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PRESENTS

The Groundsman

a Short Story

SAMPLE

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Cover designed by Jay Horne

*Beds and Graves, you go to them or they
come to you.*

for
David and his family.

Chapter One

Devon was one of the toughest of our teenage posse. He was the first to try the over-the-counter cough medicine that was supposed to get you high, and he was the first to score with Prichard's mom when we got into our post-dropout years. I would take a little more time familiarizing you with his dark, polished features, but he was just another regular white kid, short on time. A little like a miniature James Dean, and an absence in his expression at even the most depressing or stressful times. His laugh was unforgettable, because it was uncommon

and always genuine. A flash of white teeth, never at his own jokes.

Devon came to an early end when I was in my twenties. He had followed an old friend home after the guy had stolen a set of drums from Brian's garage. The drums meant little to Brian, but to Devon it was the principle.

After Devon scoped out the drum set from around the back of the thief's home he was blind-sided and the bandit stabbed him in the back with a fixed blade knife. The weapon wasn't all that large, but the wound ruptured something internal, and Devon fell out-front of the residence, bleeding. He was dead in under five minutes.

Devon's death was a blow to us all, but no one took the loss as hard as his father. Devon's little brother had a learning disability, and Jean (Devon's dad) always counted on Devon as an extra hand when it came to dealing with the kid. With Devon buried six feet under in a plot among the residents of Hill cemetery, it wasn't long before Jean became distant to his wife and surviving child.

Devon's mother had been on disability since before Devon ever played his first guitar solo. These were just the facts of life. The house was paid for, besides the monthly taxes, and Jean's wife could take well-enough care of Sammy with her own disability income.

So, Jean had started drinking.

Jean had always been a drinker, but Candice knew he had really gone for broke the first time he didn't return home from an evening visit to Devon's graveside. It had been the anniversary of his wake and neither she nor Sammy caught wind of Jean till the following evening, which meant he had slept up on the hill with their dead son.

He got worse over the next three months; a lot worse. Many times, Candice fought through being pelted by sleet, rain, and Jeans verbal attacks as she pleaded for him to return home, but it would be to no avail.

Jean's shame, both for the loss of his son, and now even those he was survived by, had him now avoiding their judgmental glances on the streets where he sometimes flew a sign in late afternoon

before returning to Devon's headstone for the night.

He had developed a routine. In the early rays of day, he would collect and take the cemetery's dingy flowers down to the outskirts of town. He'd bury the worst ones along the river and peddle off the ones with a little life left in them to the passersby near the intersection of Fulton and Twelfth avenue. He would take his earnings and travel up East-end where Ruby parked her flower cart each lunch break. After purchasing all the carnations that he could afford, he'd feel better being able to replace the symbols of affections he had lifted. Back up the hill, and after decorating the many gravesites that had been temporarily abandoned by loved ones, he would go down with his sign, which hid behind the greater tomb of James Jacobs 1870 - 1961, and ask for alms in the urban fashion.

Drink in hand, he could be with his son again; they had always loved drinking together. Something about all of those people who could visit and leave their loved ones resting out there in the cold and damp he just couldn't ever take to.

So, he made it a point, in his own time, to
polish the stones with his own garments,
replace the withered signs of love, and
speak silent prayers for those who just
didn't have time.

Chapter Two

The cemetery was owned by Lowe and Loam Inc. whose majority shareholder also had a late relative resting in the ground on Hill cemetery. He was one of those people that didn't ever have enough time.

As time passed, Jean's routine became easier and less time consuming. Blooms flourished along the river where he had been depositing the flowers for nearly a year, and people warmed to him along the route of Fulton Industrial. Ruby kept trimmings of her best flowers for him,

and Jean stayed dry under the roof of a small tent he had erected in the tree line outside of The Hill's manicured grass edge.

One day it happened that Joey Fotanella, Mr. Majority Shareholder, was visiting his loved one atop the Hill, while Jean went about his duties straightening the carnations and shining the silver pots, when from behind his own father's plot he uncovered a beggar's sign that read, "For Loved Ones Lost".

The stiff cardboard had been petrified over the weeks, and the indentations of Jean's fingertips were embossed permanently into the edges.

Mr. Fotanella recognized the groundsman as the homeless man that frequented the corner of Fulton Industrial Boulevard and recalled with ease his flower scheme. But this man wasn't taking flowers from the gravesites, he was placing them there, and polishing the holders to boot!

Fotanella replaced the sign in its hiding place and cautiously approached the groundsman.

“Hey there.”

Jean acknowledged the man in the suit half-heartedly but continued about his business.

More gently now, Fotanella attempted, “I was noticing you’re invested in caring for the dead.”

A cloudy eye rolled toward Fotanella as the groundsman polished old silver, “My only investment has been in a good night’s sleep,” he growled. The man turned his focus back on his work as Fotanella tagged along; straightening some carnations, knocking the dust from atop a marker with a scrap of his old shirt.

"You know, I'm always on the lookout for a good investment. You say sleep is where it is, eh?" Fotanella ventured, wondering who, if any one of his staff, were employing the man.

The groundsman offered him an obligatory glance, and Fotanella watched as he shouldered the scrap of cloth and pushed aside some palmettos along the edge of the property before ducking into the forest. The investor made out the weathered yellow of plastic that was the hermit's makeshift home and felt a bit

guilty for approaching him and questioning him so candidly. He was about to forget the whole endeavor of investigation when Jean emerged from the underbrush with an armful of fresh roses.

Jean put a few out in one hand to Mr. Fotanella, "It's the *only* sure investment." He urged Fotanella to take the flowers with a gentle shake of the small bouquet, "For your loved one."

Fontanella took them and the groundsman started on toward the next withered batch of carnation. He followed behind.

"Sleep and death are inevitable. One day we all end up here," he offered up a few roses to the next silver vase, "both are all there is."

Now *there* was something Fotanella understood. "Agreed! It's why I invest my money in cemeteries."

Jean was neither impressed or impressed upon. The businessman was just another 'no time for my loved ones' pawn in his own life's narrative. With as much absence as he had upon the man's meeting, he said, "Wakefulness... just the story of how you made it to bed; Life...

how you make it to your grave." The groundsman scoffed and on a dismissive wave's note said, "You invest in graves? Then invest in beds. It's your next sure bet."

Fotanella smiled with understanding and couldn't help but glance back at Jean as he left. 'Some prefer a simple story, without all of the dramatic twists and turns,' thought the investor, 'I *almost* envy him.' He dropped the groundsman's small bouquet into his father's tomb-side vase. The stems clinked against the silver and he glanced down the hill to where his car was parked and his beautiful wife sat waiting. '*Almost*,' he said.

Fotanella closed the door to his Jaguar and leaned back in the leather.

"Beds and graves," he said to himself and then looked over to where his wife looked back curiously.

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