, put that down and let's get out of here," she said. "I think we should get back to the cars. As soon as we get cell service, we can call the police. This is all really weird. I want to know if these people are okay... the cops can call the University and see if they checked in..."

Josh backed away, shaking violently, as if stricken by a sudden fever. He began cursing rapidly, one obscenity bleeding into the next.

"Dude!" shouted Brandon. "What the hell...?"

Josh spat out another profanity and pointed a trembling finger at the exhibit box Brandon was holding. "Those are *bloody*! They aren't old Indian fossil teeth. They're *bloody*! *They're fresh!*"

Brandon yelped and dropped the box of blood-stained teeth.

Susan grabbed Josh's arm for support, and together they fell back to the edge of the dig site, with Brandon stumbling behind them. "We gotta get out of here," gasped Susan. "Naomi, *run!*"

Naomi was gone.

Susan shouted her name, but Josh gave her a panicked shove in the back, to get her moving. “She's probably already down the trail. Get moving!”

Susan ran, with the boys close behind her. “I don't see her!” she called over her shoulder. “*Naomi!*”

There was no response from the trail ahead. If Naomi was in front of them, she was moving at a pace beyond anything she should have been capable of, even when fleeing in panic. She was built for pleasure, after all, not for speed.

The trees shook to Susan's left. Something was moving through the swamp. She couldn't see it, but she could see the plants moving. It was big, and it moved fast. She thought she could hear wheezy, eager breathing from that direction. “God!” she screamed. “God, they're *chasing* us!”

“I don't see them!” yelled Josh. “I hear 'em, but I can't see them!”

Susan screamed and ran faster. The trees whipped by in a blur, slapping her face with wet fronds and brittle branches. The sky overhead was painted with white sugar and thick clots of quicksilver, burning orange in the west as the sun began slipping into memory. They ran for at least fifteen minutes, but saw no trace of the camp site. They had missed a branch in the trail, and plunged into uncharted territory.

Something exploded from the trees and slammed into Susan. She howled and went down, then felt Josh trip over her and fall onto his hands and knees. Pain exploded in her leg. She grabbed herself and felt hot wires pulse beneath her fingers. She'd torn herself open on some rocks in the fall.

Small hands grabbed her shoulders and pushed her onto her back. Her assailant was a girl with short blonde hair and a University of Miami T-shirt, soaked with sweat, dirt... and dried blood. The girl's eyes were huge, and swimming with madness. Her chest heaved like a bellows as she screamed in Susan's face:

“Help me! Please, *help me!* They killed everyone else. They're *coming...*”

“Who?” shouted Josh, pulling the girl away from Susan. “Who the hell *are* they?”

“They were asleep in the mounds,” the student gibbered. “We woke the first one up. He dug the others out. The medicine bags made them sleep. They would have slept forever if we hadn't disturbed them... now they're awake, and they're so *hungry...*”

Josh stood with his jaw flapping, holding the student's shoulders and trying to process what she was saying.

“The Indians buried them a long time ago,” the blonde girl sobbed. “They had medicine... drugs that let them see into the spirit world. You can't see them without the drugs. They do something to your head, so you can't see them, they could be standing *right in front of you* and you wouldn't see them until it was too late...”

“Brandon?” said Susan. Her voice was small and fragile.

There was no sign of Brandon behind them on the trail.

He'd only been ten feet behind Josh.

“Oh, God,” coughed Josh. He let go of the hysterical student and took a step back. For a terrible moment, Susan thought he was going to break into a run, and leave the two young women to their fate. Instead, he screamed his best friend's name, and received no answer.

“The camera,” said Susan. “The camera. I saw him in the camera... but he wasn't there when I looked up...” She released the wound beneath her left knee, and fumbled in the grass for the video camera she had dropped. Gasping in pain from her injury, she hauled herself onto her feet, and flipped the camera open with shaking hands. The LCD preview screen pulsed to life, showing the empty trail behind them... and a red icon indicating only a few minutes of battery power remained. She had been filming almost constantly during their hike.

“Your phone,” she stammered. “Josh, your phone.”

Josh fumbled out his cell phone. “I got no signal,” he wailed. “We're still too deep in the

Everglades...”

“No, no, your camera,” shouted Susan. “Your phone has a camera, right? With a preview on the screen? Look through it. I saw that... that guy... in my video camera.”

“Come *on!*” shrieked the blonde girl, scrambling to her feet and kicking herself down the trail. “Run!” Her words dissolved into a wail of hysterical fear as she ran.

Josh used his free hand to grab Susan, who was alternating between running and skipping, due to her painful wound. “I don’t understand,” he panted as they ran. “What about the phone camera...?”

Susan's eyes were locked on the preview screen of her video camera. She focused on the effort of skipping and running, using the pain to hold terror at bay, trying to look everywhere at once with the camera – her periscope into the spirit world. Its field of view was so limited... it was like trying to run while peering through a tiny hole cut in a blindfold. The headache that had begun at the burial site was still burning between her temples, but she no longer believed it was caused by the heat. “You heard what she said. They do something to your head so you can't see them... but I don't think they can fool machines. You can see them through the camera. Come *on*, get your damn phone open!”

Her electronic eye glanced wildly around them, with the desperation of a feral animal. Trees, dirt, mud, and sky swirled through the preview screen. Everywhere the camera looked, it was safe to run. The rest of the warm, wet Florida afternoon was a maze of hypnotic darkness, hiding things that could sleep for centuries, and wake up *hungry*.

Josh flipped his Motorola phone open, thumbed through its on-screen menu until he found the camera option, looked into the trees to his right... and screamed.

Susan whirled, shouting his name, forgetting about the little video camera wrapped in her fingers.

Josh was standing on tiptoes, jerking and twitching in the grip of a violent seizure. His scream drowned in a spray of thick white foam that erupted from his lips. He went as limp as a small animal hit by a tranquilizer dart... but he didn't come down from his tiptoes.

Something was holding him up, something he had seen through the tiny screen of his camera phone.

Susan forgot about her own camera, flinging herself to Josh's side and wrapping her arms around him. She screamed and pleaded for the unseen presence to release him. She looked down and saw four small red circles blossom through rips in his filthy T-shirt. Her hands strayed down to his stomach, and touched thick, wriggling tentacles that stretched from his stomach to the heavy stomach of the thing holding him. The tentacles were rougher and warmer than snake skin, throbbing as they pumped some unholy venom into Josh. She understood why none of her other friends had gotten a chance to scream.

Her hands found clawed fingers gripping Josh's upper arms, and followed them back across thin arms with iron muscles, until she found the invisible attacker's chest. She pushed, her tears turning to a howl of rage, trying to get the thing away from her boyfriend. Her hands slipped across what felt like lumps of ivory, then encountered empty space.

The invisible creature kept its huge mouth in the center of its chest. The manlike shadow she had glimpsed in her camera screen was a lie. It wasn't even *remotely* human.

The circle of huge teeth in its chest contracted, and two of her fingers disappeared below the first knuckle. Susan fell back into the mud, dropping her camera to cradle her mutilated hand, numb with shock.

Josh was pulled through the trees, flopping like a rag doll. The leaves closed behind him, and left nothing except the prints from his sneakers... and his phone.

Mad with grief and fear, Susan still had the presence of mind to remember the red battery indicator on her video camera. She scooped up Josh's phone, bit her lip to make herself stop crying, and limped down the path. She clenched her wounded hand into a fist and pressed it against her chest, sending a trickle of hot blood down the inside of her shirt. She stopped trying to look to the sides. As

long as nothing stepped into her path, she intended to keep moving forward, until her lungs caught fire.

A couple of minutes later, she came across a circle of bloody teeth in the middle of the trail, carefully arranged in the manner of a religious ceremony... or the signature of a hunter, marking the site of a kill. She remembered the pattern of yellow triangles in the ancient weave from the burial site. She stopped wondering what had happened to the blonde girl.

The trees in front of her gave way to long grass, open air, and fading sunlight. She emerged from the wetlands, on the edge of an empty road. There was no sign of the parking area where she and her friends had left their cars... but there *was* a sad little building made of moldy wood, rusted metal, and buzzing neon, where soda, snacks, cigarettes, and ice cold beer were sold. Susan ran across the hot asphalt of the road, listening to the words from the convenience-store sign echo through her broken mind with each slap of her sneakers:

*Soda.*

*Snacks*

*Cigarettes.*

*Ice Cold Beer.*

She flew threw the empty parking lot and slammed into the glass door of the convenience store. The door was locked. Her eyes flicked from the burning interior lights, to the hand-lettered cardboard sign tucked on the other side of the door: *Back in ten minutes.*

"*No!*" she screamed. She dropped the cell phone, to use her only good hand to slap on the glass. "Please! Please, help me! God, let me *in!*"

A door opened in the back of the little convenience store. A fat man wearing a Miami Dolphins T-shirt waddled out, tucking in the slack on his belt after a bathroom break. He looked at her with obvious irritation.

"Open the *door!*" Susan howled. She finally deployed her injured hand against the glass, smearing it with blood. The fat man immediately moved to the counter, near his cash register, and reached for something.... then he stopped, his skin turning as white as milk, mouth flopping open.

He was looking at a video screen next to the cash register.

Susan realized what the screen had to be, and looked up.

There was a video camera mounted above the door, providing a wide-angle view of the parking lot.

She looked down in time to see the shopkeeper bring his shotgun around, wailing in terror as he took aim at her... and the terrible thing standing behind her, invisible to the naked eye.

\* \* \*

The police never quite figured out what happened at the convenience store, in the fading moments of that steamy afternoon. The damage from the shotgun blast forced them to identify Susan from the contents of her pockets. A second shell had been fired into a shelf of canned goods, splattering the wall with soup, Dinty Moore beef stew, and peanut butter. The shotgun was found lying on the cracked linoleum beside the cash register.

They had to identify the shopkeeper with dental records, which was not difficult. They never found any trace of his body, but his teeth were arranged in a perfect circle on the counter beside the cash register, in the space once occupied by a shattered video surveillance screen.