

A mystery grows at Chimney Bluffs

Chapter 3: “Department of academic ghosts”

by Jonathan Everitt

Illustration by Steve Smock

Shuffling across the quad, Professor of Botany Irving Seger looked up at the vast curtain of gunmetal clouds pushing their way across the Upstate New York sky. Halloween had blown away the blazing trees and brilliant blue, and now the air was filled with lost ghosts.

He paused, adjusted the worn leather satchel on his shoulder, pulled his cap tighter, and zipped his wool jacket. His gray beard twitched.

Irving reached the Biology department as dusk fell. Streetlamps illuminated the brick walk that led to the old granite building. He turned his key in the front lock and walked in. Passed by the faculty mailboxes in the small lobby and stepped into the main hall. Breathed deep the century’s worth of floor wax, coffee pots, disinfectant, and chalk dust.

He’d miss those old friends in the new facility rising across campus. But there was no time to mourn. Upstairs, a roomful of forgotten artifacts had to be sorted and packed this weekend. Moving day was near.

He climbed the stairs to the third floor, where a storage room sat undisturbed. The unofficial Department of Academic Ghosts, Irving called it. A landing spot for everything nobody wanted, yet shouldn’t be thrown away. The door to the old room still bore some crackled gold lettering on its window:

“*Profess_r Mori_rty, Bot_nical Studies.*”

Once inside, Irving turned on a desk lamp that cast broad shadows across the space. He reached into his satchel for his reading glasses and sterling silver flask. Cognac. He sipped, then studied the room.

There were shelves strewn with abandoned things. Papers and jars. Framed photos. Pressed flowers. An old clock above a book case had stopped years ago at 3:35. The minute hand pointed perfectly to the bottom drawer of a file cabinet, open and overstuffed. And with no other rational starting place, Irving shrugged to himself and knelt by the beckoning drawer.

He pulled a folder from the cabinet, settled into the creaking Windsor chair, and gave the papers his professorial sniff. His eyes widened as they fell across a title: “The Narcissus Enigma explained.”

He’d only heard legends. But the nautical map and the dates suggested there was truth to the long-dismissed rumor of the Chimney Bluffs.

Footsteps in the hall caught him mid-thought. The door cracked open. A young woman’s voice whispered from outside.

“Professor, you’re too late.”

Unstartled, Irving tilted his flask toward his mouth once again, letting the spice of it warm him.

This would be no ordinary Winter Break.

To be continued

