

The Gravediggers

by Gary Moshimer

The night before we dug John Clark's grave, my brother and I stood outside his windows and got an eyeful. Rose, his wife, should have closed the blinds. There she was in the arms of Willard, her neighbor, middle school science teacher. It was a serious kiss, all sliding arms and twisting heads. Gross, really, for fifty--somethings. Had John known of this? Had it killed him? Shame on her.

I was sixteen, and Bill was fourteen, and we'd had a couple beers in the cemetery. It was our favorite place to hang out, especially after dark. We were just loose enough for this idea; we got shovels from the shed, rubbed some dirt on our faces. Just as we were returning to her house, we saw Willard take off through the woods. He was weird and gangly and looked like Ichabod Crane. We had the urge to chase him with the shovels. He was a kind man, though; I'd had him in school, and you could see how he could be comforting, just not sexy.

We rang her bell. We still had our English accents, and she didn't know us from Adam. "Evenin' Ma'am."

She wasn't going to open the door. "In our country it's custom we introduce ourselves," I said. "We'll be the gravediggers." We nodded firmly. "We like to get to know the deceased."

"I've never heard of such a thing."

"It's kind of a service." We put down the shovels; they were making her nervous. It was hard to keep a straight face. I examined her mouth, and could see the smeared lipstick.

Did guilt make her open up? Maybe she felt she deserved punishment in the form of two young men with shovels.

"Come and sit down," she said, checking our clothes for dirt. We were good; it was just our faces that were dirty. Her eyes grew wide. "Were you digging tonight?"

"What?" I said. "Oh, no. This is for show. Part of the service. Like uh... chimney sweeps."

"It's frightening," she said. I felt her trembling through the sofa and I thought, "Good."

"Oh, we're so sorry," I said. "Like I said, it's just for show. We really are interested in you, and in the deceased, as I said."

After some minutes, during which Rose tried to hold herself still and think of what to say, she offered us lemonade. She had given in to something, let down her guard, prepared to tell us the story of John. With the tray she brought a photo album which was very well arranged and labeled. Within a half hour she was telling us how he changed, took to drinking when they couldn't have a child. And how he felt uneducated when her friends came around. "He was a very good man," she repeated many times. "In the end it was not him. He had high blood pressure, and would not take the medicine. He died sitting on the porch, watching a train go by. I think of how the train's thunder stole his heartbeat. After it passed all was silent." She teared up, and so did my brother, and I thought for a moment this was her act to make us feel bad for ours. Well, it was working.

She made no confession about her lover, and finally, after reviewing several times until we were bored crazy, she closed the album and stood up. "I'll thank you now for your service," she said. "Will that be hard work for such young men?"

"Oh, we're experienced," I lied. "We're tougher than we look."

As we headed back to the cemetery to return the shovels, I thought of how tough we would not be if she gets a hold of our father, the cemetery caretaker, and tells of what we've done. He will kill us, and dig our graves like bunk beds.

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We were in trouble anyway, for staying out too late. We had walked around the cemetery and looked for our favorite ghosts. There were certain nights when a mist crept along the ground and brought forth the shapes of men and women and babies. We both witnessed these, but kept quiet. We wondered if we would see John Clark, if he would haunt us for going to his house.

My father met us at the back door. "Late hours for men who have to dig a grave by hand," he said, poking us in our narrow chests. He

touched the dirt on our faces. He was so sure we couldn't do it, he'd added an additional two-hundred bucks apiece. But we were determined, especially now, after hearing about John. We felt sorry for him. We felt angry at Rose. We would will our muscles to go on. We would swing our picks unless we found the rock an immovable part of the earth.

In morning we started on the dew-soaked, marked off area. Our father stood with his coffee and watched us for a while. We were out of breath and sore after a half hour, and he laughed at us. When he finally left us alone, we rested. "Think about that kiss," I said. "If we don't think of the gross factor, if we just think of the power behind that, that passion, that can push us through."

"You sound really sick," Bill told me. "Where'd you get that from? Have you been reading or something?"

I stood on our mound of dirt and put my hand over my heart. "Just think of the power of the kiss. Any kiss. Some day you will find out. How it can rule. Better than your dick, even."

Bill threw a shovelful on me. "Like you know about it. Who did you kiss?"

"Marie Alvarado."

"Sure. That would be the day that John came back to life."

"It was a rush like the train, let me tell you, brother. Rose might really love that geek. They might have enough between them that we can do this. We can do this."

"I'll think of the money."

About three feet down a storm blew from nowhere, threatening to rip the green tent away. We secured it and kept going. There was lightning and it energized us. We were not going to stop. We thought our father would come and check on us, but he didn't. He must have thought we weren't stupid enough to work in the lightning. But we were. "That's John now," I said. "He's pissed."

Towards the end we were crying with the pain. We could barely lift our arms. Our father arrived eventually with his tape measure. We were sitting on the pile, drinking Cokes. He assumed we had

given up, but then he looked in the hole and checked it. "Holy shit," he said. "You boys did it. How'd you do that?"

"A kiss," I said. "Anger. Love lost. Love found. Betrayal. Weakness."

"Jesus," my father said. "You are delirious. I'm sorry to do that to you. What have I done?"

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Willard was at the funeral, standing right in the middle without a trace of guilt on his face. We sat by the shed, watching and waiting for it to be over so we could bury John Clark.

That night we returned to the cemetery, exploring our usual haunts. We heard voices and footsteps. We hid. It was Rose and Willard. They were holding hands and laughing, spinning around. We stalked them, moving stone to stone. We were in our element, and they were not. The mist moved in and we saw a new guy; it may have been John, twisting his way around their feet. We crept closer. We had surprises for them.

