

Grave Digger

WES KOCH

John Bucklim could hardly hear the radio over the sound of his creaking van. It didn't help that all six windows were down - broken AC - but John loved his ride anyway. As he struggled up the hill and paraded his way down the school parking lot, he saw the familiar smirks of the wealthier kids at school. These kids inherited their cars from their parents; they had working AC and loud stereo systems, but John was never jealous. Truly, John loved his van in a way only a working man could because he bought it all by himself.

"I've been working since fourteen, actually." When John spoke, it was usually in his defense, never for anything else. "Yep, saved for two years and bought Old Dusty." He slapped the hood of his van in front of some girl, soaking in the irony as dust exploded from the slap, "Hard work, *manual* work."

Despite his van, John never had trouble finding girlfriends and quickly moving on to the next. *Sometimes, wheels are all it takes, any wheels.* John would talk about the nature of his work often but not about what he did. He wasn't ashamed to be a grave digger, but he found dates unsuccessful if he ever got on the subject of his work. The girls wouldn't run screaming, but he rarely took them out again - they became distant.

"Right now, I'm more or less unemployed. The busy season is during Christmas -" he'd say.

"I just don't like to think of that stuff in...that

way." A girl named Diane once told him.

"Think about what, *what* way?"

"Death. Y'know, when someone dies it - it means something for a long time. When I saw my mom buried, then and only then did I fully accept it. It meant something to me. But to you - it's just a job, it's math. You build their eternal home. But to you, it's just another hole out of hundreds"

John didn't know how to respond. It was the only time someone had gotten close to expressing what was "wrong" with his job. He conceded, "I suppose I just don't think about things the same way you do. I mean - all my folks are still alive. And, y'know, there's a job to do and a man to do it, what's wrong with that?"

"I guess you're right. Let's just talk about something else."

John was a lone wolf. He found people interesting, but that was about it. That's why John did what he did. Working overnights in a graveyard, he never had to see a single soul. He could be alone, just him and his work. And he liked it like that.

Digging was demanding work. In the movies, graves are dug with one shovel and an hour. In Bucklim's world, digging was all-encompassing and as complicated as rocket science. His spade, pickaxe, and rock bar were simple tools that required real skill and experience. He was good at

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his job and absolutely obsessed with it.

When High School graduation finally came around, he slept through it. He had work that night. Fitting, considering he slept through most of school and just barely passed - the school board agreed to give him 'extra credit' earned through grave digging. Nobody questioned it.

When he told the school's resource officer and his supervisor that he'd graduate high school, they both had the same response, that phrase about, "Out of the frying pan, and into the fryer." John thought it was a funny phrase, but it grew on him like a vine. His life was full of odd coincidences. Anytime something happened, that phrase would blaze in his mind. *Out of the frying pan. Into the fryer.* He still wasn't one hundred percent sure what it meant. Not yet, at least.

He was now nineteen, and the sound of sticking a shovel into dirt serenaded him. One never gets used to hearing roots snap under a shovel. Those roots were old, ancient even. So old that their very being expressed some purpose. They connected to an unknown tree that was even older than the root, and every time Bucklim would strain his shovel against it and finally hear it snap, it felt like murder.

Sweat emanated from him. He was used to being exhausted, sore, out of breath, blistered, worn down to the bone, lonely, creaking, and silent. But perhaps most tellingly, he was used to being dirty. One of the first nights he worked after graduating, he was six feet down, padding out the bottom of another hole. For the past seven hours, he'd been manning around in the dirt like a mole, or a kitten abandoned in the dumpster. The deeper he dug, the more thoughtless he became, eventually only acting on two instincts: primal animal instinct and the instinct to dig. All along this hole, there were roots to be kill and heavy rocks to lift. His hands were cracked, bloody, and sore.

For the past seven hours, he was utterly alone. Not

even a squirrel dared to bother John while he was at a grave. There was no rustle on the ground nor a whisper in the wind, and the half-moon barely allowed vision of anything past the rolling hills of the graveyard. The only thing resembling life other than himself was a single gas lamp that John had stuck in the side of the grave. Bucklim found himself staring at it when he wasn't paying attention.

In the hour right before dawn, Bucklim heard a footstep on a dandelion. He continued to dig anyway. By the time he put another load of dirt in his shovel, whoever was there - was gone. Bucklim stepped up on some rocks he'd propped up for an easy escape and allowed his eyes to peer out of the top of the hole. He scanned the area but still couldn't see much. Catching himself staring at the lamp light that swung listlessly in his hand, casting orange shadows on the gravestones. He shook his head and kept packing the dirt tight... Suddenly,

SCREEEECH

The feverish drumming of a car, followed by a screeching of tires, and drunk frat boys yelling, made Bucklim jump out of his skin. He fell backwards. In the dim dawning of sunlight, John saw it. The pile of dirt that he'd been building to the side of the grave began to lean, and lean, until eventually John felt dirt spray his face as the mound collapsed back into its hole.

"NOOO!" Bucklim screamed and coughed, dirt had caked into his mouth. Layer after layer, the dirt never seemed to stop. Soon, it was up to his hip before it sizzled to a calm silence. Hours and hours of good, hard work - wasted. The falling dirt came to a trickle. He let out a gasp of air and a slight laugh. For a moment, Bucklim was worried he'd be buried alive.

Mr. Randall is going to kill me for this. Or at least cut my pay. He thought bitterly. And as God often does, He added insult to injury. Bucklim could

smell a storm brewing.

Coming home wet and exhausted, Bucklim went up to his room - avoiding his mother - who was already almost done with a pot of coffee and a pack of cigarettes. John stomped upstairs, slammed open his door, and kicked the first thing he could see. "God... damn," he'd nearly broken his toe on his bed frame. In a fit, John attempted to lift his mattress and fling it across the room - not caring if anything broke. However, as soon as he leaned over, exhaustion took hold of him. John collapsed on the bed until the next night.

On his next shift, Mr. Randall didn't say anything. Wearing his usual scowl underneath a bright red beanie, he had a white bushy eyebrow raised out of disgust - but that was normal. Mr. Randall sat on his bench in his shack every day at the beginning of John's shifts but was gone by the time he picked up a shovel - leaving Old Harison (a defunct scarecrow) behind. They rarely spoke to one another, but today, Mr. Randall and Old Harison had their eyes on John. It unnerved him.

John put on his gloves, grabbed a shovel, looked at the dig plan, then looked back up at Mr. Randall. The dig plan is a diagram of places ordered to be dug on a dirty sheet of paper. Unsurprisingly, the hole he'd spent eight hours on yesterday still had a "TBD" next to it, with an added note that said "NYC" - Not Yet Completed. But, in a stroke of luck, there were no other holes marked to dig today. *Half a hole... that's it?*

He looked back at his supervisor questioningly. The old, crusty, and wrinkled man nodded his greasy head slightly and shrugged, "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth..." he said with a moist grin. Another one of those funny little phrases John never really got, but he was grateful all the same.

He finished the second half of the hole rather quickly; the dirt was already moved around, making his job twice as easy. It was a good day. After he finished up around two in the morning, he thought about clocking out. *And what, get paid less?* No. It was probably better to take it easy for the next few hours.

John toiled at planning out another hole to dig, something he admittedly knew very little about. Setting yardsticks about, marking down the local fauna, before eventually giving up and sitting in the grave keeper's shed. There was no electricity here, so indoors, it was pitch black save for a foggy window. The place only had a few splintering stools and the sound of rats scurrying about. From the window, John looked at the graveyard caught in a ghastly white light. Every pillar of marble was spaced so perfectly as to seem endless, inhuman.

Then, the sound of the thumping of a truck engine and the howling of drunk boys steadily approached. Bucklim stood upright and started to run towards the sound of the truck. *But what can I do besides get myself jumped or ran over? Those drunk idiots are willing to do anything if they think it's fun. Oh, who am I kidding? They could kill me... there's already a grave right there!*

He couldn't let them destroy his work again, but he paralyzed in fear. For the first time in his life, he felt the presence of the graveyard, the eeriness in its uniformity, and the heavy abyss that surrounded every step. John came to an epiphany: Fear works both ways. He ran back into the shack to look for something to use. There was a myriad of shovels, as well as rakes, chainsaws, and sheets of metal. Perhaps the most obvious thing to use would be Old Harrison. He was only some scarecrow, but he was decrypted and mishappened. Besides, it almost felt sacrilegious to move him from his spot in the corner of the shack. So, John devised a plan.

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In the meanwhile, there were three college-aged boys who'd recently been on innocent drunken benders in their hometown. Both today and yesterday, they found mounds of dirt in the graveyard, and they knocked it over. They all knew it was idiotic, or at least Josh and Tyler did, but it was fun - stupid fun. It was the kind of thing that was perfect for a bunch of drunk ex-high school, and current real-world nobodies.

"Alriiight, so I'll kill the headlights and -" Kyle swerved off the road a little bit, causing the whole car to shake, but then he corrected himself. "Woah-hoh! A little turbulence on the ol' Kyle express!" Tyler rolled his eyes; Josh shook his head. The truck came to a lurching stop. Kyle turned off the truck's blaring lights.

"Try not to piss your jeans out there today, boys!" Kyle unlocked the door and winked at Tyler.

"What- dude. I didn't even-" Tyler stammered, but Josh grabbed his arm and muttered something, "C'mon man, let's just go."

The two started pushing in wooden planks under a pile of dirt and haphazardly tied bungee cords around one side. The dirt was cold and hard. It wasn't going as fast as yesterday, so for a few seconds, the only noise was the two of them grunting and kicking the dirt.

BANG BANG! Two loud noises from deep within the darkness of the graveyard sent both Tyler and Josh flying back. Without a word or look between them, they started for the truck. Kyle looked confused. "What took you guys so long?"

"Just shut up. Let's go," Tyler said.

"Waaiiit. Hold on, you didn't even tie me to the boards," he said, but the two were scrambling in their seats and begging Kyle to put his foot on the

gas. "No. Why would I drive all the way out here just to-" *BANG BANG!* That noise again followed by an insane scream and howling laughter. "Jesus-!" Kyle slammed his foot on the gas and rode up the road. They could still hear cackling. "Oh god, oh shit, oh god, oh Christ," Josh muttered to himself over and over.

And then the truck swerved off the road again. This time, the front tires slid straight into a ditch. *Out of the frying pan, into the fryer.* Josh's head cracked the windshield down the middle. Tyler's body was contorted into the floorboard of the backseat of the truck.

When Josh woke up, blood trickling down his face, it was to the sound of Kyle desperately trying to back the car out of the ditch. It would move back a few feet when he pressed the gas, but as soon as he let off it would sink back in. Revving, then sinking, revving, then sinking. "Almost... there..." Kyle slurred. He didn't seem to be injured; Josh was still getting to make sense of what was happening around him. Revving... revving... escape! They made it out of the ditch. "Let's get to the hospital." Josh pleaded, but Kyle remained silent. The truck stopped.

"Kyle- What?"

Kyle was frozen. Not daring to look forward, Josh studied the primal death etched into his friend's face. Every muscle was still. His breathing was non-existent - completely silent. "Kyle... What's wrong?" he shook his friend, but Kyle just shook his head and said, "There's something... on the windshield." For the first time, Josh looked forward. In blood, smeared across the windshield, were the words: *THE DEAD SHALL NOT BE DISTURBED.* His heart sank when he saw that the message was written inside of the truck. Josh frantically looked behind him in the backseat, "Tyler are you-" A blood stain on the floorboard was all that remained of him. They heard cackling once again, this time, Kyle sped away.

Bucklim was laughing. He'd never felt so good in his life. The burden he was carrying made it hard to breathe and laugh at the same time - he felt lightheaded and delusional. "HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA! HA HA - HAAAAH!" *Thud.*

John fell six feet into the grave he'd just protected. It hurt like hell - a broken rib - but he felt too good to stop laughing. Giggling and rolling around in the dirt, he felt too good. When John heard the police sirens come and go a few minutes later, he knew he was successful. Those kids would not be coming back anytime soon. *Especially this asshole.* Tyler's corpse lay bruised and battered next to John in his grave.

After John had calmed down a little, he crawled out of his grave. Using his tools, he managed to get Tyler out as well and laid his body down a few feet from the hole. Stumbling back to the bench, John wiped the tears and sweat from his face and caught his breath. Still, he'd randomly get a short burst of pure joy and start giggling for a few seconds, but by the time he sat down, he sighed and felt at peace. *That was a lot of fun.* He thought. *Man, I miss messing with people. I just miss people, I guess.* Another fit started to bubble up, but he calmed himself down. Bucklim popped his knuckles one at a time by pulling on his fingers. His inner voice was now silent, and he got to bask in the emptiness of a full graveyard. It was almost quitting time, John suspected, but his watch said 4:30 a.m., so not quite yet.

I want to do that again. The thought crept up like a ghoul.

An idea occurred. Bucklim swung open the door to the shack and looked around. There he is! John picked up Old Harrison by its armpits. He was a creepy-looking thing, to be sure. He brought the doll-man out into the moonlight. *I can use him to*

jump in front of the car... that way, I don't risk my life next time.

"Hey, buddy? How're you holdin' up?" he asked Old Harrison, "Oh, don't be so shy... Don't feel like talkin' eh?" John rolled Harrison over with his foot. The scarecrow was so beaten up that it hardly looked like it was supposed to be human-shaped.

Bucklim shuffled through the rakes and shovels, and he grabbed a broken rake and popped off the head, leaving just the stick. He broke the stick and half. "We got you some legs!" John grinned at Old Harrison. After he stuck the rods into his torso, he already looked better. John half expected the scarecrow to spring to life, but he still didn't look real enough for John. *Hm. What else can I add?* John rummaged through the rusty tools unsuccessfully. *I need arms, hair... eyes...* Another great idea struck Bucklim as his eyes fell on Tyler's body.

