

PROJECT INFERNO

BRIAN WEIMER

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Project Inferno

The group of men waited in eager expectation, standing around the hi-tech control room and watching a large monitor on the wall. The quiet excitement continued to build as a breakdown of real-time data filtered in; the numbers climbing with each passing moment. A combination of virtual schematics and graphs revealed the current situation.

Sitting closest to the monitor, engineer Byron James bit his bottom lip. He unconsciously tapped the fingers from one hand against the keyboard. The forty-two-year-old second in command of the Project waited nervously as they approached the threshold.

The expensive drilling operation, based in an isolated part of Alaska, had been in operation for years. Drilling deep into the Earth through miles of dirt and rock proved to be a slow, frustrating process.

Following multiple delays, the project was now on the verge of setting a new record.

The numbers on the monitor climbed higher, confirming the current depth of the hole far below them. The men maintained their fixation, staring at the numbers like the scoreboard at an important sporting event.

A crew of two dozen other men, employed to operate the drilling machinery and the more physical demands of the project, worked in another building.

While the men gazed up at the monitor, Byron checked the dual computer screens before him. He took a deep breath and made certain the scorching temperatures below weren't compromising the integrity of the large drill as it ventured deeper.

The men counted down until the numbers confirmed the new record depth of eight miles. The men broke out in united applause, congratulating one another as they celebrated the achievement.

"At last, we've exceeded the Kola Superdeep Borehole!" project leader Charles Sullivan enthusiastically announced, displaying a rare smile. "We've gone deeper beneath the Earth than anyone before us."

The other men shook hands and happily congratulated one another. Byron stood up from his station, joining the others.

"The Earth isn't the limit," production manager Thomas Rainy offered with a chuckle. "We beat everyone to the moon, and now we're beating them again."

"We're making history," Sullivan said, turning to his subordinate.

“It's amazing isn't it?” Byron asked, reciprocating his supervisors' obvious excitement. After working on the project for close to a year, following the resignation of his predecessor, he was riding high. The excitement of the new milestone allowed him to forget about the stress of the job, at least for a short time.

“Now, on to the next landmark,” Sullivan added as the excitement died down, readjusting his glasses. “How does everything look, Byron?”

Byron returned to his seat while some of the others departed the room. He checked the current operational readings of the project components both above and below ground.

“The numbers are solid and holding steady,” Byron told his supervisor. “Everything's functioning perfectly, with no damage to the drill.”

“Good. Keep an eye on that differential, will you?”

“Right.”

“We don't have time for another damn delay,” Sullivan grumbled, back to his usual foul disposition. “And don't get lazy just because of our accomplishment. We still have a lot of work to do.”

“Yep,” Byron responded just before Sullivan exited. The door closed behind him.

“Yeah, don't get lazy, Mr. James,” Richardson, a skinny coworker sitting nearby, mimicked in an exaggerated tone. “We still have a lot of work to do.”

Byron chuckled.

“What an ass,” Richardson added. “How did he ever get the job?”

“I don't know, but you might want to keep it down,” Byron suggested. “He has eyes and ears all around this place.”

“I'm not worried about it. My contract ends in a couple weeks, remember?”

“That's right. So, what's next for you?”

“Back to Montana with the wife and kids. I plan to take some time relaxing before starting the next job, God knows where.”

“I'm jealous.”

Richardson keyed a command into his computer, focusing on a virtual display of the drill beneath the earth. He leaned back and studied it.

“Makes you wonder what's down there, doesn't it?”

“We already know,” Byron replied.

“The mantle, the crust, the core; just like the diagram we were all taught in school.”

“Precisely. But if we're wrong, they may be teaching something different in the history books of the future.”

“Uh huh, and maybe we'll discover a land of dinosaurs, like in Journey to the Center of the Earth,” Richardson jokingly suggested.

Byron chuckled. “What do you really think is down there?”

“I don't know,” Richardson shrugged. “But it's hot at blazes, whatever it is.”

Pressing on, the men continued with their work.

In the weeks following the record

achievement, the project team continued to drill deeper into the earth; still on a high following the recent success. Word of the milestone reached international press, causing an influx in phone calls and emails, requesting interviews. More eyes and ears were on the project than ever, serving to motivate the men even more.

Byron also knew it was not very often people had the opportunity to be a part of something record-breaking and historically significant

Happy to work longer hours, Byron felt content. His job was his life and had become his identity. This fact had been true when he was married and remained true still. Having virtually no hobbies outside his work, he lived for the task at hand. The little bit of free time he had at night was spent watching television before dozing off to asleep. The lack of leisure time did not bother him in the slightest.

Byron crawled into bed one night, turned off the light, and went to sleep.

Darkness. Fear. Despair.

Opening his eyes in a cold sweat, Byron sat up in bed. The nightmare had been vivid, but the details of it faded like a morning mist.

Strange.

Byron laid back down and rolled over, desperately trying to forget the bad dream. Eventually, he returned to sleep until his alarm went off at 6 AM.

Following his third cup of coffee,

accompanied by the morning meeting with Sullivan and the drill supervisor, Byron felt sluggish. He ran the first diagnostic of the day on the project components, all of which appeared to be functioning at top levels, as usual.

“Everything going alright?” Richardson asked.

“I guess so,” Byron replied. “Just a little tired this morning. You?”

“The same, but I’m making it.”

The men continued working, saying little else to one another as the day progressed.

Struggling to remain alert, Byron consumed more caffeine, silently promising himself it would not become a habit.

He spent much of the day running more engineering diagnostics and performing multiple checks on various parts of the project. An hour before shutting down for the day, he was alerted to something unusual on one of the virtual readouts. He leaned in, studying the figures on the screen, which displayed an unusually high temperature.

“Interesting,” Byron said to himself.

Richardson looked over. “What is it?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

Byron continued to analyze the data. The temperature readings rose, triggering an alarm. Byron quickly activated the communicator, projecting his voice into the drilling area. “Stop the drill. I repeat, still the drill.”

Less than a minute later, Sullivan stormed into the control room. “Byron!”

“Yes sir,” he responded, rapidly working to

decode the problem. "Give me just a minute."

"We don't have a minute. What happened?"

"From the looks of it, the drill tapped into a deep cavern or possibly even a magma chamber,"

Byron explained.

"How do you know that?"

"Because the temperatures have spiked exponentially. According to sensors, it's over three hundred degrees and rising down there."

Sullivan leaned over and studied the data on the screen. "I'll be damned."

Byron turned to look. "We could damage the drill if we continue. Temperatures further down could melt the steel."

Scratching his head, Sullivan did not respond. Both Byron and Richardson quietly looked back at the monitors as the project leader and the drill supervisor decided what course of action to take.

"We're shutting it down," Sullivan announced, before unhappily leaving the room.

Byron and Richardson exchanged quiet glances, but had no choice but to go along with the orders.

The following day, drilling commenced, despite Byron's warning. Activated again, computer data confirmed the drill performing at optimal levels.

Byron ran another project diagnostic. Before he printed off the information for Sullivan, an alarm sounded. Byron and Richardson immediately checked their screens, confirming one of the pressure pumps above ground had malfunctioned.

A man's scream rang out from the other building.

“Oh no,” Byron whispered.

The men exited the room and ran over, along with several others. They entered and saw one of the men lying on the floor injured and in pain. Byron and Richardson raced over, kneeling down beside the man. The injured worker cradled a mangled arm, a trail of blood led from him to a nearby collection of pumps.

The gruesome sight made Byron weak in the knees. His stomach churned, nearly causing him to vomit.

The men worked to stop the bleeding as the unfortunate victim lost consciousness. Byron quickly called for medical help.

“What the hell happened?” Sullivan asked from an upper platform, the last to arrive.

“His arm got caught in one of the cylinders,” a worker said.

“What do you mean '*caught*'?”

“I don't know, sir. Somehow it got caught.”

“Damn it, this is all we need!” Sullivan responded. Shaking his head, he exited the building, cussing up a storm.

Within minutes, a medical helicopter landed. Emergency workers transported the injured worker to the closest hospital, nearly 60 miles away. Later in the day, he was reported to be in stable condition, but everyone knew he would not be returning to the -project or any other one. His work days were over.

“All the years this place has been in operation and there's never been an accident like

that,” Richardson later told Byron.

“Yeah. I guess it was inevitable.”

That night, Byron struggled to fall asleep, despite being tired. Replaying the days’ events in his head, something other than the accident leaving him unsettled. Something deep down that he could not determine.

Sometime after midnight, Byron fell asleep.

Darkness. Fear. Despair.

He abruptly awoke less than two hours later. Wide awake, Byron could not shake the intense dread produced by the repeated nightmare. He lay awake in bed, unable to recall the exact details before returning to sleep.

Due to the accident and the temporary setback, drilling was put on hold for several days. In the meantime, Byron was told by Sullivan to concentrate on analyzing the data recorded from the drill and to continue running component diagnostics.

Struggling to focus through his mental exhaustion, Byron turned to Richardson, who had been unusually quiet all day.

“Are you as tired as I am?” he asked.

“Uh huh,” Richardson mumbled, staring at his monitor.

“How much longer until you go home?”

“A few more days.”

“I know you’re happy.”

“Sure.” Richardson shrugged with apathy. “I can hardly wait.”

“Don’t overflow with excitement over

there,” Byron joked.

“Sorry, I had a bad dream last night, but I can't remember what it was.”

Byron turned, staring at him. “A bad dream?”

“Uh huh,” Richardson replied. “Something relating to work, I think.”

“I've been having them, too.”

“What's yours about?”

“I can't seem to remember, either,” Byron confessed. “But I'm certain it involved whatever's down there below us, underground.”

“Just between us, I have a bad feeling about the future of the project,” Richardson whispered.

“Yeah, me too.”

The men returned to the tasks at hand, choosing not to speak again about the nightmares.

Following the conclusion of Richardson's tenure on the project, Byron continued his daily duties of running diagnostics. During his frequent downtime, he watched online videos. Over the next week, as everyone waited for the drilling to commence, the atmosphere around the site seemed to alter. Morale plummeted and a tangible despondency settled over the workers like a blanket. Sullivan grew even more petulant than normal and the other workers appeared to be merely going through the motions of their jobs, just like Byron.

He wondered why everyone was in a bad mood, when just a week earlier, everything seemed much more hopeful. It did not help that Richardson was gone. Their conversations had helped pass the time. The workers all seemed to be experiencing the

same thing, but nobody wanted to talk about it. Nobody seemed to be talking much about anything at all.

The following week, things grew worse. Drilling ground to a halt and workers began calling in sick. Having little to do, Byron spent much of his shift analyzing recordings from the project. The work was monotonous, but necessary. He advanced to the last auditory recording made before drilling was stopped. Instead of listening to indications of underground plate tectonics, Byron heard an unusual series of cluttered noises.

“What on Earth??”

Replaying it, the jumbled noises sounded like a chaotic waterfall, difficult to interpret. Byron ran the audio through a filter and cleaned it up before listening again. Putting on a pair of headphones, he pressed the play button. The hair on the back of his neck stood erect as he listened to the chilling recording. The sound was unmistakable.

Screams.

Human screams. Not dozens, hundreds, or thousands. It sounded like millions.

Byron’s pulse quickened and a sense of dread rose up within him. He stopped the frightening recording after several seconds, removed the headphones and stood up. Alone in the room, he backed away from his desk, reminded of the recent nightmares.

Taking deep breaths, he attempted to convince himself the sounds were not screams.

“No,” Byron whispered. “It has to be something else.”

His fear grew and he began to tremble. After stepping outside for fresh air, Byron requested Sullivan's presence.

Half an hour later, the Supervisor entered the room, unpleasant as usual. "What is it, Byron? I don't have time."

"There's something you need to hear; a recording from the drill."

Sullivan crossed his arms, waiting. "What kind of recording? What is it?"

"Just listen," Byron said. He hit the play button and projected the audio through the speakers.

A multitude of amplified human screams filled the room like a movie soundtrack. Sullivan listened to the short recording before it stopped, then looked up at Byron with a look of confusion.

"What the hell was that?" Sullivan asked.

"I don't know, it's what the drill recorded."

Sullivan scratched his head. "Is this some kind of practical joke?"

Byron shook his head. "No, not at all."

"Then what is it?"

"Noises from down below."

"Nonsense."

"You heard it, Charles."

"I heard a bunch of garbled noises that could've been anything," Sullivan argued, waving one arm.

Byron took several steps towards him. "No, those are voices. Human screams."

"That's ridiculous!"

"There's no way they can be anything else."

Sullivan pointed to Byron's computer. "I

want that destroyed.”

“Sir?”

“Get rid of it.”

“But ... it's part of the project.”

“I want you to erase it and tell no one else about this,” Sullivan ordered.

“But...”

“Let me make this very clear, Byron. You agreed to this job. You signed a contract,” the Supervisor firmly reminded him. “If you want to continue working for this company, you'll do exactly as I tell you and erase that audio. This conversation never took place. Do you understand?”

Byron did not respond, quietly watching Sullivan leave the room. He began to delete the recording, but something within him resisted. Conflicted over the disturbing sounds, he left it.

Following the end of his shift, Byron went to the only bar he could find, half an hour from his apartment. Taking a seat, he ordered a beer. The bartender, a middle-aged woman wearing a low-cut shirt, opened the bottle and sat it before him.

“I haven't seen you in here before, honey,” she said. “Are you new in town or just passing through?”

“What?” Byron asked, barely listening.

“Are you visiting, or do you live here?”

“Oh, I'm here for work for several months.”

“Where?”

“The drilling project.”

“Yeah, I know all about that,” she said with a smile, leaning over and giving Byron an ample view of her cleavage. “Hell, the whole town knew

about it from day one.”

Byron nodded, then took another drink.

“How far have you guys drilled down?”

“Too far,” he responded, not wanting to discuss it.

The bartender laughed. “Is that right?”

Byron took another gulp, emptying the bottle before ordering another.

“I heard there was some sort of accident a week or two ago. One of the workers got hurt,” she said.

“That's right.”

“What happened?”

“Uh, look, I really can't discuss the details. Confidentiality and all that,” Byron replied, running a hand through his hair. “You know?”

“If you say so,” the bartender said before leaving him alone to serve another patron.

Following the drink, Byron got up, left the bar, and returned to his apartment. Once there, he stumbled over to his sofa and passed out.

Darkness. Fear. Despair. Screams.

Waking up from the nightmare, Byron sat up on the sofa in a cold sweat. Feeling sick in the pit of his stomach, he went into the bathroom and threw up. Having little energy left, he collapsed beside the toilet. Lying on his back, Byron's head spun, replaying fragments of conversations and events from work.

The drilling, the accident, the men, the recording, the screams.

The damned screams of agony that refused to cease, played over and over in his mind. Byron wished he could somehow unhear the sounds.

“No. No, please stop. Stop,” he quietly pleaded. “Help me, God.”

No matter how hard he tried not to think about it, the screams refused to be silenced. Instead, they continued to rise up within his soul as if from the depths of earth itself; from the worst place he could imagine.

Byron lay on the floor for what felt like an hour, until he felt well enough to get up.

Remembering he had a Bible among a collection of books in a closet, Byron sifted through the box and found it. Opening it, he quickly flipped through the thin pages. He felt guilty for never studying the Holy book, and rarely if ever attending church.

Byron sifted through the scriptures; his eyes drawn to certain passages as he flipped the pages.

Matthew 25:46

“...and these will go away into eternal punishment....”

Mark 9:48

“...where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.”

Rev. 21:8

“... the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, the murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolators, and all liars, their portion will

be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur....”

Byron closed the Bible. He tried not to think of the scriptures he had just read, wanting to believe the words were merely fairy tales from long ago. Regardless, he kept the Holy book close to him. Hoping it might help, Byron took the book to work the next day, and every day that followed.

Struggling to perform his job, he witnessed the atmosphere at the drilling site grow even more depressing and void of enjoyment. Several more accidents occurred; One worker fell and broke a leg. Another became deathly sick from pneumonia, and at least two more workers quit the project unexpectedly.

Alone in the room at his station, Byron leaned forward and rubbed his eyes. Exhausted, he wanted more than anything to go to sleep and not wake up for a month. While his eyes were closed, Sullivan entered. The door slammed behind him.

“Wake up, Byron!” The man yelled, louder and more petulant than usual.

Byron jumped. He opened his eyes, and saw his supervisor.

“What's going on in here?” Sullivan asked, scanning the room as if expecting to see other people.

“Not a whole lot, sir. I’m just not feeling that great.”

“No? Well, there seems to be a lot of that going on around this damn place, but we still have work to do.”

Byron gave a nod of agreement.

“I'm going to be on a conference call for the next two hours, so if you need anything, ask Wyatt.”

“What's the status on the project?”

“Same as before,” Sullivan responded. “If anything changes, I'll tell you. But for right now, keep running diagnostics.”

“That's what I've been doing,” Byron told him, leaning back in his chair. “That's *all* I've been doing.”

“Keep it up, but don't slip into auto pilot. We have enough to worry about without more damn delays.”

Sullivan started to leave, but before he reached the door, Byron turned. “There's something wrong with this project.”

“What's that?” Sullivan asked, one hand on the door.

“I think something very wrong is happening here.”

The Supervisor turned around. “What are you talking about?”

“All of the accidents, everything that's happened over the last few weeks. It can't be just coincidence.”

“Nonsense, carelessness is to blame for the accidents. Human error and nothing more. We got lazy after the milestone. It's that simple.”

“I have a very bad feeling about all of this,” Byron confessed before standing up. “It all started when we drilled into that chamber or whatever it is.”

“Just a temporary setback. We'll be back on schedule soon enough.”

Byron pressed a button and the audio of the

screams played loudly. Sullivan froze.

“Turn that off right now!” He ordered.

“Why? So you can pretend it doesn't exist?”
Byron asked.

“Turn it off!” Sullivan ordered, pointing to the computer.

“Listen to it,” Byron countered. “You know what that is, just like I do.”

Sullivan walked over and attempted to stop the recording but was unable to find the right button. He pressed several buttons, but the disturbing sounds continued. “Damn it!”

Byron reached over and stopped it.

“I told you to delete that audio,” Sullivan reminded him. “What haven't you?”

“Because we can't ignore it.”

“Don't test me, Byron,” Sullivan threatened, holding up one finger.

“You know as well as I do what those screams are and what it means.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Bull! You know exactly what it means.”

“You're imagining things,” Sullivan said.

Byron picked up his Bible and held it in front of the Supervisor. “We tapped into Hell.”

Sullivan looked away. “That's ridiculous.”

“It's not a legend or a myth, like most people want to believe, but a real place and it's right beneath us. There's no more denying it.”

“No,” Sullivan refuted. “There's no such place.”

“You not believing in it doesn't change the temperature down there by one degree.”

“Hell is a fairy tale, Byron, just like heaven. Just like God and the devil. They don't exist. Only religious fanatics believe that crap.”

“It's real,” Byron countered. “All of it.”

“You're out of your mind!”

“Maybe we all are. And maybe we're all headed straight to that place of torment you don't want to believe in. How many souls do you think are down there?”

“Shut up!” Sullivan screamed and shoved Byron back. He grabbed the bible and threw it across the room.

Byron recovered his balance and shoved his supervisor twice as hard, sending him to the floor.

Sullivan got up, recovered his composure and tucked his shirt back into his pants. “If you tell anyone about this, Byron, you're going to regret it.”

“I have a feeling we all will.”

Sullivan stomped out of the room.

Byron picked up the bible and took his usual seat, slouching down. Looking to the monitor before him, he blankly stared at the screen. His eyes grew heavy until they closed.

Darkness. Fear. Despair. Screams.

A loud siren wailed, awakening Byron out of a sound slumber. Disoriented, he looked to the monitor before him. He instantly remembered where he was and what he was doing. A red light blinked on the screen, alerting him to a serious drill shaft malfunction.

Quickly alert, Byron took notice of the time

and realized two hours had passed. It was now after 6 PM. He cursed and pushed the chair back.

Grabbing the Bible and getting to his feet, he exited the room. Outside, an emergency light flashed, but none of the other men could be seen anywhere.

Byron ran to the other building, looking for someone. Anyone. Entering through the main door, he made his way to the project area. Descending several steps to the lower level, Byron saw a few men lying motionless, scattered around the platform. The cover of the drill shaft had been ripped open and the solid steel of its center torn asunder.

His heart raced. Byron slowly walked to the men and realized they were dead. Their bodies twisted in unnatural ways. Byron zeroed in on one of them whose head had been turned all the way around. The dead man's eyes bulged out of their sockets; his skin pale had turned gray as if he had been dead for days.

What on Earth?

Byron vomited onto the concrete floor until nothing remained in his stomach. Recovering, he heard a whimpering noise from behind him. Byron turned to see Sullivan cowering in the corner, trembling.

“Charles?” Byron said, recognizing fear in the man's wide eyes. “What is it? What happened?”

Byron started towards his supervisor, but stopped, noticing the man staring past him.

Sullivan raised an arm, pointing at something across the room. His mouth moved, but nothing came out.

Byron turned to see a large, dark, winged

creature in the far corner, clinging to the ceiling. Larger than a man, it looked like a cross between a bat and something from a nightmare.

Hardly able to believe his eyes, Byron studied the hideous creature for several moments. His pulse quickened. Byron slowly held up the bible. Clutching it as if his life depended on it, he backed away, inching towards the closest exit. Before he made it, the creature moved, flapping its wings.

Byron watched as the thing flew to Sullivan and savagely attacked. Sullivan let out a bloodcurdling scream.

The last thing Byron saw before exiting the building was Sullivan's body hurled through the air like a rag doll.

Running faster than he had since high school, Byron raced to the parking lot. Reaching his car, he opened the door, got inside, and locked it back. He cranked the engine and peeled out of the lot as quickly as possible.

Byron drove away from the drill site. His thoughts raced as he floored the gas, ignoring the icy road conditions. Speeding down the lonely road, he frequently glanced into his rear window. He saw the project site growing more distant until no longer visible.

Dialing 911, Byron listened to a brief ring before the call was answered.

“What's your emergency?” A man asked.

“My name is Byron James. I work for Inferno, the drilling project,” he explained.

“Something horrible happened. Everyone's dead. We went too deep and tapped into something bad.”

“Please slow down, Sir,” the man responded.
“Are you on any medication?”

“No, you don't understand!”

“Sir, I need you to remain calm, okay?”

“Look, I'm not on drugs and I'm not lying to you. You have to believe me. Some kind of thing killed several men at the site!”

“Where are you right now?”

“I'm on Route 11, heading away from the site,” Byron explained. He glanced in his rearview once again. Abruptly ending the phone conversation, he tossed the phone into the floorboard.

Arriving at his apartment, Byron quickly packed his belongings into his car and departed. Leaving Alaska, he silently vowed never to return.

As the hours, days, weeks, months and years passed, he would not be able to get far enough away. For Byron James, the screams would never cease.