

# Six Down

*by* Stuart Millard

The hand to mouth thing had gotten old. Rattling around in a house that was too big for one man, drowning in utilities bills and rent payments to sustain a place that felt like more of a burden than a home. I subtly raised the issue with my boss, hoping for a bump in pay, but getting a speech about priorities. “You own your own burial plot, but you don't own your home,” he'd said, and I couldn't help but agree. That night, I arranged for everything to be put into storage, and by the weekend, I was lowering myself down into my new abode.

Even on the first night, it didn't seem so bad. I warmed some soup on a small camping stove and slept underneath a blanket looking up at the clouds. I'm sure there's a lot of pop-psychology about the safety of the womb, but really, it was just cosy down there, down in the Earth; below everyone and everything, underneath the noise and the chatter. We have too much space. The world's so big, you could never fill it with enough things to stop it from feeling empty. Down there, I could only stretch out my arms if I sat sideways, but when I did, I still couldn't feel the edges.

Soon, the routine of coming home every night to the comfort of my grave pushed aside any and all thoughts of returning to bricks and mortar. I hammered some bookshelves into the soil and hung a picture on a nail I'd found by the bin they keep all the dead flowers in. By night I'd read by torchlight or listen to the mating screeches of the foxes across the way, and on weekends I'd stroll around the cemetery, or if it was raining, listen to music and wank underneath my tarp. One day a football bounced into the dirt and rolled towards me. As I picked it up and inspected the scribbles of biro inked into the leather, a voice called down from above.

“1988 Liverpool Squad. Sorry about that,” said the face, before adding “I’ve just moved in next door.” He told me his name was Mort and that he wasn't short of money or homeless, he'd just seen me clambering down one night and thought it must be a nice way to live. “I might go back on weekends,” he'd said, but he never did. More followed, taking up residence in nearby burial plots and making them their own; first time buyers, students, divorcees, young couples — pretty soon we'd got ourselves a whole community. One neighbour was recently separated and had just sold his house. He spent his share on the nicest plot in the whole grounds, underneath the willow tree at the top of the slope. “Look at that view,” he'd said, before proudly leaping inside. As content as I was, the sight of the newly-weds from three graves down eyeing a small adjacent plot - the perfect size for a child's coffin — hand in hand and with tender hope in their eyes had filled me with the first flutterings of broodiness. Now that I was settled, maybe it was time to start thinking about a family of my own.

One morning, I awoke to red and blue flickers and the sound of sobbing. Mort had passed away in the night, rocked by a massive heart attack that had finished him off before his fiftieth birthday. I spent that night tossing and shifting in the dirt, preoccupied by how morbid it was to be sleeping a few yards from where somebody had died. A few days later, as I climbed out to go to Mort's funeral, I found myself face to face with someone who was moving into his hole. Apparently there'd been such a demand for the plot that they'd accepted a buyout, and the new tenant was already settling in. That's why the funeral took place in a house. Mort was laid to rest in a comfy chair, in the living room of a semi-detached three bedroom residential property that would have gone for £350k in the old days. As became customary, the television was left on, while there were a selection of unread hardback books on the coffee table in the centre of the room and authentically ethnic African masks hanging in the hallway.

People have become so desperate for unused plots that they're starting to exhume the old ones just to keep up with the demand, digging up the bones and propping them up in armchairs that used to seat the living. Dusty old corpses with flock wallpaper and Ikea console stands, with all that space that we no longer need. But I've got my home, and they can't take it from me. Not while I'm still breathing.

