

From the August 12th issue of *The New Amsterdamer*, "Talk About Town" section:

## GHOSTS

Spooky Jones strode into the bustling cafe bundled up with his reversed baseball cap, hoodie and Burberry trench, as oblivious to the 85 degree SoCal city heat as he seemed to be to the sudden appearance of mobile phones, all desperate to capture this rare daytime sighting.

As young women (and more than a few young men) tittered and Twittered with excitement nearby, he slid into his seat. An iced mocha appeared in front of him, delivered without a word by the owner's teenage son, Haiko. Spooky is a regular at the Devil's Bean Café, but only after hours.

"I'm more of a night person," he said, a bit rakish. "It's part of the job."

That job, of course, would be vanquishing demons and rescuing abducted children, a mission Spooky Jones has pursued with no small notoriety since he was 14 years old. Today he was going to take a reporter to see his office.

"I've had to put magical protections in place, so people need to stay pretty close to me when we walk over. And they aren't able to remember how we got there."

An eye blink later, he was standing in front of a lonely door set in long, windowless hallway. Written on the glass: "Spooky Jones, Occult Investigations." This was the first time an outsider had seen where he worked. The magic was effective; his office really could be anywhere.

He withdrew a key from his coat, and stepped into a small room with an empty receptionist's desk. Apparently, it had been empty for some time.

"There was a woman who worked for me four years ago. But not anymore." A shadow crossed his face. "I work alone now."

Another key opened a second door behind where she had sat. It led into an office worthy of Humphrey Bogart: a metal desk with mounds of loose files, a wooden swivel chair, a leather couch, a 1940s filing

cabinet. The air itself seemed to have a sepia tinge. On top of the cabinet perched the only artifact from our modern era: a baseball cap, identical to the one he was wearing.

"Stone gave me two, in case one got lost."

Stone Williams was the creator of the animated, 13-episode *Spooky Adventures*, a cult phenomenon that drove the boy demon-fighter's legend deep into the hearts of 12-year-olds throughout the world. Despite weak initial ratings, its popularity was guaranteed by the tut-tutting of media pundits and concerned parents who considered the content far too adult for children. Being brave enough to make it through an entire episode without covering your eyes continues as a rite of passage among Facebooking tweens.

"A lot of people think I started wearing the cap to promote the show. But actually, it's sort of the other way around."

A framed picture of Stone stands watch at the corner of the desk, a Hollywood headshot that captures the then-21-year-old's sad, grey eyes. It's the only part of the desk not overrun with loose paper.

"We actually met on a case, three years ago. His younger brother had just disappeared after getting mixed up with some bad people. Stone didn't have any other family, so he was willing to try anything to find him. He'd heard about me from someone else I'd helped."

Stone's parents had themselves disappeared under mysterious circumstances ten years before.

"There tends to be a lot of connections with this stuff," Spooky said, his eyes dark.

He removed a thick folder from the top drawer of the filing cabinet. Other folders had precisely typed labels, each with a three digit number followed by a last name, a system set up by the long-absent assistant. This folder's label was handwritten and merely said "Stone."

"The case was very complicated. Harder than any I had tried to solve before. We worked together closely for weeks at a time, through the night mostly. We'd come close to finding an answer, and then it would just slip away." Boyish amusement lit up Spooky's face. "With the way I dressed, he said I looked like an anime character, and with him being an artist, he would draw sketches to deal with the stress while we worked."

Inside the folder were dozens of pages covered with cap-and-

trenchcoat-wearing cartoon ghosts in various action and comedy poses. The Spooky Ghost character on the first pages were drawn quite rough, but within ten pages had settled with confidence into the now-famous design. The pages in the middle of the stack included poses of the Ghost shirtless, and towards the end, many showed the cartoon Ghost nude and well-endowed. If Spooky was embarrassed by this, it didn't show.

"He always got a kick out of the fact I wore a baseball cap everywhere, even in church. By this point, reporters were getting interested in me, even more than before I guess, and there'd be these long articles about what it meant that I was wearing a 49ers cap or whatever. Really, I'd just bought the cheapest cap at the airport to keep my head warm.

"My friends celebrate the day I returned like my birthday, and Stone wanted to give me a gift that he knew I'd use. So, he had two of these caps made. I magicked them so they couldn't get burned or ripped. It was after I'd been seen wearing them for a couple months that Stone got asked to pitch a cartoon to the network guys."

Stone Williams disappeared after the final digital production files for Episode 13 had been delivered to the Animation Network. He hasn't been seen since.

"I tried everything I knew, but the leads on Stone's brother eventually ran cold. I solve a lot of cases, and I know if I hadn't gotten involved those kids would be dead or worse, but with what I do... There's not always a happy ending.

"I was willing to keep going, but it had been over a year, and Stone said he had found some peace in knowing we'd tried as hard as we did. He said he wanted to focus on the next season of *Spooky Adventures*, and so he took me off the case. A week later he was gone."

Doesn't wearing the cap remind him of the loss of his friend? "No, no. It doesn't make me sad. It gives me hope."

That he might find Stone someday?

He shakes his head again.

"Wearing it gives me hope that I'll be able to find *all* of them someday."

The smile that rises on his face is far subtler than the broad grin of a pure white cartoon ghost, but somehow, it still seems brighter.

--Lindsay Powers