

## Uncle Jack Eats a Mummy

By Alan Robbins

He's coming here at nine tonight," he whispered, even though there was no one in the store besides the two of us. "And I want *you* to be here with me."

"This is insane," I said for the twelfth time. "Aren't those gravesites guarded?"

"He bribed the guard."

"It's illegal. Doesn't that tell you something?"

"It tells me there's something there worth having."

Uncle Jack -- that was my nickname for him -- bit his lower lip the way he always did and swallowed another of his aspirins. He looked tired, but that wasn't unusual. He was only around fifty, but a lifetime of worry left him with the face and posture of an older man. A lifelong bachelor and hypochondriac, Uncle Jack was a monument to anxiety. He was skinny from fear of food poisoning, jittery from worry over household accidents, and an insomniac from dreams of his own funeral. While I tried to cheer him up with wisecracks or gossip, his conversation was peppered with reports of heart attacks or automobile collisions. He lived, as the Indians around here say, like a man seducing death.

"What's he got for you?" I said, breaking the uneasy silence.

"Something from the excavation at Tarahuasi."

He bent his head toward a cracked mirror and checked his tongue for spots.

"He dug this up himself?"

"And thinks it's worth a look. Relax, he knows what he's doing."

"I'm sure *he* knows," I snapped. "But do *you*?"

The "he" in question was a man named Ramon who had come into the store a few days before. He was an outsider, not from the city, and he was staying at a nearby hotel. He had slick hair and rubbery lips and struck me as a bogus tango dancer from a thirties movie. One of his eyes looked slightly to left field. I didn't like that either.

He had come to the store because Uncle Jack occasionally sold Indian artifacts among his other junk. Ramon identified himself as a dealer with a special item for sale. Dealer, mind you, is a broad term covering anything from a licensed antiquarian to an outright grave robber.

It wasn't unusual. In Lima, like many cities near the Incan ruins, everyone sooner or later comes across ancient artifacts. They are practically the official knickknack of the country. Gold earpins, flat-faced statues, lapis beads, that sort of thing. Most of the stuff is stolen anyway. But there was something about Ramon that made me especially uneasy. Nothing Uncle Jack would have picked up on, of course. He would have been too busy taking his pills to notice a con man in a convent.

"Why don't you forget it and come to the movies with me instead," I suggested.

I had moved down from New York to stay with him for a while and took it upon myself to try and upgrade his life.

"I hate movies. They remind me of death."

"What? How do movies remind you of death?"

"I watch them frame by frame, like life slipping away."

"This is hopeless. Look, we don't know a thing about this clown Ramon," I insisted. "Why does he have to come here at night?"

"What's the difference," he said, gargling with baking soda to kill germs. "He's got something to sell."

“Suppose he tries to rob you?”

“That’s why I want *you* to come. To protect me.”

That much, at least, was convincing. Uncle Jack did need protection. Not from outsiders but from his own gullibility. He was so busy guarding against calamity that there was nothing left over for ordinary caution. How many times had he been ripped off by someone selling fake artifacts, or stiffed by a creditor who never returned to pay? Or bought a bogus health cure from some sleazeball con artist? Naturally, I agreed to come back that night.

At nine o’clock on the dot, Ramon parked his car in front of the store and walked in. He was carrying a package under his arm. It was wrapped in brown paper and tied with a cord. He seemed a little dismayed to see me standing next to my uncle at the counter.

“This is my nephew from New York,” Uncle Jack said as the other man placed the package on the counter top. Ramon nodded. “Is this it?”

Ramon untied the cord and opened the paper as he answered. “It was found in a small burial mound due south of the central tomb. The Incas often buried them at the four corners of the main pyramid to protect it.”

“Then why didn’t the archaeologists find it?” I asked, turning to Uncle Jack. But he was already caught in the web of the adventure and was putting on his reading glasses for a closer inspection.

Inside the paper was a wooden box, not much larger than a shoebox. Ramon slowly pried the lid off and slid it aside. Inside there was more paper and within the paper there was an object. Like llamas at a watering hole, the three of us tilted into the center to have a good look.

It was apparently an eroded carcass of some kind, stiff and leathery, about the size of a deflated football. It looked like something that had been buried for too long, all rooty and bleak. You couldn’t make out anything familiar about it, except that it probably was not supper. And it didn’t smell like fun either. The word *dingus* came to mind, although I had no idea what it meant.

“Creeperino,” I said, bypassing my college education.

“You see?” Ramon said. “It’s a mummy.”

“Mummy?” I said with a laugh. “It looks like a dried fish someone tried to bury.”

“Look,” Ramon said, ignoring my theory and pointing to the tip, “you can still see some of the teeth and hair.”

Indeed, on closer inspection, there was some black thatchy material attached to the top and some teensy white slivers imbedded on the surface a few inches down. But for the rest, it was hard to make head or tail of it.

“Did it shrink?” I asked.

“It’s a baby.”

“Really? I didn’t know mummies *had* babies.”

Ramon frowned and explained.

“When the ruler was buried, his wives were often killed along with him. If they had small babies, they were killed too and mummified. Then they were buried at secret locations around the tomb.”

“Of course. Why not!” I sputtered.

“They had to hide them,” my uncle explained patiently. “There was a market for them.”

“Still is,” Ramon added with a wink.

“A market for mummy babies? What on earth for?” I barked. “Pillows?”

The whole thing was really starting to get to me.

“Medicine,” they both said in unison.

I didn’t say anything, but my green pallor must have hinted at a tinge of skepticism.

“Look, mummy has been a drug in Europe and the Far East since the Middle Ages,”

Ramon explained. "No decent apothecary shop would be without it. It's a powerful medicine. Because of the minerals used in mummifying...bitumen, natron, and so on."

"Bullcrap," I said.

"No, I don't think that was used."

"It's true," Uncle Jack added. "The medicine made from these mummies is supposed to, as the Indians say, cure the disease of the clouds."

"Come again?"

"It bestows immortality," Ramon said.

I could only laugh at that one. But the others were not joining me in the glee. They were dead serious.

"You're too young to believe in such things," Ramon said calmly, wiping his eye with a handkerchief. "That's good. That's what youth is for. Your job is to believe in fun. TV, sex, Coca Cola. But for men of our age, belief must seek a greater reward."

"Immortality," I repeated, trying out of respect not to giggle my way through every syllable.

"Don't sound so shocked. It's nothing new," Ramon said. "Immortality's been around for thousands of years."

"Immortality...as in living forever?" I asked, just to make sure we were on the same wavelength.

"Yes," Ramon said solemnly. "It's a belief held all over the world. In South America, Egypt, Persia. Any place where the dead were prepared for eternal life. Why shouldn't those discoveries aid the living as well. Why not?"

"Because it's totally crackbrained, that's why," I announced. "Have you ever heard of -- like -- science?"

"How much do you want for it?" my uncle interjected.

"I know that you are a sick man, Jacinto. That's why I came to you with it. Don't worry about the price. I'll give you a good deal."

"Who'll cook it?"

"I know an Indian who can prepare it for eating."

I definitely heard the word, though I first thought it must have been heating or beating or anything but what it actually was. It took me a few seconds to process it and interrupt.

"Wait a minute," I said, putting as much distance between myself and the ghouls as possible. "Do you mean to tell me that you are going to *eat* this thing? Just pour on a little hot sauce and open a beer?"

"Not like that," Ramon said. "You pulverize it and mix the powder with mineral water."

"And some rum," Uncle Jack added. "For flavoring."

"No shit!" I said, but by then I'd had it with the whole rotten mess and was storming out the door. "I hope this is a practical joke because if it isn't, and even if it is, it's the sickest thing I've ever heard in my life."

"Stick to your beliefs," Ramon shouted after me. "Go watch television."

But I was already out on the sidewalk, leaving them to conspire alone in the ghostly light.

I did not see my uncle for a few days after that. The fact is, I couldn't bear to look at his sad and troubled face so I stayed upstairs and avoided him. But eventually I began to worry. I figured that he was just desperate enough to try it and get himself good and sick. So I went to the store and was surprised to find him vigorously dusting off the counter. He looked rather alert, even chipper. His gloomy color had given way to a reddish blush. Not rosy exactly, but vaguely pink. And he was standing up a little straighter. Not enough that anyone else would notice. But I did.

"You didn't really eat that thing, did you?" I finally asked when I got up the nerve.

“Sure did,” he said and flashed a smile. His teeth looked very pearly and I hadn’t noticed that he had so many of them before.

“The whole mummy?” I asked, sounding like a sick TV commercial.

“It’s medicine, not junk food,” he insisted, taking out a plastic container with some mud at the bottom of it. “Ramon brought it over the next day. I take a spoonful every evening. And when I wake up in the morning, I feel a thousand years younger.”

I couldn’t argue with him. In the first place, it was already done. Secondly, he actually *did* look a lot better. In coming days, he started dressing up to go to work. Not fashionably mind you, not spiffy, but neater. He sent his pants to the cleaners. He wore a white shirt. He even began to comb his hair with a part down the middle.

In the following weeks he did not once mention a funeral, a case of cancer, a car accident, a coronary bypass, or even an infant death. The report of an earthquake on the news seemed to bore him and he changed the station to a quiz show. One day, out of the blue, he threw out his aspirins and stopped peering down into his throat for tumors.

By the end of the month, inexplicably, he had actually asked for the hand of a woman in marriage! She was thirteen years younger than Jack and, as far as I knew, had hardly ever spoken to him. She rejected him, of course, but even that did not seem to dismay my uncle. He drank to her health and treated me to the movies.

Things seemed so good on the way to the theater that I did not have the heart to tell him about the news I had heard. It seems that a man sounding suspiciously like Ramon, but with a different name, had been picked up by the authorities for trying to sell a phony mummy to a local dealer. When the police went back to his hotel room, they found seven more baby mummies in boxes. They were all fakes, made of paper and dirt and old straw. I should have known when I saw the first one, but I didn’t think of it until later.

How many babies – mummy or not -- have you seen with teeth?

Sitting there in the dark, I was about to say something to Uncle Jack about it. But as the picture started I turned to him and suddenly saw the light. He was laughing at the movie, his eyes glinting, his skin twinkling from the glow of the flickering screen. I couldn’t bring myself to eclipse it. So I just sat back and said nothing. And what would have been the point anyway? Perhaps he got just what he paid for. Exactly that.

As the Indians say, there’s no great trick to immortality. As long as you live it day by day by day.