

Author's Note: "Hob Carter" is a creative re-imagining of the Spanish language story "El Otro Laberinto" by Adolfo Bioy Casares.

Hob Carter

by Bryan Hulse

Hob Carter had one gift, one weakness, one obsession and one love. Ever since he had been little, Hob found that he could "move" things just by thinking about them. He'd see something, concentrate intently, and in an instant it would disappear into thin air and then reappear across the room. Small objects proved to be no problem for him, but the bigger the thing, the more effort it took. He once tried to materialize a four-course dinner onto the dining room table, but he only managed to move a plate of sweet potatoes and half a turkey into the room before he sent himself into unconsciousness.

This last bit of effort landed him a stay in Savannah Georgia's New Candler Hospital (the old one being vacant since the late 1800's). Hob came to the next morning, but he remained feeble. The doctors told his family that in the stress, his heart had been weakened, perhaps permanently. Any undue effort, they warned, could cause it to fail and Hob to die. He was fourteen.

Years passed and Hob grew into a healthy, if fragile, young man. He graduated at the head of his class and enrolled at the University of Georgia in the fall of 1926. It was there that he found his calling in the study of all things history. He plunged himself body and soul into the mysteries of the past, devouring books and accounts of historical events with an insatiable appetite for knowledge. In fact, I owe our friendship to Hob's obsession with the historic. We were at school at the same time, and though Hob was one year my junior, he always had this aura of knowledge about him that made him seem several years older. In addition to my studies, I earned a modest keep as a desk clerk in the University of Georgia's Peabody Library. At nightfall, my duty required that I make a round of the shelves and usher out any stragglers before I locked the doors for the evening. One night in mid-October, I did my rounds as usual and came upon Hob surrounded by a monstrous stack of tomes, reading so intently that I thought the words themselves might explode into flames from being read so forcefully. I told him that the library had to close and that he could come back tomorrow to finish any business he might have.

"Half an hour more, that's all I need. Please," he begged me.

"I'm sorry," I told him, "but those are the rules. Now go ahead and put those in the corner there and I'll let you get back to them in the morning."

With a sigh he lifted his glasses, rubbed his eyes, and began setting his books in meticulous stack upon the table. As he worked, I scanned the titles of his research. It was a menagerie of subjects that seemed to have nothing in common: thick, dense physics tomes, religious extracts and hagiographies, histories of the south and the colonies, philosophical treatises on time and space, and a whole host of other things I couldn't even guess at.

"What exactly are you studying in here?" I asked him.

"It's a bit of personal reading," he said bashfully, "my own little individual research"

I raised an eyebrow incredulously. No one reads Einstein's *Fundamental Ideas and Problems of the Theory of Relativity* just to pass the time.

When I didn't reply, he tentatively kept explaining. "It all started right...here!" and he rushed

over to pull a book out of the middle of his now teetering stack to show me. I quickly put my hand on his shoulder and he stopped just as the whole thing came crashing down to the floor around him in a flutter of heavy pages.

"Why don't we just pick this up, go get a drink and you can tell me all about it. Library's closed for now."

I led Hob out into the night and down the road to a bar. I ordered us two beers, set one in front of him and demanded, "Ok, so now what's got you so interested?" From his twisting, interconnected effusion of facts and speculations I gathered this:

On the night of January 2nd, 1768 an unknown man had been found dead in Savannah's Forsyth Park. He bore no wound and no one could find any apparent cause of death, but dead he was just the same. What's more, he was dressed in strange, foreign clothes and carried no identification, money, or any other objects on his person save for a leaf of unbound papers. These one-sided pages, stranger still, contained writing in some undecipherable tongue. Hob came across the account while researching the founding of Savannah and the colony of Georgia. Though he found several references to the incident, every observer had their own explanation to the mystery, each as unique and creative as the last. Some say he was a sailor who drank himself to death. Others say he angered a witch who transformed him so that no one would recognize him. Still another claimed he was an angel cast out of heaven and that the writings were a warning from God to sinners down on earth. As to the identity of the man or the documents he carried, he said, there was nothing.

Yet the obsession had taken hold and Hob could no more let go of it than it could let go of him. He had been up late that night, and many nights before, so I learned, trying to solve the mystery of how that man came to be dead, as if out of no where, in the middle of a park in colonial Georgia. He had started looking everywhere, exploring both the old theories and a few of his own, but he always came up with nothing.

"If only I could find those papers!" he said in frustration, slamming his fist down and spilling the rest of his beer on the table. "I'm sure I'd have the answer then!" I ordered two more beers and we continued to talk for the rest of the night. We've been friends ever since.

Hob and I graduated from college in the spring of 1931 and he moved back to Savannah, still bent on finding his mysterious man, having met with no more luck since the day I met him. We were apart for a year or so, but the Great Depression hit my family hard and it came to pass that Hob offered me a job with his father who edited the Savannah Morning News. So it came that in June of 1932 my sister Elizabeth and I left home and came to Savannah, putting ourselves up in an old apartment near Thomas Square. Elizabeth was younger than myself by three years, and would've gone to college herself had the depression not wiped out all of our family's savings. She was a beautiful girl; thin and easy moving with the strong and slightly exotic facial features of our Serbian grandparents. Behind that face, though, she possessed a strong mind and an even sharper tongue. It's not hard to see why Hob fell madly in love with her as soon as he saw her. It is a brother's duty to protect his sister's virtue, but when Hob showed up in his suit that first night to call on Elizabeth, I can't say I really minded.

If Hob's new-found love had brought him a greater happiness, it had in no way altered his obsession with the mysterious man in Forsyth Park. Ever since I had come to the Savannah, the Morning News had been in decline. People just couldn't afford it any more. As the paper went downhill, Hob threw himself even deeper into the mystery. He shut himself up late at night in the paper archives going through edition after edition. Then, when he woke up in the morning with his head still on his desk, he would head over to the public records and scour their archives as well. Despite all the searching and sleep he didn't get, Hob never found that crucial evidence: those elusive one-sided and undecipherable pages.

So hard did he search that soon he began to lose touch with reality. He still came to work and wrote mechanically, but his father had ceased printing any of his articles in the paper itself long ago. He drew into himself emotionally and physically, becoming thin and skeletal as he forgot to eat, sometimes for days on end. Only Elizabeth seemed to be able to distract him from his search. When she was around he almost seemed to be his normal self again. When she was gone, however, the eyes glazed over and Hob found his way back to Forsyth Park on that night in 1768.

Eventually it became too much for me. I couldn't bear to watch him slowly kill himself with obsession so I resolved to fulfill it. I brought out my mother's old schoolbook, a primer written for schoolchildren in Serbia. Painstakingly I copied the odd letters from the book onto a piece of thick paper browned with tea. When I finished I let the paper dry in the sun of the windowsill to fade the ink.

The next day I called Hob over to me while we were at work, writing out the articles for the next day's edition. I didn't say a word but led him into his father's office and closed the door behind us.

"I've found them, Hob!" I said in a voice like a whisper. "I've found them! The papers! They're here!" I held out the loose, brown pages in front of me.

"How...how..." he stammered, unsure whether he could really believe his eyes.

I had come prepared with a story about a gentleman I had met who kept all kinds of documents from before the civil war hidden away in his cellar, thinking to hide them until the South rose to free itself again. None of it was actually true, but it rang true enough to convince Hob.

"Milo this is amazing!" He yelled, grabbing the papers and pressing me into a bony hug. He released me and stared in awe at the paper in his hand. "I can't believe it. After all these years, all that looking. I've finally found the key!" He hugged me again, but found himself unable to tear his gaze away from the paper in my hand.

"Milo, I need to tell you something, too", he continued, trying nervously to meet my eyes. "I'm going to ask Elizabeth to marry me. I thought I should let you know before I did it. I'm ready to ask her, all I need to do is get my hands on a ring."

I moved towards him slowly and shook his hand with two of my own. "Hob I'm thrilled, truly, really thrilled. And Elizabeth will be, too. But she doesn't need any ring to marry you. Lord knows you can't afford it right now."

"I'm getting her a ring. Every girl should have a ring to get married with." His mind was set and I knew that nothing I did or said could change it now.

Hob made photocopies of the papers I gave him and insisted I give the originals back to the gentleman I got them from. I said I would, and hid them deep in the bottom of my wardrobe where no one would find them. He carried his copies with him everywhere in his coat pocket and developed a habit of pulling them out whenever he had a spare moment, trying to puzzle out the translation of a word or two.

If I had known then how he planned to pay for the ring, I never would've let him do it. By the time I found out, however, it was too late. One Saturday morning, a month after his announcement and the "discovery" of the manuscript, Hob burst through the door of my apartment, white-faced, wheezing, and wearing nothing more than his night clothes and overcoat. Elizabeth leapt out of her chair to catch him as he fell exhausted into her arms. "They're after me," he gasped, trying to catch his breath. "I'm in danger...You're in danger...We're all in danger now."

"Hob Carter stop it you're scaring me!" demanded Elizabeth in a high-pitched squeak.

"Tell us now," I said as calmly as I could, "Just exactly how are we in danger?"

Then the story came out. Hob needed a ring so that he could propose to Elizabeth, but couldn't come up with the money. In desperation, he became involved with a group of liquor smugglers who paid him to draw up fake business permits and land titles. It was easy work, and

they paid him well enough. He nearly had enough to buy just the ring he wanted, but everything fell apart when the police busted a warehouse certified by one of his fake permits. Now the smugglers were after him, accusing him of selling them out.

"I didn't know where else to go!" He cried as he collapsed to the floor. "They came to my house. Woke me up with their pounding and shouting. I only just escaped. Oh god! What do I do?"

"Oh Hob," said Elizabeth, cradling his head in her arms and hugging him close. "You stupid, lovely fool!" Just then, however, the sound of many feet filled the hallway followed by the crack of wood as the door of the first apartment flew inward.

"He's not in this one!" shouted a rough voice and the feet shuffled to the next door. Elizabeth's face went white and for once she seemed lost for words. Hob reached up and held her face in his hand.

"You have to go now," he said. "Both of you. It's only me they want." Elizabeth didn't move, but just sat there rocking back and forth with her arms around Hob's shoulders. I grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her forcibly away, towards the window and the fire escape at the back of the apartment.

"GO!" shouted Hob and I shoved Elizabeth out the window and down the metal ladder. The feet had reached our door by this point and were about to break it in. Hob took one look at the door and screwed up his face in an enormous effort. A moment before the bolt gave way, Hob Carter simply vanished and the would-be lynch mob found themselves in an empty room.

I later realized that Hob did the only thing he could think of. In his desperation, he "moved" himself. Not only across space, but across time as well, straight to the first place that came to his mind: Forsyth Park, January 2nd, 1768. He made it, of that I'm sure. But the effort proved to be too much for his fragile heart to handle. He was dead the moment he arrived.